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How Small-Scale Paintings Became the Art World's Big New Trend

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Shara Hughes, who was born in Atlanta, is a 35-year-old graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design. She paints in a small, windowless studio in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. A visit there reveals a room chock-full of colorful, wildly idiosyncratic fantasy landscapes. She's wearing overalls and a white T-shirt and has several discreet tattoos—a sun and moon on her right wrist and a 3-D red cube on her left forearm. “I remember drawing that cube when I was a child, over and over, and realizing I could make a three-dimensional space,” she says.

Asked if she is noticing a recent move toward intimacy in painting, she says, “I’ve always worked this way, but it hasn’t been trendy until now. I think seeing someone’s hand in the process is coming back—that individual touch. Communication nowadays is all on the phone and the Internet, and there may be some kind of reaching out for something more personal.”

There are four large paintings (60 inches by 52 inches) and more than a dozen medium and small ones on the walls. A big canvas called *Magic Hour* is an exuberant, semiabstract landscape seen through a framework of loosely painted brushstrokes. It holds the viewer’s eye and sucks you right inside the picture, deeper and deeper. “I’ve been thinking about the time of day when the sun goes up or goes down over a couple of minutes, just melts in and out of the landscape, and the color is always changing. It’s about capturing that magic hour.”

A show of Shara’s “psychological landscapes,” as she calls them, appeared earlier this year at the Marlborough Chelsea gallery in New York. The *Times*’s Roberta Smith described them as being “a bit like puppies: noisy, incautious, and frequently irresistible.” Several galleries took notice and made offers, and she recently decided to go with Rachel Uffner, on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Canada, Jack Hanley, Nicelle Beauchene, and several other galleries in this area and in Brooklyn show paintings by what we might call the new Intimists.

Like a lot of younger artists, Shara deeply admires the work of [Dana Schutz](http://www.vogue.com/13362181/dana-schutz-artsplainer/) (<http://www.vogue.com/13362181/dana-schutz-artsplainer/>)—a painter who never succumbed to the siren call of “festival art.” (Others who come to mind are Carroll Dunham, Peter Doig, Chris Ofili, Cecily Brown, John Currin, and Elizabeth Peyton.) “Dana came and spoke to my class at RISD when I was there,” Shara remembers, “and it was the first time I felt it was OK to just paint whatever you wanted to, and own it.” Schutz, whose work helped open the way for much of the intimate and honest painting we’re seeing now, told me she is impressed by the way that “Shara is willing to take personal experiences and put them in the work.” Dana also mentioned seeing a painting by the British artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. “It had that intimacy we’re talking about,” she said. “You can feel the person behind it, and the touch, and the closeness. It’s great when you see work like that.”