

ETTA HARSHAW

in conversation with **Emma Hapner**

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Etta Harshaw is the Founder and CEO at Harsh Collective. With Harshaw's formal background in fine art and graphic design and her experience in the art industry, Harshaw built a creative and inclusive community at Harsh Collective, where she continues curating and designing bespoke exhibitions for emerging and historically underrepresented artists.

Etta, you've spoken about the importance of putting the artist at the center of the art world. What inspired you to create Harsh Collective with this artist-first approach, and how has it shaped the way you curate exhibitions and build relationships with artists?

The value I place on centering artists at Harsh Collective comes from my experience as an art history student. In my seminar for art history majors, we read Vasari's *The Lives of Artists*, a classic text that tells the life stories of artists like Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci with a sense of reverence, perpetuating the idea of the solitary artistic genius. During these studies, I couldn't help but wonder what works of art we could know about if our attention were more equitably spread across the art world. Oh, the paintings we could be discovering while we wait in line to see the Mona Lisa! Getting to know artists through my work with Harsh Collective and telling their stories at the gallery allows me to feel that I'm writing art history as it takes place.

Harsh Collective's mission is to demystify the art world for artists and viewers alike. What are some strategies you've implemented to make your gallery space and the art market more accessible to a broader audience?

The simplest way I make the gallery accessible is by ensuring each visitor is greeted and offered the opportunity to ask questions in the space. People ▶



NABILA WIRAKUSUMAH, Knotted, 35mm film collage, Fuji professional RA-4 digital print on crystal archive silver halide paper, 7x5in



GABRIELA KRAMER, *Shelly From PA*, acrylic, spray paint, oil stick, oil pastel, ink, graphite, crayon on canvas, 48x30in

often apologize for asking questions, and I always respond, "My pleasure! I get to do my favorite thing—talk about art." Just discussing art is a huge part of what we do at Harsh Collective. People might be intimidated to talk about unfamiliar works, and while many pieces are nuanced and complicated, I try to encourage all forms of discourse in the gallery. From "I hate that color" to "That looks like Gummy," all commentary adds something to the conversation, and nothing is off the table.

Growing up in a family of artists, how did your upbringing shape your understanding of the art world and influence your decision to found Harsh Collective? What lessons from your family's advocacy work are you applying to your own gallery today?

My understanding of how profound an artist's practice is to their life was formed through my lived experiences

with my grandparents. As my grandfather explained at my grandmother's wake, she said she'd paint until the day she died. The night she was painting and dropped her brush—she had a lot of health issues affecting her mobility and had asked my grandfather to help her to bed. She passed in her sleep that night. The day she couldn't paint was the day she died. My grandfather, now 91, still paints every day.

When I started working in the art world, I realized that artists weren't always treated with the respect they gave to their practice, so my ambition for a space where artists are met with the passion with which they create arose quickly. My dedication to making artists feel seen and heard in exhibitions at Harsh Collective is how I work to advocate for them. Galleries are too often thought of as just buildings with art on the walls. We are a living, adapting entity, and so are our artists—every exhibition is a collaboration.

Community is a core value of Harsh Collective. Can you share more about how your events, workshops, and future in-house speakeasy will help foster connections between visitors, artists, and the artworks on display?

Community is integral to Harsh Collective. At the gallery, we have created an inclusive space in which



UZO NJOKU, *Apartment 26*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 30x40in



NICOLE JAMES, *Between Shit And Sorry*, acrylic on linen, museo-alu stretchers, 48x60x1.5in

relationships are fostered between collectors, viewers, and artists—whether over a drink, a song, or a palette and paintbrush. Through our various pop-up events and exhibitions across New York City, we have welcomed all art lovers and aim to create a collective understanding of the artist behind the art. We regularly open our space and resources to local creative thinkers who share our goals of cultivating a community space to reflect on art. Harsh Collective acts as a cultural hub, curating and designing activations and exhibitions to support emerging and historically underrepresented artists and groups.

Looking ahead, what are some goals you have for Harsh Collective as you continue to grow and evolve? Are there any upcoming exhibitions or projects that you're particularly excited about?

At Harsh Collective, our goal is always to increase accessibility in the art world. I continue to prioritize price accessibility and identify ways for visitors to take something home from an exhibition—whether that is a piece of art, a print, or an exhibition tote bag! Part of increasing access is also continuing to host community-driven events and workshops in the gallery, ensuring that artists are at the forefront of the conversation and able to share their work and stories.



JOHANNA KESTILÄ, *Of Course You Were Right*, acrylic and pen on canvas, 43x39in

Recently, Harsh Collective presented a pop-up open call exhibition in collaboration with Brooke Finegold in our new space in Greenpoint (61 Greenpoint Ave #103). The show, *Dress Up*, took place just before Halloween and explored how costumes, clothes, and/or makeup act as tools for self-expression and acceptance in queer communities. The opening event incorporated a drag performance, further celebrating the role of dress in queer identity and art forms. Our next exhibition is set to open in mid-November, focusing on women working in metal and craft for our second iteration of the *Holiday Bazaar*. In addition to the show, Harsh Collective will offer holiday programming and family workshops for the community.

I am also thrilled to share that Harsh Collective will be participating in the Affordable Art Fair's spring edition, which will be a wonderful extension of the gallery's presentation at the fair's fall edition this past September.