A conversation with artist Maureen McQuillan
by Francis Xavier

New York based artist Maureen McQuillan graciously took time to answer questions about her wildly intriguing ink and acrylic art. McQuillan's labor-intensive method requires slowly and repetitively laying ink lines in layers of acrylic polymer. Lush ribbons, swirls and spirals challenge the viewer to adjust their optic perspectives on color, design and the spectrum of shades, hues and contrasting focal points that compose color theory. McQuillan's gorgeous, dazzling works of art are a feast of kaleidoscopic color for the eye and the soul. The paintings demand we examine the world of color and how we perceive color and how technology influences what we see and how we see it.

Maureen McQuillan has been exhibiting her work for two decades, both in the U.S. and internationally, including eight solo shows (New York, Baltimore, San Francisco and Paris). Her most recent solo show was entitled “Process Color” in 2015 at McKenzie Fine Art in NYC. Group exhibitions include: The Weatherspoon Art Museum, Greensboro, NC; The Contemporary Museum, Baltimore, Maryland; The Drawing Center, NY; The Islip Art Museum, NY; Herter Gallery, UMass Amherst; The College of New Rochelle, NY; the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Wisconsin; and Le VOG Contemporary Arts Center, Fontaine and The College of Art and Design, Grenoble, France among many others. McQuillan's work has been mentioned and reproduced in The New York Times, Newsday, The Boston Globe, TimeOut, The San Francisco Chronicle, San Francisco Examiner, ARTnews, Architectural Digest and Art on Paper, and her work is held in private and public collections all over the world. Maureen McQuillan is represented by McKenzie Fine Art in New York.
McQuillan’s work can be seen as part of the Coast to Color exhibit showing at The Laura Korman Gallery. The Coast to Color exhibit highlights the infinite vocabulary of color through a range of media; serving as a psychological and communicative tool in engaging with the viewer and their response. The exhibition is on view from January 7 through March 5, 2016 at the Laura Korman Gallery in Santa Monica, California. More info HERE

For more information on Maureen McQuillan, her art and current exhibits, please visit her website. Be sure and check out the slideshow to see more of McQuillan’s work.

**Francis Xavier:** When and how did your journey as an artist begin and what led you in the direction of your artistic medium?

**Maureen McQuillan:** As an artist, my work has long centered around drawing, and over the past 20 years has ranged over various mediums, from ink and resin on paper, paint on canvas, to cameraless photography and sculptural installation. Currently, I am making drawings that are based on a systematic investigation of color that reflects my interest in the way the perception of color has changed as technology has advanced. The threads that run through all of my work are seemingly opposites: surface and depth, gesture and geometry, concept and process, system and disorder. And, although I don’t try to mystify on purpose, usually no one can tell how it’s made. I always start with a simple idea that through repetition becomes something more complex. Work that is made by hand, though a slow, labor-intensive process, paradoxically often looks machine made or technologically produced.
One of my earliest memories is from the second grade. I remember my class had made little gifts for Mother's Day, and the next day the teacher gave us huge sheets of newsprint and instructed us to make wrapping paper. Right away, I knew I wanted to fill the entire sheet. I did not know what in the end it would look like but I wanted to find out. So I spread my paper out on the floor in the back of the room and started off in one corner of the sheet, carefully making squared off and angled spirals. Soon the classroom fell away and I was in my own world. When I looked up I had been fenced off by a circle of empty chairs, all the other kids were at their desks and it was almost time to go home. A few kids sniggered when I finally got up off the floor, but my field of "roses" was done, and I was very proud and excited to present it to my mother. I remember the absolute horror I felt as she ripped into the paper, and the look of complete bafflement on her face as I lost it, and threw a major temper tantrum. But I never forgot what it felt like to be completely immersed in and mesmerized by an activity.

I'm still drawing. It's the hands on, very meditative process that slows down time and for me becomes a way to escape the velocity of the world.

**FX:** How did you approach the ‘Coast to Color’ exhibition and what challenges did the project present and did any of the pieces in the ‘Coast to Color’ exhibition evolve into something different than what you initially intended?

**MQ:** I had been working many years in primarily black and white, until about three years ago when I realized it was time to crack that binary code and shakess things up. I realized I could approach the idea of color in the same way that I approach my work generally; make it part of a systematic process. Though color and line traditionally were pitted against each other, I decided to incorporate color into my drawing practice. I began by using a very limited number of transparent colors in a certain random order or rotation. Then, like a refrain in music, or code in a computer program, I repeat the colors using variations on certain basic rules. There are other arbitrary rules I set, such as do not put complementary colors next to each other or on top of each other and vice versa. I imagined that I would end up with myriad greys of different intensities, but that didn’t happen.

**FX:** Which piece from the ‘Coast to Color’ exhibit challenged you the most?
MQ: All the work is a challenge in one way or another, and that's what makes it interesting. But unless you have seen the work in person, it's difficult to realize that the surface of these pieces has an actual depth, as well as the illusion of one. The surface is built up in layers over time and sometimes can be as much as an inch thick. So it was a challenge to begin to take this work to a larger scale. My piece on wood panel in the show was one of the first of these.

FX: How did New York influence your 'Coast to Color' work?

MQ: I was born in NYC and have spent the most time here, but I have lived in other places for three years or more; such as Mississippi, Hong Kong and Miami. I know that New York is unique. It is also very much about black and white. Living in Hong Kong, for example, where the buildings are more likely to be pink or purple than grey, was a revelation. The cultural associations of color there are of course very different as well. For example, when I first moved there I asked why baby boys wear red or pink and not blue. I was told that red brings good fortune and is also associated with male vigor and health. (Baby girls wear blue or another color, but not pink.) Only Westerners in Hong Kong wear black to a funeral. In China, white is the color of mourning and death, and for this reason, traditional brides in China never wear white. So I guess being a New Yorker working in black and white came naturally. Color not so much.

FX: Can you describe your creative process and how does working on paper compare with working on canvas? Does either prove more difficult than the other?

MQ: There is something about working on paper that allows you to escape the weight and baggage of painting with a capital P. But at this point, for me, any surface is a depth to be explored. We are bombarded by technology and images in a way we never have been before; it's all part of life and therefore fodder for artists. I don't believe you have to sacrifice working by hand to express an interest in the way technology is shaping and changing the world, for good and for ill.

FX: When do you know a piece is done, and do you ever wish you could change something once its “finished?” How do you let a piece go?

MQ: I usually work on a number of pieces at the same time using different rules and rotations on each. It's what I imagine feeding a bunch of slot machines at the same time is like. You keep putting quarters in until a certain combination comes up; only I never know what that
combination is going to be beforehand, and I also know I may never get there. And as for letting a piece go, that's the easy part. Makes room in the studio for more.

**FX:** What did you learn about yourself as an artist while working on the ‘Coast to Color’ exhibit?

**MQ:** I had been working in black and white for long enough and it was time to take more risks, and open up the work to more possibilities. That was the catalyst for the work in Coast to Color.

**FX:** What type of art/art movement inspires you

**MQ:** There is always something you can learn, and I always try to keep an open mind when I am looking. But most of the time when I go out to galleries or museums I target work that is going to energize and not sap my spirit. There is a lot of work that I never get tired of looking at and thinking about. But obviously drawing, rules/system and process-based artists such as Eve Hesse, Agnes Martin, Sol LeWitt, Nasreen Mohammedi, Gego, Gerhard Richter; artists that don't easily fall into any category, such as Emma Kunz, Charles Burchfield, Ana Mendieta, James Whitney, Martin Ramirez, Mark Lombardi…Op art, Bridget Riley, Julian Stanczak, Edna Andrade; design, Ani Albers, Sam Lucente; an artist in a category by herself, Louise Bourgeois; architecture, the Selfridge’s in Birmingham, Gehry, Gang, Hadid but I'd better stop there. I am also just as likely to get inspiration from random images that don't have any particular significance, except maybe to me.

**FX:** Do you ever suffer from a creative block? If so, do you find stepping away from what you are working on helps? Or do you just plow through it?
MQ: When I was starting out, I would get stuck often. I don't want to tempt fate, but these days, the rare time I get that sickening paralysis is when I have been away from the work for a while. It's important for me, as well as a lot of the artists I know, to work every day to keep a connection to the process. Moving and getting started in a new studio is a huge interruption. First you have to remind yourself what it was that you were thinking before you left. Picking up the thread that you dropped is a matter of getting back into a process that is non-verbal, and has to do with a connection and attention to the peculiarities of your materials, as well as devotion to an idea.

FX: How does seeing your piece in an exhibit different than when it’s in front of you, and how does your work reflect your life?

MQ: It's always wonderful to see your work out in the world and in a new context. Though I make my work alone, being part of a wider dialogue is what it's all about. Seeing my work among the work of other artists creates new connections you could never imagine for yourself. I am very much hoping to see Coast to Color in person.

As far as reflecting my life, technology and nature, at this juncture, have never been closer, and in fact when they are not overlapping they are mirroring each other. Technology has enormous potential to make life better, but more often that not it is running amok. There are so many things we can't sense for ourselves, and so we rely on technological mediation for everything from images of viruses and cellular structures to evidence of climate change, WMD, predicting earthquakes you name it. Yet technology is a flawed system that is growing in ways we cannot even imagine. As artists, I don't think we can avoid these issues, although we all address them, either directly or indirectly, in our own ways.

FX: Where can readers find your work online?

MQ: My [website](mailto:MQ@MQ.com)