

# Virginia Holt

—Pamela Jorden, Los Angeles, 2020

Virginia Holt's life as an artist is still somewhat a mystery to me. My first encounter with her work was in 2007 at a show of her small abstract paintings at Jancar Gallery, a modest space on the 13th floor of an art deco building in Los Angeles' Koreatown neighborhood. I was struck by the intensity of color, form, and odd compositions packed into paintings all under 12 x 12 inches. The show was curated Katy Crowe, a painter and longtime friend of Virginia's.

I'm grateful that Katy invited me to join her in frequent visits to Virginia's home. I got to know Virginia during the last decade of her life at a time when she no longer had an active studio practice. The three of us often got together for lunch, caught up on the news, and talked about shows up around town. Our time was spent enjoying the present. We admired the art in her home, which was filled with objects and ephemera collected from her travels, artwork by family and friends, and her own paintings.

I brought Virginia several of my small paintings, including one of the first small shaped paintings I made. My paintings sat atop a table and leaned against the back of chairs in Virginia's large bedroom, which was full of books, stacks of newspapers, art and photographs all equally held, considered, and appreciated.

I know from stories and photos of her friendships with the gallerist Eugenia Butler, her daughter (also Eugenia Butler) and granddaughter Corazon del Sol, James Lee Byers, Don Van Vliet (Captain Beefheart), and Suzanne Caporael among others, that Virginia loved art and music. She frequented rock shows and record stores with her son, Ben. She painted portraits of musicians, literary figures, and rock stars on burlap sacks that she collected. Some of these were pieced together into extremely large tapestries approximately 30 x 30 feet. Others were used as backdrops in theatrical productions including The Who's *Tommy* and the musical *Hair*.

In 2009, I curated a show entitled *Sun Zoom Spark* at WPA, an art space I collectively ran with friends. Partially inspired by Virginia and her appreciation of the music and poetry of Don van Vliet and his band, the show's title is taken from the Captain Beefheart song. I included a large painting by Virginia and several of her small abstract works. The exhibition reflected the characteristics of



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kaleidoscopic vision, in particular the ways it fragments space and alters images through perspectival shifts and reflections. Ultimately, these qualities demonstrate that visual experience includes not only objects, but also the spaces between them, along with colors and impressions that change and reconfigure themselves through circumstance and time. The use of color and form was what I found immediately striking in Virginia's paintings. Her paintings contain gestures and interactions, both balanced and precarious. They have eyes, torsos, arms, and legs. The paintings are a result of relationships and friendships and interactions. They are responses to music, rhythms, motion and flow, and are also full of energy and texture that are beautifully frenetic and fractured. Like Captain Beefheart and much of the music she listened to, Virginia's paintings communicate a visual experience inspired by life lived with colors and impressions affected by constant transformation.

Virginia often described an experience of descending Mt. Whitney, the tallest mountain in the Sierra Nevada, with her husband on a moonlit night. She talked about the "switchbacks" in the trail and how the moonlight on the landscape changed from pitch black to brightly lit as their direction shifted during the winding descent. She used these "switchbacks," as she called them—which traversed light and dark, certainty and uncertainty—as a metaphor for her experience of life as an artist. Virginia's "switchbacks" resonate with my painting practice because my work explores continuum—art historically, materially, and physically. I pour paint across surfaces with directed and uncertain results. My paintings are improvisations, exploring qualities of reflection, energy, movement, magnetism, and light. Color is intense, yet fleeting, depending on how light or perspective alters the visual experience of a painting. These moments of transformation are where I feel most connected to Virginia. It is in painting where we hold and create space for the many brief and substantial transitions of life lived.