

ELLE DECOR

OLIVE AYHENS

Though she's based in Brooklyn, this peripatetic painter finds as much inspiration in stark, remote landscapes as she does in the chaos of daily urban life. By Vicky Lowry



The art market doesn't always play nice. While some artists rise swiftly, like fresh Champagne bubbles, to prominence and prosperity, others, just as radiantly talented and productive, can toil for years without the recognition they deserve.

Olive Ayhens falls in the latter category. The California-born, New York-based painter has been drawing her whole life (high-school biology class was a fertile ground for early, inventive doodles). And while her résumé is top-loaded with awards, grants, and residencies, the artist remains an idiosyncratic, nomadic

presence in her field.

By the age of 18, Ayhens, who grew up in Oakland, knew she would be an artist and trained at the prestigious San Francisco Art Institute. At the time, she recalls, "the old-guard Abstract Expressionists were at war with the minimalists, and I was neither." But she was able to paint all day, and her figurative drawings caught the notice of curators. Philip Linhares, the former longtime chief curator of art at the Oakland Museum of California, was an early champion. "She has a fantastic imagination," says Linhares, who acquired a 2003 piece, *Crashing the Canyon*, for the museum. "Her paintings are very elaborate and emotional. They have a California sensibility with fantasy and spiritual qualities. They certainly don't follow the cool, New York way of making art."

Like the Post-Impressionist French painter Bonnard, Ayhens uses sketches and photographs as a starting point, but she also relies on the memory of scenes and

elements of her life, as well as the pure creativity of "made-up-things," which all come elaborately and vividly alive on the canvas. The crenellated arches and domes of Moorish architecture, seen during a residency in Spain, form the lively backdrop of her dream-like 2013 painting *Memories of Beasts Past*. Those beasts, curled in repose or leaping in flight, include a menagerie of real pets and fictional creatures.

Another work, *Flecks in the Foam*, influenced by an enormous building in New York City's Chinatown that Ayhens glimpsed while riding the subway, portrays a sea of skyscrapers swaying precariously in the background, with a giant wave crashing along the shore. It was painted in 2012, but before Hurricane Sandy ripped through the city.

A deep concern for the environment— "the duality of nature versus the industrial complex," as her New York dealer, Lori Bookstein, puts it—is a prominent theme for Ayhens. She's got a bird's-eye-view of that



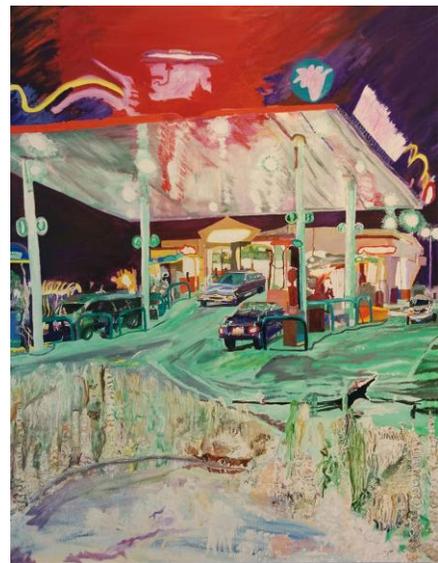
Interior Wilderness, 2008

fragile balance while working in a studio, awarded to her through a grant, in the World Trade Center. (She vacated it just months before the towers were destroyed.) Up there Ayhens trained her eye, using binoculars, on city and sea. "It was like looking under a microscope," she recalls. "All those different patterns of sky scrapers are like a fabric."

What saves her postapocalyptic imagery from being too worrisome are the hallucinogenic, confectionary hues she employs with such



Bitter Lake, 2014



Roswell by Night, 2015

assuredness. A girlish pink, the color of candy hearts, infuses *Computer Lab*; fuchsia midcentury-modern chairs (Ayhens happens to love furniture design) recall blooming flowers amid the cacti of *Remembering my Chickens*. "It might sound pretentious, but I feel like color is my first language," she says. "I like to extend it and isolate it".



Outskirts of Roswell, 2014

hope I live a really long life," she adds, laughing, "to get them all down."

Ayhens recently returned to her Brooklyn apartment after a residency in Roswell, New Mexico, and she says she is brimming with ideas for new works. "I thought I was finished being inspired by New York, but my brain is stirring right now. All these images knock me out, and I know I want to do something with them," she explains. "I just

Lowry, Vicky, "Olive Ayhens," *Elle Decor*, July/August 2015, No. 217, p. 60-64.