

Interview *with* SERENA VIOLA CORSON

BY JENNA FITZGERALD

I video-called artist Serena Viola Corson, who is currently staying in Brazil, to chat with her about her practice and the themes that recur across her paintings.

Jenna FitzGerald: Hi! Thank you for joining me. I love your work; it's so great to see these images of women together in this kind of sacred safe space. I read from your artist statement that your themes largely revolve around mysticism and ecofeminism; could you describe how you express these ideas and how they are connected?

Serena Viola Corson: Well, I am in an herbalism class right now, and we had a session last night, so that knowledge is really fresh on my mind. I think it will help to explain my overall approach. One of the class participants had the most beautiful definition of magic yesterday: it was about how magic is mundane. They explained that magic is like the daily alchemical interactions that we have with the natural world, and I'm an animist. So, you know, I believe that everything on earth is alive and connected and one, together with our home, the earth. I think that my spiritual beliefs kind of orient my relationship to my art. It encompasses my whole perspective on life, and that just translates to the art. Unfortunately in our society a lot of what I believe in is seen as very utopian. So that's how 'mysticism' or magic comes into my art. I do very much believe that anything we can imagine can become real, so I feel like I'm healing myself through imagining these fantasies, and I hope that they can become real one day. So of course my belief in animism translates into these fantasies of people being respectful and living peacefully with the land again, like people did for so long until relatively recently. So that's really what my art is really about: depicting scenes of humans living peacefully with the land again.

JF: That's awesome, and it's beautiful how you're describing that. The herbalism class sounds really cool; it definitely seems to be in your lane.

SVC: Yeah! The class is mostly about learning how to observe and research herbs, but this past class was about specifically folklore and magic with the herbs. So, that was really cool.

JF: I guess it's pretty obvious, but how do you explain how the environment is impacted by patriarchy?

SVC: I think I have a specific answer that is really based in history that maybe a lot of people don't go to, because I'm obsessed with Sylvia Federici and her book *Caliban and the Witch*, where she documents the history of the Middle



danse macabre (dance of death) (2025). Acrylic on canvas. © Serena Viola Corson.

Ages and really points to the Renaissance and then the Enlightenment eras as big cultural shifts that still affect us today, leading to consumerism and industrialism. So Federici said that a lot of the ideas that these male European theorists came up with separated the mind from the body. The period also saw the erasure of more magical worldviews for pretty much the first time. And people started to think that the earth wasn't a living thing but just a dead rock or object that could be exploited. When you think of the earth as something that's not alive and conscious, it's easier to exploit. At the same time that these male European theorists were starting to write and talk about Earth in this way, there was also this rise in misogyny and exploitation of female reproduction as well as the witch trials; Federici really connects Earth's mistreatment with the mistreatment of women.

JF: Yes, I think that's a really profound connection to make. It's also interesting when you think about the way many of today's largest religions are centered around men. Like in Christianity, they just take out the woman to create the holy trinity of the father, son, and the holy ghost. It doesn't make any sense without a woman, so it's

lovely to see your work, where witches are depicted in a way that celebrates pagan beliefs rather than being scary. They're just existing with and celebrating nature.

SVC: Thank you! I've been engaging with, of course, witch and pagan imagery and symbolism but also Christian symbolism and poking at these patriarchal narratives. I have one painting that's titled *Where Shame Never Arrived*, and it's placed in this apple orchard, with this little couple making love kind of to the side and then an almost hidden snake, but I'm kind of poking and referencing biblical stories and art history. The nude is so important to art history. And then here is this interesting biblical creation story about where the shame around nudity came from through Eve's eating of the apple, so in the worlds that I paint, the characters are usually nude.

JF: How do you view your use of the female nude in conversation with the long-standing history of men painting female bodies? Because there's such a clear difference when I look at the nudity of your work versus the nudity depicted by male artists using the classic odalisque pose, for example.

SVC: Even though I really am interested in art history and responding to how these male painters depicted women, I also just feel like I naturally gravitate towards painting nudity just to represent freedom, like it represents the most free state of being. But I do like to say that I'm in conversation with these male painters, especially because I depict nude women in nature and outside, similarly to a lot of the neo-impressionists. There's that famous painting, I think it's called *The Luncheon on the Grass*, where there's one nude woman, and the two men around her are dressed in suits, and it's so weird. Why is she nude and they're not? I try to consider everything, like how the pose should be, you know, looking feminist and not like a limp odalisque pose. I try to be more honest with my subjects; I love painting stretch marks and belly rolls and zits, and then some of the works are straight-up very explicit, I guess. There is one pose that I make sometimes; it references *Sheela na gig* sculptures, which are these exhibitionist sculptures from ancient Ireland, but they're still around today—they depict nude women and are usually found at the entrance to churches. The poses of these sculptures are always legs spread wide, in your face, and this pose is believed to protect people from evil. So, I like to think about things like that as inspiration for my subjects too. I think that if you go far enough back in history, nudity wasn't as taboo as it is now, and there wasn't so much shame around it. We're just kind of coming to the end of this long era where there has been a lot of shame around nudity.

JF: Now artists like you like have the voice to create new narratives and all that. So is your background Irish?

SVC: Yes. My ancestry is mostly Irish, so I've spent a lot of time there recently, getting into the culture and history. I think human history is very important, and these things, like the introduction of patriarchy and the oppression of pagan religions, did not happen long ago; they affect us so much today.

JF: That's wonderful that you're diving back into that ancestry. My family is Irish as well, and recently I've been more and more interested in rediscovering ancient Celtic spirituality. Shifting towards a more technical aspect of your work, I noticed that you have a really good use of light and dark sources in your paintings; does your use of lighting conceptually help you explain your ideas?

SVC: I think just in terms of the painting process, it's really fun to do that and experiment with imaginative and dramatized light situations. But I guess, for example, in the feast painting there are a bunch of women around a table eating together, and a very warm but intense glow is emitting from all of them. I think that's a good example of intentional emphasis on subjects to show how their connection at this dinner table creates this powerful energy

JF: That's a beautiful explanation; the way the light frames the subjects just feels very safe, like everything is completely exposed but still safe, if that makes sense.

SVC: I love that. And it's like, and I will say, you know, that my work kind of oscillates between utopia and dystopia because there's no way to ignore reality, and I feel it inevitably creeps in regardless. So there are, I would say, kind of heavier or violent themes that come in sometimes and symbols that I use to reference violence. Some like very obvious ones like guns, but I just want to show the reality that although I am often imagining peaceful scenarios, I feel like that always comes with hardship. I'm not for toxic positivity, but I am for hope.

JF: Yeah. It's reminding me of this quote by writer Tony Cade Bambara, where she says, "My job is to make revolution irresistible," which many artists have since adopted as their mission. I think your work does embody that idea quite well, which is really great to see.



where shame never arrived (2025). Acrylic on canvas. © Serena Viola Corson.

SVC: Thank you. I love that, and I love that quote.

JF: Where do you find references or inspiration for your work? I know you've said that a lot of it is in reference to art history. But then other than that, do you have just kind of visions of what you want to paint, or are you inspired by things you see in your life?

SVC: Inspiration definitely comes to me from a diverse range of places. I take a lot of photos of my friends, and I use those, but while I used to more directly paint from those, I've been moving away from that because I like how I paint more when I'm imagining scenarios. So, I'm transitioning to more intuitive inspirations. And of course, I'll still look up like a specific butterfly or flower or something to help me, but I'm into painting very loosely and imaginatively right now. And when an idea comes to me, I just, randomly write it down and kind of collage it together. Sometimes I'll do plein air sketches; I like to go outside and study the flora around me and get inspired from that. But I feel like I'm pulling from like so many different places.

JF: I've seen that part of your artistic practice has been hosting small dinner parties as kind of installations for your work. What draws you to involve other people in a community event? Why is that practice important to you, and where do these events exist within your greater body of work?

SVC: I've always naturally just loved hosting, and I've been hosting events since I started college, since leaving my hometown at 18. I helped run a feminist collective in college that grew to be like 400 people on the Facebook group, and at least 50 people would come to each event. That experience was really fun and inspiring, and



garden gathering (2026). Acrylic on canvas. © Serena Viola Corson.



The Art of Hosting Is The Highest Form of Art, Glassell Gallery, 2026 © Serena Viola Corson.

I've just kept up with it every since, and then I had a realization, like, wait, this is literally art. This is the same thing that I'm painting about. So, I've just tried to intentionally merge the two worlds of event planning and making artworks, especially because as much as I love painting, I like to add other media and performance into gallery spaces because I think it helps bring them to life.

JF: Well, it seems like you're really practicing what you preach since, you know, your works are about community and about people coming

together and sharing joy. And so for you to actually do that, it's perfect seeing the photos of guests having dinner together in front of paintings of people eating dinner together; they mirror each other, like they're in the same world.

SVC: Yes, exactly. And they both feed each other; it's a feedback loop where the community gathering influences the painting and then the painting influences next events.

JF: I'm sure the dinners are very memorable experiences for everyone involved. Off the top

of your head, who are some artists that inspire you in your practice?

SVC: Oh, so many. I guess the first one that just shot to my mind was Kevin Sabo. I met him in San Francisco in 2021, and I just love his characters. They're so vibrant and fun. Also, Katherine Bradford creates these very loose paintings that are inspiring to me. Someone dead that inspires me would be Matisse; I love him.

I guess I'll go with those three; I really love each of them. I love color. I love messiness.

JF: Oh, that's awesome. Those are all of my questions, so do you have any new projects coming up that you'd like to shout out?

SVC: I have a painting on display in New York City until July 18th at the painting center. So if anyone who's reading this is in Manhattan, they can go see my painting. I kind of go through phases of making work and then reading and absorbing inspiration, so this summer I'm in the absorbing phase, and I brought a bunch of books with me to Brazil that I'm just devouring. Right now I'm reading Gabriel Mate's *The Myth of Normal*, and I think the reason why his book is hitting so close to home for me right now is because he doesn't believe in individual health but rather that our illnesses are collective and result from societal factors. I'm really interested in that. As for a next painting series, I really want to make paintings that are about interconnectedness between humans and the environment. And I think it's going to be kind of surrealist. That's all I'll say!



the protective embrace of Mother Oak (2026). Acrylic on canvas. © Serena Viola Corson.