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Dianna Settles: An Interview

By Maria Owen

Dianna Settles was born in Los Alamitos, California in 1989. She grew up in Blue Ridge, Georgia and received her BFA from San Francisco Art Institute in 2014. Settles currently resides on an urban farm in Atlanta, Georgia, where she lives and creates in the company of a large community and co-runs Hi-Lo Press, a print studio and art gallery. Settles has exhibited at Institute 193 in Lexington, KY, the High Museum in Atlanta, GA, the San Francisco Art Institute, and the Zuckerman Museum of Art in Kennesaw, GA, among others. This interview was conducted on the eve of her solo exhibition currently on view at MARCH Gallery, New York, touching on her painting practice, sustainability, and the possible futures of Southern communities.

Dianna Settles, All things sing of a possible haven, is it not this? —– it is., 2022, acrylic and colored pencil on panel, 32 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist and MARCH Gallery.

Maria Owen: Hi Dianna! You're currently living on an urban farm in Atlanta, Georgia. What is a day in your life like, and what are you working on outside of the studio?

Dianna Settles: I live on Crack In The Sidewalk Farmlet in South Atlanta, which was started nearly 15 years ago by my friends and neighbors, Chris and Isia. My boyfriend, Keelan, started farming with them a few years back, and for this past year he has been in charge of the vegetable production. While preparing for my current show at MARCH, I've spent Monday through Fridays in the studio, but I work on the farm on the weekends, harvesting vegetables for the Sunday market and helping with weeding and chores.

We have six chickens—Light Brahmas—that are very sweet, and two cats. I normally train in Brazilian jiu-jitsu a few evenings a week, and I'm always working on organizing shows and events for Hi-Lo Press, a gallery and press studio I started over six years ago. It is currently run collectively with my friends Sophie Whittemore and Yoon Nam. On any given week there are endless activities to do: working in the studio, grappling in the gym, running to a local brewery with Keelan to pick up spent grain for the fields and chickens, tinkering with the riso for

Dianna, photographed by our friend Rinne Allen at her home and the Hi-Lo Press office in Atlanta, Georgia.

Hi-lo publications, meetings, practicing French, going to market, sitting outside with friends, reading alone, reading groups, hiking, weeding, and hopefully, for the rest of the summer, a lot more swimming. My next major project is to start making my own pigments. I've been collecting different mineral deposits from around Atlanta, as well as growing indigo, marigolds, and other plants for pigments here on the farm. I want to have a deeper relationship to the paints I use and have a different way of interacting with the colors I use, rather than just using whatever is available through the commodity market.

MO: Can you speak more about how painting fits into these wider practices?

DS: Everything we learn and spend time practicing changes the way we interact with everything else. Jiu-jitsu is part of my painting practice in that it helps me strategize my way around challenges. Farming is part of my painting practice in the ways it teaches me to see and render plants, seasons, and growth patterns, and in the way it has shifted my relationship to failure. The things I read and think about, both alone and with my friends, are integral to my painting in that they help to situate the desires I have for a life worth living––and for a material connection to the world around me––into a long lineage of people trying to elaborate these same struggles and pleasures.

MO: It seems that sustainability is a major consideration in everything you do. How and when did you begin to incorporate sustainable practices into your everyday life? Is it something you learned from a young age or discovered later on?

DS: A lot of the drive I have to learn how to produce things on my own or with friends comes from growing up very poor. Early on, it was evident to me that a lot of the things I wanted or

that I was interested in weren't accessible to me for a number of reasons, so I learned a lot about waste and resourcefulness. A lot of the food we ate came from food pantries or had been otherwise discarded. My family members got by without many resources and the ones that we did have were shared.

During my first year of living on my own, I got involved with a bicycle cooperative where I learned how to build and fix my own bike. That same year I also got involved with Food Not Bombs, and joined a radical marching band called the Atlanta Sedition Orchestra. All of these endeavors were very rooted in figuring out ways to make things happen that weren't happening otherwise. I couldn't afford a nice new bike, and no one was going to give me one, but the one I built and maintained myself with scrap parts became an important part of my life—an object that I had a deep and meaningful relationship to. Taking on skills like that makes you highly aware of the incredible amount of waste and environmental devastation that come from our industrialized world. As time went on, I had the opportunity to ride much nicer bikes, but in fact the one I had made myself was not only more meaningful to me, but also just a more functional and enjoyable bike for me to ride, since it was so perfectly suited to my body and my needs for it. I think most things are like that––there's an illusion that you can just buy your way to the good things in life, which, largely through necessity, I've actually found to be completely untrue.

In the past few years I became interested in building my own panels and making my own gesso, both out of necessity and in order to deepen my understanding and connection to more of what my paintings are made of. Gleaning an understanding of how to make these things that I want to see in the world, along with living on a farm and learning more of our potential to have more of a symbiotic relationship to the land we inhabit, only makes me more committed to deepening the bond I have to where I live and what I'm doing there, i.e. learning to be a better steward and to move through the world with more intention and less isolation in general.

MO: On a wider note––how do you imagine a future South? What do you consider necessary to manifest this future?

DS: I hope that in the future, "the South" will be replaced by any number of more meaningful distinctions to help us define space. As far as I can tell, "the South", like so many identity distinctions today, mostly functions as an economic and political construct that is then mapped onto cultural experiences. Since both the economy and the existing political sphere are based on abstractions and spectacle, I think this leads to most of the really interesting differences in the way people could choose to live being erased, either forcefully or through being captured and made unreal by forces like nostalgia and commodification.

Watersheds, bioregions, and shared material and spiritual cultural practices make a lot more sense as ways of talking about and differentiating space to me than abstractions like "the South", states, or other economic regions. I'd like to live in a world where the differences between people and places can be celebrated, where the joy of experiencing that difference can be held up as one of the great joys of life on this planet. Obviously, that would mean that it is necessary to take up and develop forms of life that are truly in and of the places they exist as part of, as opposed to the ongoing project of Western metaphysics to simply copy and paste an abstract way of life over a local reality ad nauseam. It seems to me that one of the main tasks in the world today is to develop ways of living that take seriously the prospect of

being an active participant in the world and its many processes, of caring for the world that cares for us. That could include forms of art making, ways of growing and preparing food, and ways of producing material culture like housing, furniture, clothing and tools, but it will also include developing new ways of understanding our existence, new metaphysical and spiritual ideas and practices, new ways of organizing ourselves and making decisions together. I think the solutions that arise out of that search will look wildly different in the Southern Appalachian mountains, the coastal plains of the Atlantic, and the Mississippi River Valley.

MO: That's an exciting way to think about the future––the valuation of small nucleic communities over somewhat arbitrary borders feels like a natural (and much needed) shift. In that vein, what communities or movements are you inspired by at the moment?

DS: There are all kinds of inspiring things across the country. In Bloomington, Indiana my friends organize a huge community tree planting every year under the name "Neighborhood Planting Project." The past couple years the project has even spread as far as Atlanta, so we have a few pawpaw trees on the farm from them. It's a great way to connect to your neighbors and also plant a lot of native fruit trees fast. Connected to that model, there are also folks in New Orleans called Lobelia Commons who are working towards autonomous food production on a neighborhood level there.

Just recently, I was able to see the new space for a project run by friends in Ridgewood, Queens which is called Woodbine. It's a huge increase in size and capacity from a smaller, original location they rented for many years. The new building has kitchen equipment for their regular dinners and their free grocery distribution, a gym, a woodworking shop, hosts regular painting, drawing, and sewing classes and organizes a soccer team and a sailing group within the neighborhood.
Beyond that, there are still residents at the ZAD Notre-Dame-des-Landes in France who are occupying the land and figuring out ways of living together communally. That struggle has been incredibly inspiring to me, along with the proliferation of other ZAD struggles across France. Long standing communities like the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico are certainly a touchstone for the kind of life I'm interested in. And I'm always reading and thinking about the Paris Commune of 1871 and the collective reimagining and restructuring that the Communards achieved in its brief moment.

MO: Is there any advice you'd share with someone looking to incorporate more community and sustainability into their daily life? Small changes that someone could help begin this shift?

DS: Have conversations with your close friends and put something together that you've all been wanting to attend or see, but that doesn't exist yet. That could mean planting a small garden, organizing an art show, hosting a reading group, building a sauna, etc. Think and talk about why those things aren't already happening and about what forces conspire to make things you'd enjoy difficult. Keep talking about how to defeat those forces. Try to find things that fulfill you and make a more joyful world for your community without regard for financial gain. In general, experiment with articulating what kind of world you want to live in and combining your energy and resources with others to make those things come into being. Make a meal for you and people you love using only things that you've grown, even just once to see how different that feels, resist trendy and poorly made objects, learn to mend, care for, and ideally to make the things you give a lot of use to, whether that's tools or garments.

MO: Your paintings on view at MARCH explore ideas in this vein—scenes of nature, self-sufficiency, protest, labor, community and solitude. How did you conceive of the works in this show, and what ideas did you hold close while creating the series?

DS: One of the values of making art is that it is a very freeing and relatively low risk way of imagining how things could be. In these paintings I was trying to imagine what kinds of life might be worth fighting for, worth struggling against the many rivers of oppression and alienation we all muck our way across every day. To me, a life worth living is one where our subjectivities are not dominated by an internalized disconnection from our place in the physical and biological systems that make up our world, where we are not ignorant to the industrialization that poisons us, the food we eat, the water we drink and bathe in, and all of the ways we spend our time.

A life worth living is one where you and, not only the people immediately around you, but people in the broadest sense, have access to what is needed to elaborate a good life in as many ways as possible. This could include working with the land to unlearn centuries of lawns and nonsensical landscaping in place of rehabilitating lost savannas and biodiversity, building homes, dojos, and other communal buildings, growing food, hunting, practicing martial arts or other ways of knowing and expanding the limits of our bodies, mending and constructing the garments that carry us through our lives and give us joy and meaning, gaining an understanding of how to care for our own bodies, the list goes on and on. A life worth living is stealing as

Dianna Settles, Colorfast/fugitives (a vital knowing of the potential to shape, to change, to build, to play, to open the world to new worlds, new possibilities, newly knotting ourselves to our place and time), 2022, acrylic, colored pencil, watercolor on wood panel, 32 x 48 inches. Courtesy of the artist and MARCH Gallery.

MO: In works like How do we follow after you? Cupping circles, culling rows and How to make it last, how to share (apple season), you depict groups of people laboring together, tending to crops and preparing food in harmony. Clearly, community has a large presence in everything you do, from the gatherings and common spaces in your paintings to your endeavors as a curator and leader in your city. Can you share a little bit about your perspective on community and the collective as it relates to your life and work?

DS: The relationships and friendships that you have are what constitutes a rich and joyful way of living. I want to get free. I want others to get free. The things that elicit the feelings of freedom and joy for me are the things I want to make tangible however I can and I don't feel alone in that desire. I think that making the space to share knowledge, skills, tactics, and ideas eases us out of the imposing illusion that we despair in this world alone. With events that I work on with the other Hi-Lo collective members we are putting these shows and publications and experiments together because we want them to exist for us as much as for anyone else. The big desire with inviting people to come to film screenings or drunk critiques or drag drawing classes is 1) that it's more interesting than just watching movies with your friend all the time and 2) we want people to see that it's possible to make interesting, thoughtful, thought-provoking things happen without having a ton of money, or a building, or institutional access. I don't feel much like a "leader in my city," but I am proud that Hi-Lo exists in a rich ecosystem of people here in Atlanta seizing power and space for themselves to carry out experiments in doing, thinking, and living together. Our friends at South Bend Commons put on tons of excellent events, our friends at No Lite throw incredible parties in the forests and abandoned buildings, and several friends recently staged an unsanctioned production of Tristan Tzara's play The Gas Heart on the front lawn of the High Museum, complete with costumes, a live band, and replica museum security guards.

Dianna Settles, To go beyond resistance, we must position the territory within a becoming-world. This time, the wall built against our enemy will not be made of concrete, but of time itself. It is a world that possesses a fragmented geography. It is where we find our friends and even enemies to be fought. It is where we love and we find war, where we share and are free to make use of ourselves as much as we like. Finally, it is where we find the possibility of a crossroads in the path of history., 2022, acrylic and colored pencil on wood panel, 32 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist and MARCH Gallery.

For every thing that we realize we are capable of, countless other possibilities unfold.

MO: Conversely, works like All things sing of a possible haven, is it not this? ––– it is. illustrate the individual in solitude. How do these moments fit into a greater examination of the collective?

DS: It's certainly true that I need some degree of solitude in balance with my sociality. I use that time to process my interactions and to rest. In this time I am able to meander between curiosities and research and uncover new ideas to play with and to contribute to my conversations and friendships. But in the end, utter solitude is always an illusion. I'm not alone in any of those paintings, there just aren't any other people around. In the painting you referenced, for example, there are so many forms of connection depicted it's almost impossible to list them all. There are the animals and plants depicted, which I have a deep and active relationship to. There is the creek – waterways have always been a conduit for people to come together both with each other and with other forms of life. Even the action I'm doing, graining the lithography stones, is something that connects me across time and space to those who taught me that craft, to those who used those stones long before I did, and to those who quarried them out of the ground.

MO: The title of this painting speaks to the inherent dualities and contradictions of human experience: "It is a world that possesses a fragmented geography. It is where we find our friends and even enemies to be fought. It is where we love and we find war, where we share and are free to make use of ourselves as much as we like. Finally, it is where we find the possibility of a crossroads in the path of history." At what crossroads do you find yourself? What does choosing the right path mean to you and what does it look like?

DS: There are crossroads all around us of different kinds. One important crossroad that we are all standing at here in Atlanta is the proposed development of hundreds of acres of forest in South Atlanta into a massive police training facility and the largest movie production soundstage in the world, a development that would be absolutely devastating to the ecology and the quality of human existence in this city, not to mention the way in which it would reverberate far beyond the city limits as well. That painting isn't necessarily a literal depiction of the struggle against that development or any other particular struggle, but it absolutely is about the possibility of staking yourself to the real world, and the sort of tense serenity of committing yourself to trying to lay out a crossing path to carry us off the miserable, world destroying road of speculation, extraction, and sedation that we've been barreling down for centuries. There really are actual people who are living in that forest and who have up until this moment prevented it from being destroyed, and choosing the right path in this instance, for example, probably means either joining them or supporting them to whatever extent you possibly can.

To me, choosing the right path means living in ways that are aligned with the things that make me alive. Not just alive in the bare, biological sense, but alive in the sense of being an active and joyful participant in an active and joyful world. That's a concept and a feeling that has been so diluted and clouded that it feels difficult to communicate effectively, both so basic and obvious and also too profound for words. But I want to feel a part of the world, to have stakes in the ways I move through the world that remind me of my place in it and its place in me.