

HOW TO MAKE LOVE TO A CACTUS

THROUGHOUT HER TELEVISION CAREER, REBECCA KIRSHNER HAS WORKED AS AN EXECUTIVE PRODUCER AND SHOWRUNNER ON “90210,” AND WROTE FOR “GILMORE GIRLS,” “FREAKS AND GEEKS,” “BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER” AND MORE. BUT IT WASN’T UNTIL LAST YEAR, WHEN SHE STARTED PAINTING CACTUSES, THAT SHE FOUND A WAY TO DIRECTLY ACCESS JOY DURING THE CREATIVE PROCESS.

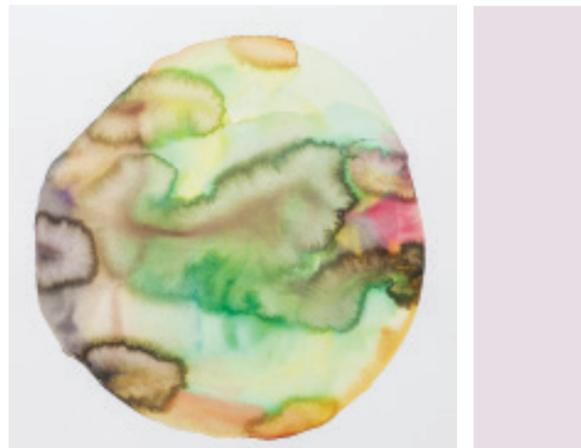
WORDS BY **KRISTIN SCHARKEY**
ARTWORK AND PHOTOGRAPHS
COURTESY OF **REBECCA KIRSHNER**

To make love to a cactus, you must make your way to the desert. For Rebecca Kirshner, this was Ojai. The Los Angeles-based artist arrived in the fall of 2015, on a trip with several girlfriends in the wake of a recent divorce. A television writer by profession, Kirshner was in the midst of writing a novel, grieving the end of her marriage while also falling in love with a man living in Paris. She was, as she recalls, “in the middle of a midlife crisis.”

But early one morning, the Harvard graduate picked up her watercolors and began to paint a cactus, simply because it was there. She was alone, and discovered she wanted it that way – to be present and free of the need for validation or identity. The experience impacted her so profoundly that it spurred a year-long love affair with painting cactuses – a collection ultimately collected in a book, “How to Make Love to a Cactus.” In it, Kirshner includes some of the insight she gleaned throughout the process. Here, she offers even more.

WHAT WAS SO MONUMENTAL ABOUT THAT FIRST PAINTING IN OJAI?

Part of my creative process has always been, to some extent, about correcting myself. As a writer or a painter, you do something and then you see a mistake that’s not quite right, whether you’re trying to be realistic or just create something that feels right, so you correct it. Then, you find something else now feels off and you correct that and correct that, and it’s this act of going on top of yourself – in essence, being critical because you’re always looking for something that isn’t quite right. I think it was a function of the nature of watercolors themselves, where because they’re translucent, you can’t fix things. I



somehow surrendered and released this need or ability to fix, and was literally going with the flow.

WHY DID THE PROCESS NEED TO BE PRIVATE?

That morning in Ojai, I heard the voices of the women who I had gone on this trip with, having coffee and chattering, and I felt this pang of anxiety. I went back to painting but I found that I was no longer in that state. I was no longer in the flow. I realized that I had imagined that my friends would come out and look at what I was doing. I started to see the painting through their eyes. I started to think, ‘Wait, is this good?’ Somehow, I was looking at the paper and in this very subtle way, judging what I was doing. Does this look enough like a cactus for them? Will they think I’m

a good painter? I could even imagine them saying, ‘Oh, I like that one but not that one.’ Suddenly, because I was so clear and in such a peaceful state, I could identify these subtle anxieties that were probably part of my interior dialogue my whole life. But suddenly, I thought, “[expletive] it!” If they come over and ask to see what I’m doing, I’m going to say no! For the first time in a lifetime of doing creative things, I had this really strong feeling of letting go of other people’s perspectives.

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN YOU RETURNED HOME?

I came back to Highland Park, where I was living in a tiny little place with my daughter, and I started to paint cactuses. There’s an amazing cactus store, called Cactus Store in Echo Park. It was an opuntia cactus that I had that formative experience with and so I got a small one of those and some other ones. To my surprise, I found that I could continually, or with some regularity, access this same state of connection, being truly in the moment, not judging myself or the painting. At night, I would paint and paint and paint and fill the house. My daughter would wake up in the morning and find 40 or 50 paintings of cactuses! I’d never really had anything like that, where I was open to something and it sort of came through me.

WHAT WAS IT ABOUT THE CACTUSES THAT ALLOWED FOR THIS TYPE OF TRANSFORMATION?

Both of my parents are scientists, and my mother is passionate about botany. I am conscious of the fact that I haven’t even learned all the names of the cactuses that I’ve painted, and I still call them cactuses instead of maybe cacti. But I have definitely thought about the cactus a lot in terms of the fact that it’s alive, it’s actually moving. It’s growing, but it’s just happening very slowly. That has been kind of amazing to me. I have not painted from a photograph, nor would I be interested in it.

Maybe it’s the influence of photography or just some part of the modern mentality, but we have this idea of capturing, freezing things as part of art making. A photograph freezes the moment. Should a painting as well? Maybe that’s about realism, or a kind of realism, but for me, I began to recognize that one of the cool things that was happening was I was allowing things to change. I would start to paint one thing and it would be purple, but then as I looked somewhere else and then back, in contrast to something else, it looked green. And I wouldn’t judge that. I wouldn’t make a conscious rational decision like, “Wait, I said that would be purple.” If it looked purple, I did purple. If it looked green, green.

WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO PUBLISH THE BOOK?

Early on, my boyfriend said, “Maybe this French literary magazine would publish one of them.” I had shown him out of love. I said no at first. I was really protective and cautious about protecting this thing that was happening to me. I only told a few friends, but Kime [Buzzelli, owner of The End in Yucca Valley], was one of those people. I’ve known Kime for a long time, since back when she lived in Echo Park and she had a shop called Show Pony. Later, when I was doing TV, I hired her as a costume designer.

After I started these paintings, I got a studio in the Fashion District and she was in the first handful of people who came. From there, it evolved naturally where she was like, "Maybe we should show some of these things at The End." I never would have pursued that. In the past I would have. But in this case, it was like I really knew it had to come from the right place. We ended up doing a show at her shop this past June. Ultimately, I felt like the energy was in the cactus and then I allowed it to flow through me, through the brush, onto the paper and then that wasn't the end. That in the painting, there's a kind of life force and energy. The most optimistic thing for me and the most exciting thing to me is the idea that the energy can still come off those paintings and flow into somebody else.

WHERE DID THE SAYINGS IN THE BOOK COME FROM?

I started to write down some of the things I was learning about this very particular practice of painting watercolors of cacti. The lessons I was learning were somehow bigger than that to me. In the book, I ultimately collected these things. For example, I started to get really nice paper and I would think, "Well, should I get nice paper? I might mess it up," because in these paintings, I realized I couldn't fix mistakes. I couldn't be conscious of mistakes. I had to just let the paint do what it would. And yet I found, "Well, no, you should get nice paper. You have to get nice paper but then you have to be not afraid to ruin the paper." I started to stop trying to control the outcome of things, not just in my watercolor paintings but in my life and art in general.

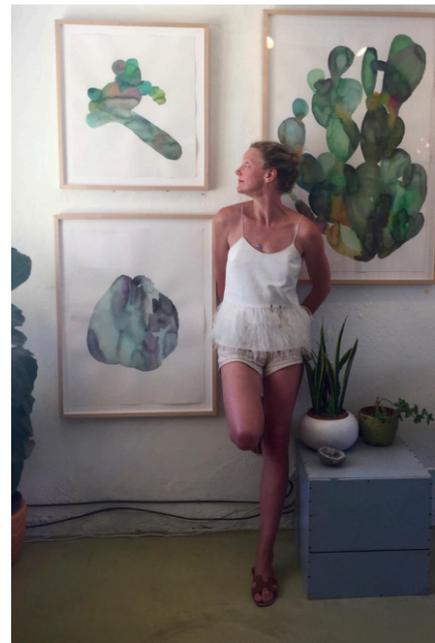
HAVE YOU APPLIED THIS INSIGHT TO WRITING?

When I would paint the cactus, I found that if I painted from the center of a point and went out, I could stay in this connection, this meditation, better than if I did an outline. Because an outline was saying, "This is what the edge if going to be and now I'm going to fill it in." I wasn't quite in it. I was preparing and then executing something I'd already planned to do.

I took a job just recently on the TV show, "Graves," starring Nick Nolte, and I definitely struggle to reconcile what I've learned about this fantastic, creative feeling with the day to day work of writing a TV show. When I say you don't outline a cactus paddle, you go from the inside out, in a TV script, it's literally the opposite. You outline a story, then you write a script that fulfills the outline, then you film the script. During the experience, I actually went out with my old boss, Joss Whedon, who I worked for on "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," and he said "Yeah, I always felt like your poet nature and TV nature were fighting, and I'm really glad the poet won out." I want to write things, maybe children's books with illustrations, where I can integrate art and writing – where I strengthen in writing some of the restricted muscles that have had atrophy and let myself remember again why I'm drawn to writing in the first place. I love to write and I love to paint. And like many things with most people, over the years, they have become things where I wasn't always accessing the joy. I was more accessing, "This is what I'm good at," or "This is where I'm trying to make progress."



THE DETAILS
Prints, paintings and "How to Make Love to a Cactus" are available for purchase on rebeccakirshner.com.



IS THAT A RESULT OF THE INDUSTRY YOU'RE IN?

I'm part of a culture where there's so much presentation, and it was a radical thought to be private and to not need to prove anything. It was kind of like, 'If a cactus is painted and no one is there, did it really happen?' It was the magic of knowing that you can have this experience in the world without getting validated by anyone else. The world is mine to connect with, and that, in itself, was the ultimate goal.

HAS IT CHANGED THE WAY YOU SEE YOURSELF?

I'm much kinder to myself, more curious about myself. A long time ago in therapy, I described how if I did a self-portrait, I could

be curious about myself like, "Oh it's sort of purple under my eyes," or "Look how my chin is sort of bulging out." It was a totally different, perceptive mindset than what I might feel if I looked in the mirror and was trying to get ready to go out. I felt a lack of judgment when I looked at myself through the eyes of an artist.

WHERE DO YOU GO FROM HERE? WHAT ARE YOUR FUTURE PLANS?

I'd like to try to do oil in the same manner I've done watercolor. I want to try painting on linen. I also have been wanting to apply this same mindset to painting people, particularly myself. To look at myself with that same kind of open eye. And I want to keep painting bigger, whether it's me or still looking at cactuses. They take a long time, a few hours, and I really can't drop out of it. I can see in a painting if I start to become self-conscious or try to start to control things – there's a phony moment in the painting. If I go big, it really is staying in a meditative state for a really long time or staying in a state of non-judgment, sort of as an exercise.

One of the best things about this year was that I was focused, I was singular. I was painting cactuses. I was having my life and making a child and doing other things, but artistically this is my thing. Now, I feel the challenge of choice and many options. I'm trying to let that develop naturally and recognize also that I took some detours during this cactus thing. It was not like it was all straight watercolors of cactuses. At first I was like, "Oh, this will evolve into the paintings I was working on before which are these abstractions of the body," and so I would try to do that and it was like, "Huh, I was feeling more when I was doing the cactuses. OK, I'll go back to that." Then I thought, "I should be working with oils, that's more serious," and ended up saying, "Nope, that's not happening." There were some tributaries that I took that didn't feel as exciting, and then I kept going with what was most interesting. At this point, yeah, I'm starting to draw with ink again, like, "Why don't I do these *New Yorker* cartoons I've always wanted to do? And I'm doing these self-portraits and I'm going bigger and I'm writing a TV show and I'm also now four months pregnant. That is another way that life has surprised me recently.

I don't know if working on the staff of a TV show is something that is part of my future, It's part of my present but I feel like I'm not sure. I've got to earn a living, so you have to be practical to some extent, but the first piece of advice that I have in the book is, "Find the joy." When I was doing a painting, I would try to start with the area that interested me most. If you're looking at a cactus, start with the part that you're most interested in and then follow that. Find the joy and follow the joy, that's what worked. Not to plan ahead or be tough on myself. I've seen that this is so true in the paintings. and it's so true in creativity. I have to imagine that, to some extent, it's true in life. While you want to be practical and earn a living, I have both a heightened sensitivity to what I don't like and also a heightened confidence that if you follow the joy, follow what you are truly interested in and trust that, great things happen. Hopefully, that's a way to live. I guess I want to find out. 🌱

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