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## SHARA HUGHES

When Color Becomes Climate

Words PLUS MAGAZINE

Photography JAE KIM



In her first New York solo exhibition in six years, presented by David Kordansky Gallery, Shara Hughes stakes a claim on emotional atmospheres through her inventive landscapes. *MaMa* (2025), one of the marquee paintings, emerges in vertical grandeur, its eight-foot canvas awash in radiant reds, oranges, and yellows that whirl and descend like heat made visible. The flower at its zenith, blazing like a sun-flower hybrid, anchors a visual torrent that feels haunted and jubilant in equal measure. The painting carries a complex emotional cadence: serenity and unrest, precision alongside abandon. It is a living thing, not a window into nature, but a creation from the emotional weather inside the painter herself. As Hughes notes, "Yes, they are depictions of natural scenes. But I'm talking more about the nature psychologically inside myself."



*Installation view, Shara Hughes: Weather Report, September 4 – October 18, 2025, David Kordansky Gallery, New York. Photo: On White Wall Studio, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery*

Hughes’s method is as lyrical as her imagery. She abandons sketch and reference in favor of a direct, intuitive approach, with pigments poured, splattered, dripped, and layered until the painting dictates its own form. Or, as she puts it, “Usually I start really abstractly... once I have something on the canvas, I might see it becoming a tree, or perhaps a passageway or a river. It’s almost like a dance between me and the painting.” The result feels less representative than an encounter: snake-like trees, floating moons, rippling water forms, and abstract flashes coexist with dream logic, striking a dialogue between Symbolism and Fauvism, but never bound by either tradition. What emerges is a kaleidoscopic synthesis of form and emotion, where paint itself generates meaning in motion.

The first work that greets viewers upon entering the gallery is *Bigger Person* (2024), a towering canvas that sets the tone for the exhibition. Its central tree rises like a fractured monument, trunk rendered in jagged strokes of blue and black, branches thrust outward like veins under pressure, while flat, circular leaves bloom in electric shades of crimson, fuchsia, ochre, violet, and green, their graphic boldness colliding with a backdrop of rainfall-like drips. The painting oscillates between order and chaos, a structure that feels at once protective and combative, armored with color yet pierced with thorns. Hughes collapses depth and foreground, letting branches dissolve into brush-flung gestures, so that the work becomes as much an emblem of defiance as it is of growth, an interplay of intention and chance, of what denotes a tree and what is simply paint surging across canvas. The insistence on trusting this process stems from a personal realization Hughes described: “Once I started getting into the landscapes, I realized I didn’t need a specific subject to keep painting. Because it’s me, there will always be something to respond to. I just have to trust myself.”

Rather than offering an escape, these paintings intensify the present, psychic topographies that externalize interior states. The title itself underscores this. As Hughes explains, “This past year has been so up and down that every day felt like something new to respond to, almost like checking the weather.” *Weather Report*, then, is less a theme than a barometer, a way to frame emotional fluctuation as both natural and inevitable. Or, as she puts it more simply, “The title gave me room to approach a wide range of emotions in the work.”



Photography by Jae Kim for Plus Magazine.

The exhibition also foregrounds the tension between chaos and orchestration. At first glance, a canvas like *MaMa* feels explosive, a fiery burst of instinctive mark-making. Yet sustained looking reveals Hughes’s extraordinary control: how chromatic clashes are calibrated to vibrate rather than collapse, how errant splatters are absorbed into compositional arcs, how the eye is guided through dissonance into a surprising harmony. For Hughes, this particular work emerged from a desire to overwhelm: “I wanted to make this big painting of mostly this big mound of flowers. I wanted it to be overpowering.” The painting morphed in process, becoming unexpectedly figurative: “At first it was a portal... then with the big dandelion on top, it felt like a face or head. It turned into this Madonna figure you go to for stability or worship in some ways.” That evolution mirrors the larger exhibition: improvisation that resolves into revelation.

The exhibition coheres as a record of shifting states rather than a sequence of landscapes. Across nine large-scale canvases, Hughes navigates turbulence and tranquility through color, texture, and gesture, exploring extremes such as intensity and levity, control and surrender, with the same brushstroke to craft a visual vocabulary of life’s complex harmonies. Each painting asserts its own presence, while together they form an emotional measure, charting inner climates of transformation and reflection.

*Weather Report* also places Hughes within a lineage of painters who use landscape not as subject but as structure for psychological inquiry: one might recall the dreamscapes of Odilon Redon, the lush intensities of Bonnard, or the turbulent abstractions of Joan Mitchell. Yet Hughes distinguishes herself by refusing nostalgia or retreat; her landscapes are urgent, tuned to the immediacy of contemporary feeling. They confront the viewer with the rawness of lived emotion while offering a vision of resilience, storms that do not devastate but clarify, and atmospheres that overwhelm yet ultimately sustain. Rather than a visual feast, the exhibition operates as an atmospheric register, asking whether paint can evoke the sensation of wind or color can convey the weight of a storm. Hughes answers with canvases that are at once turbulent and luminous, pressing viewers to stand inside shifting fronts of feeling. *Weather Report* is not simply a title but a forecast in itself, a reminder that moods, like skies, are never fixed, and that the weather within us is as worthy of attention as the world outside.

Shara Hughes’s “Weather Report” is on view at David Kordansky Gallery, 520 West 20th, New York, from September 4 to October 18, 2025.