

Julie Heffernan

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## Professor Artist Profile: Julie Heffernan

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Professor Julie Heffernan sits in a Brooklyn studio by her husband.  
Photo courtesy of Jonathan Kalb

*Professor Julie Heffernan has worn several hats during her 20 years at Montclair State University. She has taught all levels of painting and drawing as well as seminars for the BFA and MFA Programs. One of those many hats includes being a mother to two sons, 26-year-old musician Oliver and 21-year-old Sam, an environmental science major at Oberlin College. Heffernan candidly speaks about her art, her inspirations and her creative process. The time that it takes for Heffernan to finish her art varies between two weeks and 10 years.*

Q: Where did your love for being an artist come from?

A: Probably from those early saint paintings I'd stare at while sitting in church for an hour every Sunday all through my childhood. Those people were badass heroes to me, willing to die for something they believed in.

Q: Where do you draw your inspirations from when painting?

A: I've been painting since I was 10, but it was after graduate school where I knew I wanted to be a painter. When I was on a Fulbright in Germany living in West Berlin, I began to notice a flood of images streaming into my brain just as I was falling asleep. They were like movies in my mind that I would close my eyes and watch. This was all utterly new to me, so I quickly learned to jot down in paint some of those individual "film stills," and then to use them in larger still life paintings as mini "projections" onto enlarged apples and pears. They floated into my mind kind of like cartoon thought bubbles. I came to see them as accumulated features of an interior self and as a way into painting a different kind of self-portrait: one more like a truer self, conceived without the distortion of a mirror.

I continue to use that method of conjuring an image to figure out and deepen the content of paintings I'm working on. I go into the same relaxed (theta wave) state to work on particular problems that come up in the course of painting. It happens like this: I encounter a problem; I work on it, think about it, imagine as many possible solutions to that problem as I can. Most of the time I can't find the perfect solution, so I pretty much despair. Then, with despair, comes giving up, and when a person gives up they tend to relax. I often fall asleep at that point. But here's where things start to get interesting. Without me being aware of it, the relaxed brain starts working on the problem. The prefrontal cortex goes into action and searches the entire brain for a solution to the problem. And sure enough, almost always I will wake up with an image in mind that is some interesting combination of those half-baked ideas I'd been flirting with before; none of which were quite right in their initial manifestations but now in the right combination, but only after the subconscious mind was allowed to work on it.

Q: What types of paintings do you do?

A: I was brought up Catholic and reared on tales of saints and martyrs, so that's how I came to love storytelling. Later on, I wanted some of that momentousness in my own work, so I began to make large paintings of what I was seeing in my head to explore that inner wilderness. Over time, the paintings became records of my changing life—crystallizations of my own female experience from motherhood slowly moving towards old age. Most recently, I've been making landscapes out of all that interiority. I want substance and weight in my work that suggests there is urgency in what I paint about, what I care about.

Q: What are some of your proudest accomplishments?

A: I have a traveling museum show up right now [called] "When the Water Rises," going from the Louisiana State University Museum of Art in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and traveling to the San Angelo Museum of Art in Texas, the University of Tampa in Florida, the Mennelo Museum in Orlando, Florida; then on to the Palmer Museum in State College, Pennsylvania. I'm very proud of that show because it brings my concerns about what's happening in the environment to the forefront. Had I had the talent to be a politician or a scientist, I would have used those platforms for

activism, but I do have a set of skills I've been developing over 40 years that I can use as my bully pulpit to bring those issues to a larger public and that's what I'm doing with these shows.

Q: What work of art are you most proud of? Why?

A: I'm probably most proud of the painting "Camp Bedlam," which is the centerpiece of the "When the Water Rises" show. It's a diptych and depicts an imagined space—a kind of post-apocalyptic world where folks have taken to the trees and created a provisional habitat for themselves there using the detritus from the old world – soggy mattresses, old appliances from TV sets to washers and dryers—to create a new kind of living experience. The message behind the piece is that life goes on, the good and the bad of it, but we will find ways to survive and adapt.