



Preparing for *Danse de Bousculade* opening, creating dance traces. Photo still I took from video courtesy of Verena Thompson, PCA employee, 2022

COLLEEN SURPRISE JONES

ARTIST IN PARIS

Interview by Harryet Candee

Photographs Courtesy of the Artist

"I first came to Paris in 2017, just after my 40th birthday. It was for a four-day trip. I was terrified to be travelling to a foreign country alone, not knowing the language. Also, I had only been abroad twice before, to London and some parts of Ireland. What got me here was nothing short of tenacity, believing I could experience Paris, too. It wasn't just for "other people", whatever that even means in my own thoughts. Before my first trip to Paris, I decided to break things down in steps and gave myself permission to turn around at any point: If I can get in the car, I'll at least make it to the airport. If I can get on the plane, I'll at least touch the soil. If I get to the hotel, I can decide if I want to stay in or get out into the city, etc. Walking myself through it that way opened the door for many more experiences, such as coming to study at the Paris College of Art in 2021 for my MFA in Drawing."

Harryet Candee: Colleen, how exciting it must be to be studying art in Paris. How is it going for you?

Colleen Surprise Jones: At this point, I can say that it is going very well. There have been highs and lows, as I suppose anything has. Being in school has been a challenge since I was in middle school when I started to have disruptive OCD symptoms which kept me stuck in worry instead of doing anything productive. For the first time, I decided to discuss it with the school in order to get accommodations and see if that would make a difference in my successful completion of the courses. I believe I have benefitted from that openness and am now about to begin my last semester in January. This will be quite an accomplishment considering that it took me almost 25

years to get my 4-year undergraduate degree due to that OCD struggle and the general static structure of schools' expectations.

Why did you choose to go to art school in Paris?
CSJ: For years I had thought that I wanted to go to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I had applied directly after I finished my Bachelors in December of 2018 at Charter Oak, walking in the Spring ceremony in 2019. I got into SAIC's Painting and Drawing program, but only with a \$600 scholarship. So, I reapplied in the hopes for a scholarship that would make a dent in their price tag. This time though...I did not get into that program, and my only option for SAIC would be their Low-Residency program, meaning I would not need to move to Chicago to attend. Things

were changing at home, and my living situation was no longer viable. So, I really needed a school where I could plant myself in a new living environment. I needed a new home and at the same time, a new school. Prior to applying to SAIC, another table had caught my eye at the College Fair at MassArt where I went to meet with SAIC faculty for a portfolio review. It was the Paris College of Art. They did not even offer a painting program, only drawing. Something was different about it though because it was contemporary drawing. My work has always been deeply rooted in abstract drawing, and I kept PCA in the back of my mind as something to think about. Low and behold, here I am.

Tell us what you see when you look out your



Palais Garnier, Paris



Black and red ink on Washi paper; an exercise in restraint, 2021

apartment window in Montmartre?

CSJ: Pure magic. I'm very much in a neighborhood. I'm right next to the Sacré Coeur, which I can see the peak of. I'm one level below the top of the steep, steep mountain that Montmartre is on, and my main view is looking up. There is a patch of grass and trees across the way between two homes for myself and my cat to look at, sometimes spotting another cat of Montmartre. It has a set of winding stairs going through it to the very top of the mountain, landing near the Place Du Tertre. There is a black iron streetlamp attached to my window, and at night it lights up my sitting room. I'm very, very fortunate. The other way, out my kitchenette, at night I can see the turning light from the top of the Eiffel Tower. With my view, one doesn't need to use their imagination to override reality.

Do you have any favorite things you like to do in Paris that you cannot do in the states?

CSJ: I frequent the Palais Garnier. I'll go into their shop, take advantage of their last minute, obstructed view tickets for about 25 euro or occa-

sionally plan a special night out with an orchestra seat. There is a large Chagall painted medallion around the chandelier and being in the deep red velvet box (which happens with the last-minute tickets) is a pleasure in and of itself. Viewing the audience as well as the performance there this way makes me understand Mary Cassatt's perspective quite well now (referring to her painting *A Woman in Black at the Opera*). This landmark theater is about a 20-minute walk from my school and is the main theater of the Paris Opera Ballet. So, it was a dream to go there once in 2017. Now, I try to go a couple of times a semester for a performance. Currently, I'm using the architecture for one of my classes, so you can find me on the front steps crocheting golden wire to fuchsia tulle for some in situ work. I can also be a flâneur in Montmartre at bistros La Bohème, L'Artiste, or La Maison Rose relaxing after long days at the Paris College of Art. I've had my violin worked on by a luthier on Rue de Rome, a mesmerizing luthier covered street. My class has also taken us to Berlin, which further made me realize how easy travel is here and now I'm making my list of

places I want to see. I did go to Aix-en-Provence to see Bob Dylan's iron sculpture *Rail Car* at Château la Coste before school started this semester, which was an awe-inspiring trip.

Can you tell us about the structure of the programming and in what ways they are set up to meet your specific needs as an American student with an already established background in art?

CSJ: The MFA in Drawing program is very workshop oriented. It offers a taste of many contemporary approaches to making art that, perhaps, I might not have investigated on my own. So, that's interesting because I noticed most MFA programs promote fierce independence toward the goal of the degree, and do not offer classes as such. Normally, I'd say the latter is the route I would want. However, I had not been exposed to some of these techniques, like coding or bookmaking. My answer really addresses the structure of the programming portion of your question. I can't really say anything is geared toward me as an American student so much as we the student body as inter-
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Printmaking en pointe

Made utilizing the bourrée movement in ballet over inked acetate on top of silk paper. 2022



Bittersweet Lavender Bouquet, acrylic paint on canvas, 2022

national students, who are among everyone else. I may even be in the minority as an American, though it is an American degree granting school. I think perhaps we are exposed to a more diverse roster of artists because the teachers are international as well. My already established background in art is acknowledged by getting into the MFA program, but it's not a place to rest. I'm expected to experiment with things I would not normally do. For me, the goal in this is to add on to what I already do, not take away.

What classes have you taken that were exceptionally great, and why?

CSJ: I have always been a fan of electives. I think that is one way students can tweak their program to suit themselves. Due to this love, I received two Associate degrees from Berkshire Community College. I was going for the A.A. in Fine Art but found myself also with an A.A. in Liberal Arts. At Paris College of Art, I deeply enjoyed Performance as an elective because it got me back into my body (I have a dance background) which I then started using in my work, as I now make art with my feet as well. Creative Writing has been hands down an exceptional class. It was a poetry class at BCC that got me back into school, and now I am in this course in Paris with a teacher who has supported the publishing of my poetry. My textiles course has gotten me further into sculpture and lace, but also using fabric or metallic threads to draw with. I have also been able to learn silk-screening and intaglio techniques in printmaking. I submitted the intaglio prints to the Pinacothèque Luxembourg Art Prize 2022 and, though not receiving the prize, I did receive a certificate of merit and recognition. We also benefit from field trips in all our classes. We went to Château de Chantilly this semester to see an extraordinary Albrecht Dürer exhibition.

I am looking at your website, and need to tell you how much I love your art. There is one I would like to know more about. Sow, acrylic paint on canvas, 36"x 24", 2018.

Sow was steered toward a certain juried exhibit that was held at the Lichtenstein Center for the Arts called *Showing Up*, and is one of three in a series. The other two are *Reap* and *Hunting for Utopia*. The show had to do with community, and this made me think of community gardens, spirituality and aerial views expanding our line of vision.

I consider myself to be a “pure” abstractionist quite often so discussing narrative or creating it when working on abstractions is a strange place for me. I just observe it though. Let’s see what happens next.

How might this painting differ from that of which you are creating in school now?

CSJ: I think Sow would be categorized as a painting, though drawing is inevitable in a painting whether it's with graphite or the paint itself, and the school really does have a conceptual bent, so often anything can be a drawing. Sow is colorful and juicy and has some apparent symbolism of

vegetation. I have painted flowers here while teaching at the École du Breuil which has beautiful student run gardens as an agricultural high school. But, I am definitely not painting vegetable type vegetation right now, nor using these juicier colors currently. There is a similarity though in the ethereal nature of the shapes.

In *My Work Has Gotten Stronger*, this could be a bit closer to what I'm doing now, but really I am not using paint or ink to completely saturate the canvas. Also, I am not using canvas at all currently. Also, these pieces were made using my hands to apply the pigment. Currently, my drawings are made with my feet, a tool, or another medium such as wire or fabric or even the computer.

What are some of your goals as an artist that you feel the need to soul search at this point in your life?

CSJ: I think life itself is such a huge question mark. I absolutely want to keep looking around. I need to stay actively opening up my experiences to more worldly views. I see where experiencing new lands, cultures and personalities can help do this. Being ready to say "yes" is a valuable lesson. I want to feel as prepared as I can be for opportunities that either I create or that come to me because I create.

Have you gained new insight into establishing goals and principles in your art making agenda?

CSJ: Certainly. I've learned that it can only be interesting to see the result of something I've tried. If I don't try it, I may never know. I'm sure I have more confidence in experimenting and would consider that something to take with me, absolutely. Also, I had ideas in my head that I kept speaking about, slowly I see them unfolding into things I'm actually doing. I think low self-esteem has held me up along some of these lines in the sense that I have felt almost contained into the wall as a 2-dimensional artist not allowing for 3-dimensional work where I may be present and active. So, when someone says, "Where's that thing you wanted to try, haven't you done it yet? Show me." Well, I'm in the place to whip it up and dish it out.

In what ways have you seen your art making evolve so far since your studies began at the Paris College of Art?

CSJ: Aside from what else I had mentioned, I have embraced new gestures in my lines. For someone like me who has taken these lines very, very seriously for decades, this is an extraordinarily important development for me. I'm also using a lot of brush and ink which creates a calligraphy effect and evokes a sense of language. I had thought perhaps my goal at the school would be simply to make my work bigger, but I'm going in every direction, not just expanding the edges of a static structure. I am also respecting materials I may have considered garbage, such as cardboard. I'm finding these utilitarian items really speak to the necessity, impulsivity, and grit that I feel goes into my work.

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Sow, acrylic paint on canvas, 2018. One of a series of three



Träume Noir Intaglio print, 2021. Graphic notation of classical music



During installation of *Danse de Bousculade* - Here I am placing flying "tutus" on the wall that I created with tulle and wire.
Photo courtesy of Megan Bowyer.

In your most recent art opening at the school you did a project called, Danse de Bousculade. Can you go into some detail as to what this is all about for you, and what you have already learned from this body of work that you can apply to your artistic repertoire?

CSJ: Yes, I am combining my abstract, gestural drawing with a form of narrative, the danced-on floor. Through using my feet, I created multiple dance “floors” that are exhibited either on the ground or displaced on the wall as a 2 D piece of art. This has expanded into creating “almost” tutus. Tutus that cannot really be worn but may be tempting to touch or stand in. Looking at William Forsythe’s *Choreographic Objects* I decided to create “things”, objects. Ultimately, they’re sculpture and a continuation of making my 2-dimensional work 3-dimensional. Taking the line from the page has been one of my goals, and now I’m making it active as well. Some of my pieces now can be “activated” – touched, moved, manipulated. I of course take my sense of mental health and spirituality into my work, but that is not necessarily how I would discuss it. It is present with me and the art, influencing us, conversing with us always.

You are the creator of movement and art. Tell us about your work involving holding a paint stick behind your back?

CSJ: This piece began as a type of drawing restraint while also utilizing dance and a new way to work for me. I value aesthetics in art and I was playing with that. So, I didn’t want to see the piece

as I was making it, which made the way I made it more important. I wanted to stand while making it, and had to create an instrument to use. I put a paintbrush in the end of a tube used for a shelving structure. This worked exceptionally well. Like a dance, I came up with a protocol for how I would move: repetitions, changing pigment, turning my body, and finally the fact that this brush would be held behind my back. Then I wrote down the directions for how to achieve this without showing the result for reference.

How are you finding the art supply stores to be? Are you finding what you need easily?

CSJ: I have been able to find art supplies very, very easily. There is no shortage of products, and some things are much cheaper here, to my surprise. I will sometimes go to Magasin Sennelier across from the Louvre to get back to my pastel roots. The Sennelier family invented the oil pastel for Picasso and the shop is still family run. The history is quite fascinating. I also live near the St. Pierre Marché fabric market which I frequent. But, honestly, some of my supplies come from found objects, such as wooden pallets and broken-down cardboard. Many of us are now expert at going through things that have been scheduled for garbage pick-up. We get some really great results.

Do you find you are able to take to the streets and absorb the goings-on, then bring fresh ideas back to the canvas and drawing table? Would they be shown in class or would you keep them private?

CSJ: I do find the architecture to continuously in-

spire me every day. I never forget where I am or take it for granted. I do go out and experience happenings, but often it’s when I am surprised that I feel the most moved, such as finding the playground at Les Halles with sculpture balloons. I used this space to set my tutus free. As much as I express, I keep a lot of things to myself. Though, there would be a balance between what I share and what I keep, I will let my experiences seep into my work without explanation, if that makes any sense. I don’t feel I always have to expose my most inner workings. I also have no dire need to be understood. That last sentiment can cause a stir sometimes.

Tell us about your passion for creating Poetry. Is there a painting that goes a long with it?

CSJ: I have always been drawn to what I consider to be the word equivalent of abstract art. To me that is Shakespeare, Bob Dylan, Emily Dickinson, and Cab Calloway. I first really started writing in a journal in grade school and it quickly became poetry. I also put images to it as well. There is often a musical element of course, the meter. Sometimes the images came first and then one line per page. I feel writing has become my new abstract painting because of the emphasis placed on some sort of concept behind our work at school. I’m always going to find a way to not allow an outside force to have a say in what I do creatively. Luckily, I am able to find that freedom in writing, and it was a poetry class that got me to pursue school again years ago. There is an exhibit I want to see here in Paris at Fondation Louis

Vuitton. It is Joan Mitchell and Monet. The exhibit includes Joan Mitchell's poetry with her paintings. Also, there is a Patti Smith poetry exhibit at Centre Pompidou. Both of these I plan to see when finals are over.

How are you artistically influenced by the art and culture you are surrounded by in Paris? How does it differ from your inspirations back in the Berkshires?

CSJ: I am taking in both the old and brand new. I certainly feel like I can approach my art in any way here and there would be some audience for it somewhere. Also, there is no escaping the Haussmann architecture which gives Paris its signature creamy stone facade with decorative iron. The design of the city itself is inspiring; it is comforting and something I've come to expect like the rolling Berkshire Hills from every direction I look. In the Berkshires I look to Jacob's Pillow and Tanglewood, which are quite intimate, as opposed to this city's sizable cultural institutions which may be overwhelming at first.

Curious to know if you have detected any eye-opening trends in Parisian art and culture that

would be interesting to know about? What would you write home about?

CSJ: That's an interesting question because I cannot say that I have been specifically parsing out contemporary art (and culture) trends that are Parisian, per se. This is because of what I've been studying and focusing on, which is contemporary and experimental drawing. That is not particular to Paris. Within that is a research and process based focus (not necessarily impulsive/intuitive), which I do not always subscribe to, but am interested in the process based portion in consideration to drawing and dance/music, notation, time-based art, etc. There are certainly many references to Parisian artists throughout our school which has many Parisian artist professors, but the scope of influences is broader than that. I can say the exhibitions of current artists I've attended are much more European than Parisian and I have been looking at things more collectively this way. Being multilingual and from multiple (European) countries is very, very common here. I greatly notice this influence, especially when attending art events. I have met many people in creative fields here who at least speak French and German very well. I'm exceptionally interested in learning

more about the relationship between France and Germany pertaining to contemporary art in drawing and what's coming out of expressionism as well as drawing's relationship to calligraphy and language, broadening my scope to Arabic and Asian influences, for example. It is also very common to see the "artist book" in galleries alongside exhibitions and be able to read through some form of book the artist has made. I recently went to a very large artist book fair in Romainville. It was called "MAD" or "Multiple Art Days" specializing in artist editions. Again, this is an international event. Making the artist book has been an integral part of many courses at school and my thesis exhibition will include a Creative Workbook. Both "drawing" and "book" have fairly loose definitions.

I want to learn more about your thinking process, in your painting, "My Work Has Gotten Stronger".

CSJ: I really started to let go. I had the unstretched canvas on the floor and started to walk around the piece so as to let the top and bottom figure themselves out. I didn't want to dictate where that
Continued on next page...



Drawing Back Dance Circle (front) on craft paper, Slash Box (back) on moving box.
Both with Sumi ink and white gouache, 2022

Dance Cloth made with "dance stick" and pointe shoes.
Sumi ink, acrylic paint, and graphite on fabric, 2022



The dog doesn't plan. If I give everything I have, would it fix something?

Mystery is raveled in words
transfixed to hear sound
mind

ravel the un

Travel the one
way which is in

is out
doubt

stops

time

is just motion
of some kind

Revealing

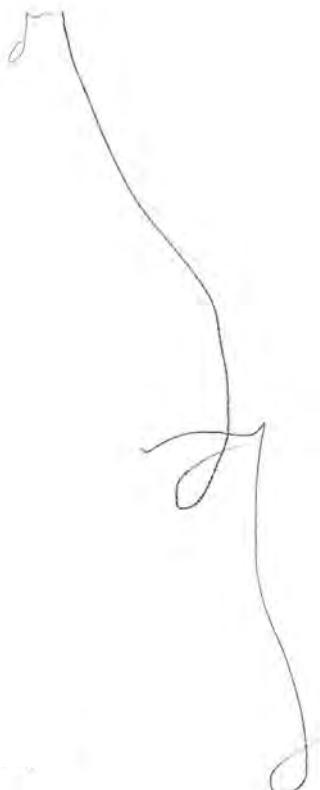
solves the maze of resolving

admissions
already

Known

what once was wasn't wondering

—Poem and Drawing by Colleen Surprise 11/30/22



Pas de Deux, or twists.

These pieces are made with wire and tulle and are depictions of movement or dance. 3-dimensional and autonomous

would be or if it needed to be. I think this is where I really started to experiment with a different gestural aesthetic and see how it felt. I understand that the series is what galleries often expect, so much so that artists often never move beyond it. I have to wonder how many artists stick within the same series for a lifetime in order to adhere to this rule rather than stay true to their own vision or growth. I need more stimulation than that kind of repetition.

Tell us about your life growing up. Have any of those years remain with you in your art making?
CSJ: Dance, music, nature, imagination, spirituality – those are all with me. But grief especially so. For most of my life, I had a brother. He died by suicide brought on by failures in the mental health system. That is in my work. Much of my work is sentimental, especially if I am making it around a holiday like a birthday or death anniversary. I often bring dead flowers of special bouquets (that may have become bittersweet) back to life through painting. I did this at the École Du Breuil. These feelings of grief move through me, and I allow it. When I deal with symbolism it is not always in the most obvious sense. Repeated imagery that follows me pertaining to family

members gets used in my work as a way of tracing synchronicity.

If you can introduce something to the Parisiennes that is from the Berkshires, what would that be?

CSJ: I think that students in the Berkshires are used to a more liberal approach to school in the sense of student autonomy. As an American, I'm not used to what comes across as a certain strictness. I'm much more used to it now because we all get to share our experiences of what we expected when coming here and what met that and what didn't, etc. It's perhaps a culture shock that now I can say is more or less an experience that I would not have had if I stayed in the Berkshires. I also have not found sourdough pizza yet or bagels that taste like bagels. I'll be ok, though. We have croissants and baguettes, and Paris' first place award winning croissant boulangerie is across from the college.

With so much art to see in Paris, you must be influenced to paint like the old masters?

CSJ: I would love to spend some time doing that, but I would have to take it after the program is over. It could be a way to catch my breath. I've always wanted to make my own pastels. I feel so

much more in the present moment here in Paris than I had in the Berkshires, that I am focusing on my own growth really. This means more experiments for me now, working toward my vision.

Describe the gallery scene in Paris, and what direct experiences have influenced have maybe altered your way of approaching the artist market?

CSJ: I've been attending contemporary drawing specific places and events more than any other, and it is very liberating. It seems that honing in on this niche market has allowed for more intimate contact within the world of contemporary drawing. The Drawing Now Art Fair was one such event. It represents international contemporary drawing artists and their galleries. I happened upon a professor of mine from Germany who was a part of the *Hyperdrawing* portion of the event (performative drawing). I was able to see his work in situ and discuss the nature of it and the event. I think that being so close to the performative aspect also helped me to create some things that I wanted to accomplish as well, and I started experimenting more this way. There is a thin line between performative drawing and dance if any at all. The following semester I created the piece behind my back, *Drawing Back Dance Circle*, with



Black and red ink on Washi paper,
an exercise in restraint, and this one, freedom, 2021



My Work Has Gotten Stronger
Graphite, acrylic paint, and ink on unprimed canvas, 2020



Strangulation Piece - made of red satin, red chiffon, and wire. Satin fabric is twisted and holding a chiffon scarf as an acknowledgement of the tragic death of Isadora Duncan. Wire creates a haunting face-like frame. Often displayed on the wall, this image has the piece displayed on the floor as many of the "dance floors" I have made are viewed.

the paint brush drawing tool I created. Another German professor had me initiate contact with a gallery in Berlin. So, I cannot really say I have been looking specifically at Parisian galleries, more so the galleries that may recognize my work.

What do you wish to bring back to the states when you have finished your time in Paris? How would you like to see things unravel for you as an artist?
CSJ: I don't know that my time in Paris is done when I graduate. I'll actually be extending my stay with an internship. That being said, I'd like to take a renewed sense of direction back when I visit. Learning about the depth and breadth that is in contemporary and experimental drawing is invigorating to me. I was not really aware of this movement, and I believe it suits me well in many ways. I know I can put my gestural drawings out there and have them taken very seriously.

How much of your past do you presently bring into your wonderful artistic life?
It's all there, I'm sure. Perhaps even a past life or two.

Thank you, Colleen!

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