

UTDallas



## Abstract art professor teaches from experience

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***Painting lecturer Michelle Mackey uses background as career painter in course, works in New York on sets for TV shows***

At seven years old, Michelle Mackey would tag along to her grandmother's real estate work. She was shy and devoted much of her time in drawing in the open houses while her grandmother attended to clients. Today, she said that those were the formative years of her life as an accomplished artist. The physically empty spaces that surrounded her made an impression and influenced the conceptual art she now shows in major galleries on the national level.

Recognized for her art both the art communities in Dallas and New York City, Mackey, who teaches painting foundations on campus, describes herself as teacher, a sister and a daughter. Although at her core, she's a creator. "When I think about my identity, artist is the term that captures the most aspects of who I am," Mackey said.

Much of her artwork deals with architectural spaces. Her work passively distorts and melds corporeal places. One of her most recent exhibitions presented a series of paintings inspired by an old gas station

in Dallas that used to belong to Clyde Barrow of Bonnie and Clyde fame. Each painting conveys the material world in a metaphysical light, portraying the haunting dimness of the antiquated building that she said pulls from the history of the Depression era and incorporates an element of hidden criminal secrecy.

Mackey wants to show abstractness with just enough recognizable imagery for the observer to be able to locate themselves. The imagery reflects interior spaces of sharpened corners and forms contrasted with radiant bright colors. In one of the paintings, titled "Alcázar," the shape of what seems like a doorframe or reflection of light is juxtaposed with a shadowy wall or backdrop.

At her other job in Brooklyn, New York, she's a scenic painter on the sets of various television productions including "Boardwalk Empire," "The Following" and "The Slap." She said she enjoys working with like-minded artists there. On any given day, there may be anywhere between one and 15 scenic painters on the set, along with the set designer and art director who has everything planned.

"We have to finesse spaces and surfaces in the paint jobs to make whatever scene they're trying to build," Mackey said. "I love it." While the work can be an adventure, it can also be tough. She said the demanding environment consistently tests her abilities. "Some days are great and some other days you might be trying to do an on-location job," she said. "It's really random as to what they're going to have you do from day to day."

Mackey started her tenure at UTD this semester after visual arts professor John Pomara asked her if she could teach the painting foundations class a few weeks after her solo exhibition last spring at Holly Johnson Gallery in Dallas. "Her knowledge about the whole history of painting is very deep and full," Pomara said. "I thought she would be a perfect person. Not only is she very strong in her career as an artist, but she's a very gifted teacher expressing ideas to students and giving them the tools to make and create their own work."

As a painter himself, Pomara said Mackey's work as an emerging artist contributes to conversations of what defines abstract painting. "It makes you ask questions, and I love art that makes a viewer ask questions of not only, 'What am I looking at?' but what art can possibly be instead of telling me or describing something," he said. "Every day, I kind of look at something that reminds me of her work."

As a lecturer, Mackey said the unpredictability of the job is what inspires her to teach. In the classroom, she said she wants to give students a skill set in basic color mixing, understanding, composition and principles of good design to give them the ability to describe what they're seeing. The object is to focus on looking at art with intent and being able to translate that into their own work. "There's so much planning and research that goes into creating your class, but that doesn't necessarily provide a script," she said. "That's what I like most – the prepared surprise of it."

For Mackey, the insight of her career experience is moved by the discipline of timing and dedication that she puts into her teaching as well as learning. For her, being a fruitful artist isn't just about knowing when to create, but also when to give herself some room to breathe.

"The hardest part starting out, getting out of grad school – as well as still to this day – is constantly reassessing what you're doing," she said. "Whatever is happening in your life, you have to make adjustments. You're making adjustments so you can protect that side of your life to give you that space to create. That's the main challenge."