

In Her Manhattan and Maine Studios, Artist Inka Essenhigh Creates Luminous, Ethereal Landscapes From Buckets of Paint and Coffee

The artist has an exhibition now on view at Miles McEnery Gallery through 3 June 2023.

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Inka Essenhigh, 2023. Photo: Kyle Dorosz. Courtesy of Inka Essenhigh.

Inka Essenhigh believes painting is a private matter.

The American artist keeps two studios, one nestled in the woods of Maine, the other on the fifth floor of an old building in downtown Manhattan. While worlds outside the studio doors might be very different, life inside is remarkably similar. Essenhigh spends her studio days drinking coffee and passionately working and reworking her fantastical nature-inspired canvases until her paintings resonate with her intuition. She doesn't let just about anybody see her work—until it's finished, that is—and her only visitor is often her husband the painter Steve Mumford, delivering lunch or yet another cup of coffee.

Such intimacy is essential; Essenhigh's ethereal and fantastical landscapes are painted entirely from her imagination, without preparatory drawings or sketches, and Essenhigh must steer clear of outside influence. But when her works are completed, they are luminous. Right now an exhibition of her recently created paintings is on view at New York's Miles McEnery Gallery (through June 3). These lush and magical paintings conjure up a kaleidoscopic world of cascading evergreen forests, flower-like nymphs and fairies, and sensuous, drooping blossoms that seem to pour off the canvas and into our eyes. The works radiate color—an effect of the enamel paints she uses, offering up delightful glossy sheens of color.

Recently we caught up with the artist who told us about what her two studios have in common, the brand of paint she (and Jackson Pollock) swears by, and why it might take her a minute to answer the phone.



Inside Inka Essenhigh's studio. Photo: Dan Bradica. Courtesy of Inka Essenhigh.

Tell us about your studio. Where is it, how did you find it, what kind of space is it, etc.?

I have two studios. One is in lower Manhattan where I've been since the early '90s, and the other is a space that I had built in St. George, Maine, around 2008. The space that I built in Maine is very similar to the space that I have in New York City. Both are white, square-ish spaces with a large sawtooth skylight. In the city, I have southern-facing light; in Maine, I have northern-facing light. In the city, I'm up on the fifth floor. In Maine, I'm in a forest next to the St. George River.

What made you choose this particular studio over others?

I don't think you choose a studio in New York City. Mostly you settle for what you find, but in my case, I love what I found (or what found me).



Inside Inka Essenhigh's studio. Photo: Dan Bradica. Courtesy of Inka Essenhigh.

Do you have studio assistants or other team members working with you? What do they do?

I have my stretchers made and delivered and that is all that I have help with in regard to my actual paintings. I paint alone. I make them up as I go along. I could never give them to someone else to fill in, there are no sketches to follow, no road maps at all. I have a “destination” for what I want the experience of the painting to be, but I discover what the experience will look like as I paint. So, there is really no way anyone could help. I have had help with organizing my archives, website and keeping track of my images. I don't actually like hiring people and when I have in the past, I've always had the feeling that I was working for them, coming up with something to do. I rely on my galleries to keep better records than I do.

How many hours do you typically spend in the studio, what time of day do you feel most productive, and what activities fill the majority of that time?

I'm a morning person. I get to the studio after I've dropped off my kid at school, which is around 8:30, with a coffee in hand. I sit and look at the painting I'm working on and sip my coffee and come up with what I hope to accomplish that day and immediately get to work. My husband works in a studio adjacent to mine. He usually comes in a couple of hours later and brings me a cup of coffee and sometimes lunch. Most of my time is just spent painting. I wear vinyl gloves and even a kitchen glove on my left hand—the hand that holds a wiping rag with mineral spirits, as well as a respirator. I take little breaks when the respirator becomes too annoying, heavy, and sweaty on my face. I hate that the respirator leaves creases on my face. If the phone rings, it's a production to get all the stuff off so it's a real interruption. I'm dragging by around 3 p.m. and I go home at 5:30 p.m.

What is a studio task on your agenda this week that you are most looking forward to?

All that I do is paint and I make one painting at a time and it's what I look forward to. I like the whole thing, the beginning, the middle, and the end. I like being left alone for long periods of time. I love working on a group of paintings that are going to be seen next to each other and seeing how they're talking to each other.

What are you working on right now? Please send us a few smartphone shots of a work in progress.

I don't do this anymore because of the seeking nature of my process. I no longer expose myself to people saying how they liked it so much better when it was in this phase, or why did I turn that yellow field into a blue field? Things might be looking just fine with nice paint and color but if it's not the experience that I want, then I change it

This can be mystifying to people. People might ask: Why not just be happy with this and make a new one? This looks like art! People love to look at a big splot of paint and say, "Oooh this is so exciting! Why not leave this!?"

If there is anything that has gotten better about my work, it's because I've finally tuned out all that talk about letting the paint dictate what's happening. For my work it's not the paint, it's the energy that drives the paint. I think in New York City with its Ab-Ex legacy, this has tipped the scales towards thinking that the paint itself is in charge, which it is for some artists but not me.

I don't think the world needs another okay-looking painting that doesn't have a sense of purpose, love, and completion.

What tool or art supply do you enjoy working with the most, and why?

I paint with sign painter's enamel, a brand called One Shot. There are a few artists that use it like Marilyn Minter, Gary Hume, and most notably, Jackson Pollock, whose drip paintings were made with enamel paint. Oil doesn't drip like that. Enamel is liquid and I love to make crisp clean shapes and lines that get sanded down and layered up.

How do you know when an artwork you are working on is clicking? How do you know when an artwork you are working on is a dud?

An artwork is clicking the moment that my own eye muscles start to relax and drink in the image. If I'm looking hard, squinting and such, it means I'm making it work in my mind but it hasn't resolved into a real place yet.

When you feel stuck while preparing for a show, what do you do to get unstuck?

I don't really get stuck because changing the painting is part of the process. At worst, I can be bored but that means that I have to go deeper, I have to remake the image or shape with more love and attention.

What is the fanciest item in your studio? The humblest?

There is nothing fancy in my studio. I have no computer or equipment of any sort. No nice furniture, no special fancy lighting setup. I do have an old trashed antique couch and table that my husband bought when he was younger; the bathroom and sink are down the hall. I listen to music on my iPhone. But in some ways, my studio is the most luxurious studio I've ever seen because it has a huge sawtoothed skylight and windows on both sides. A cross-breeze in Manhattan is a rare and wonderful thing.

Describe the space in three adjectives.

Light-filled, airy, old, and crumbly. That's four.

What's the last thing you do before you leave the studio at the end of the day (besides turning off the lights)?

I say to my paintings, "Ok, everyone, nice job! Good work today! We'll figure the rest out tomorrow, goodnight!"

What do you like to do right after that?

I go home to make dinner for my family.