

PAULA COOPER GALLERY

Felsenthal, Julia. "An Artist Whose Work Might (Possibly) Have Its Own Free Will," *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, March 16, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/16/t-magazine/tauba-auerbach-art.html>.

ARTIST'S QUESTIONNAIRE

An Artist Whose Work Might (Possibly) Have Its Own Free Will

Tauba Auerbach's brilliant, mathematical paintings and sculptures exist in what they call a "scary place of unknowns."



The artist Tauba Auerbach in their studio on New York's Lower East Side. Melody Melamed

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By Julia Felsenthal

March 16, 2023

Every morning when the artist Tauba Auerbach arrives at their ground-floor studio, housed in an old metal-stamping factory on New York's Lower East Side, they race down to the basement to check on the contents of their glass kiln. On a recent afternoon, Auerbach, wearing a mismatched paint-spattered sweatsuit and clogs and a black apron, guided me down the steep stairs to show me some of the work they will unveil on March 18 at their first show in five years at [Paula Cooper Gallery](#) in Chelsea. "I'm newly in love," Auerbach declared of the kiln, inspecting its recent issue: wafer-thin lattices made from granulated colored glass called frit; sprinkled and baked, the grains fuse together, leaving gaps as they contract to form distinctive, delicate architectures. "This might sound silly, but I just understand how profound it is, the oven as a technology to change the state of this material."

Auerbach, 41, has been making what they call frit lace for only about six months, but experimenting across mediums is the artist's hallmark; they're at home in what they call "that unique, scary place of unknowns." Raised in San Francisco by a mother and father who worked as consultants designing performing arts spaces, Auerbach credits their own punky, science fair approach to being an only child and "having to amuse myself at my parents' office for long periods of time with their office supplies." Later, as an undergraduate at Stanford University studying art, Auerbach spent a year designing rudimentary machines in the mechanical engineering department — "probably my best experience at that school," they said. Where their peers sought out M.F.A.s, Auerbach, who was interested in typography, spent part of college and a couple of years just after graduation working as a sign painter at San Francisco's New Bohemia Signs.

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Auerbach uses the studio's front room for spray painting. For a series of new paintings, they've dialed down the compressor pressure "to make more of a droplet than a mist," they explained. "I'm trying to make these kind of particulate backgrounds with different colors." Melody Melamed



In the office area, the artist Sam Chun's sculpture "Space Jam" hangs alongside a poster by Auerbach's partner Lele Saveri (top left), a long, skinny print by Brenna Murphy (below and to the right), a painting by Fredrik Varslev (top right) and a "Goals of Life" flier by V. Vale (bottom right). Melody Melamed

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In 2008 they moved to New York, where they made waves at the 2010 Whitney Biennial with their "Fold" paintings, spray-painted canvases that were flat but seemed crumpled, a trompe l'oeil trick that reflected the artist's enduring preoccupation with interdimensionality. Initially lumped in with a market-driven frenzy for young abstract painters, Auerbach resisted pigeonholing. ("I was always going to move on," they recalled of that era. "I don't really stay on one thing for that long.") In parallel with making paintings, drawings and sculpture, they have designed a multiplayer pump organ with the musician Cameron Mesirov; modeled sculpturelike pop-up books of complex geometric shapes; marbleized the exterior of a fireboat in New York Harbor; hooked a microphone to a pen in a musical collaboration with the band Zs; and produced a mesmerizing video capturing footage of silicone droplets dancing on the vibrations of a speaker cone. Through the side project Diagonal Press, Auerbach publishes open-edition artist books and specimen posters of the typefaces they design in their spare time.

Surveying the breadth of Auerbach's practice and the diverse bodies of knowledge they dip into, I began to think of the artist as a sort of antenna, picking up invisible signals from across time and space (this impression was likely bolstered by the way they wear their eyeliner: antenna-like, drawn an inch or so past each outer canthus). Their work is rigorously conceptual and often engages with the kind of brain-twisting math many of us have spent our lives avoiding: space-filling curves, string theory, fluid dynamics, the fourth dimension. But it can also be elegantly simple, poetic and physical, a way of processing abstract ideas through the body.

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A printer with storage above. Melody Melamed



A steel chair by the Wisconsin artist Robert C. Anderson sits below a drawing by Auerbach's cousin Maya Schindler. To the right, from bottom to top: a calendar designed by Saveri; one designed by Auerbach; a drawing by the artist Margaret Kilgallen; and a drawing by the theosophist and architect Claude Bragdon, whose books Auerbach has re-published through Diagonal Press. Melody Melamed

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Auerbach's new work emerged from no less heady a quandary than the existence of free will. "My personal jury is out," they said of the subject, but they found intriguing a theory postulated by the late English-born mathematician John Conway that not only do humans possess free will, but so does particulate matter. This would mean the beautiful frit lace patterns could be interpreted as an expression of the will of the glass molecules. Two more series underway in Auerbach's sprawling studio — undulating beaded sculptures and pointillist paintings based on photos of soap bubbles assembling under a microscope — speak to the particular and efficient way that spheres self-organize in space.

Putting aside scientific and philosophical underpinnings, these new pieces feel nostalgic, flirting with the aesthetics of friendship bracelets, suncatchers and magic eye posters. I am struck by Auerbach's playfulness. In late 2021, they mounted a survey show at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and stayed for a while at their childhood home. During that time, their mother resurfaced a book the artist had made as a child using one of those vibrating pens that loops along as you write. "The book was about how you could join the squiggle wiggle writing club," remembered Auerbach. The club's name might plausibly apply to the artist's recent series of "[Ligature](#)" drawings: rhythmic, calligraphic doodles of meandering wavelike shapes. "It made me ask the question: Have I grown up?" Auerbach said. "I mean, I think the answer to that is a solid no."

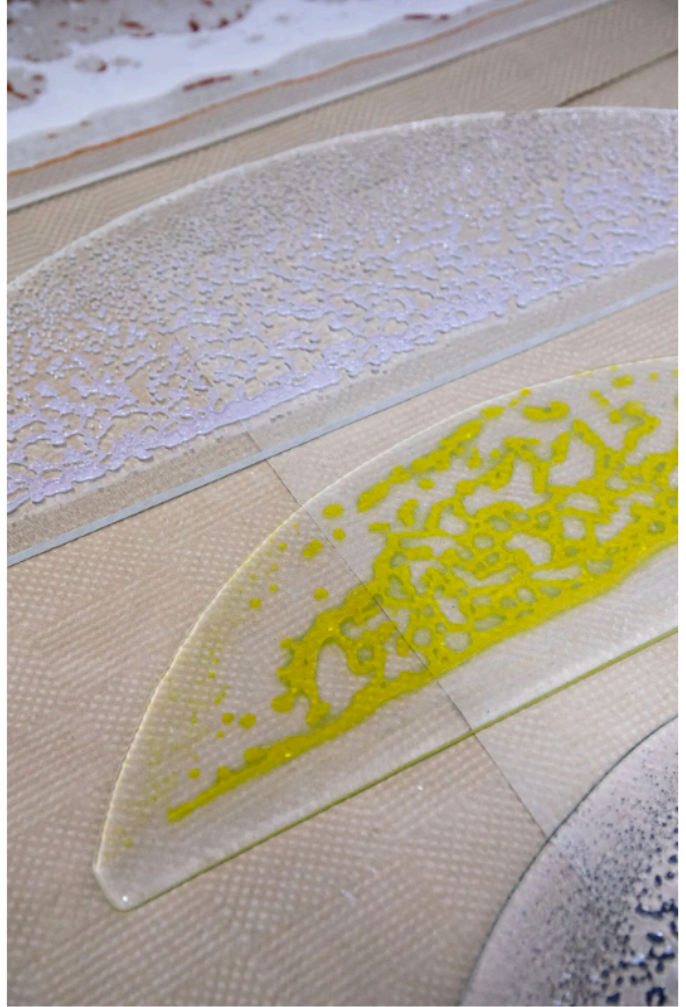
Seated at the table in their studio kitchen before a postmodern teapot vaguely resembling a chicken, Auerbach answered T's [Artist's Questionnaire](#).

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Auerbach's glass kiln, in the building's basement. Inside are just-baked examples of the frit lace they've been making using granulated glass. Melody Melamed



Auerbach fuses the frit lace to thicker pieces of solid glass to preserve the delicate structures. Melody Melamed

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What is your day like? How much do you sleep, and what's your work schedule?

Well, I used to be a huge night owl, and that changed a couple years ago when my partner [Lele Saveri] started working as an EMT. He wakes up at 5:45 a.m. for his shift, so we shifted our day. And I'm surprised to love being up early in the morning. Maybe I'm just getting old. I love being up late at night too, but you have to choose, and they have some of the same appeal: a kind of quiet that I really relish. It takes me a while to thaw out in the morning. I work usually six days a week. It depends what's going on. Right now, I get here early in the morning and I leave pretty late, and I'm not taking any days off.

How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?

I really don't know how to answer that. First, I thought I don't know how to answer that because I don't know where work starts and stops. But then I realized, I don't know what is being creative and what's not. Like, is just the planning phase of something the creative work, and then the execution, is that still creative work? I guess the general answer is that it's a very blurry line.

What's the first piece of art you ever made?

I know I made it at an age when I was too young to remember. But there's a piece of artwork hanging at my parents' house, made when I was four or five, "Peanut and Toast." It's a little painting of a piece of toast and a big peanut.

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In the front room, printouts of digitally altered photographs of soap foam taken under a microscope. Auerbach processes the images to add color, then copies them onto spray-painted Dibond panels using a projector and a system of pointillist dots. Melody Melamed



Assorted paints in the spray-painting room. Melody Melamed

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What's the worst studio you ever had?

The corner of one bedroom. The floor of another bedroom in San Francisco. But you know what? I'm fond of all my previous studios in different ways.

What's the first work you ever sold? For how much?

I think it was a drawing that said the word "Like" or "Um." It was at an event in San Francisco in 2003 or 2004 called the Monster Drawing Rally, where a bunch of people sit at a table and draw quickly. You have maybe 30 minutes and you make five drawings or something, and then everybody sells the drawings for 25 bucks each. And I think that was the first time I made a cash transaction for an artwork

When you start a new piece, where do you begin?

A lot of testing and making of swatches and then a lot of just sitting around and thinking about it. I do just let myself sit and think, which is hard.

How do you know when you're done?

Ideally, not just when I'm out of time. Sometimes I let something rest for a while and if it feels like I don't need to come back to it, then it's done. But sometimes I have to test it out and see if it really is.

How many assistants do you have?

I have one person who works for me full time, Allison. And one person who works for me two days a week doing Diagonal Press stuff, Kathleen. They're fantastic. And right now I have a bunch of short-term help to finish things for this show. I'm so grateful for the help right now.

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Toward the back of the studio, new beaded sculptures for the artist's forthcoming show at Paula Cooper Gallery in New York. Auerbach described the works' structure as "a three-dimensional mesh" recalling fascia, the human connective tissue. Melody Melamed

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Have you assisted other artists before? If so, who?

The only artist I've assisted was my old boss at the sign-painting shop, Damon Styer — one of the best painters I know. We've done two murals together since I stopped working there.

What did you learn from sign painting?

So much. Not just technique. It's a certain kind of procedural way of thinking about painting, but also something much more visceral. You have to find a sweet spot between speed and effortful precision. If you go too fast, you'll be inaccurate. But if you go really slowly, there'll be a quiver in your line, and it won't look graceful.

What do you listen to when you're making art?

Music, books and podcasts. But music is important. I like listening to free jazz, experimental music, industrial music. I have a lot of friends who I think make beautiful music. I've been going down a wormhole listening to punk music that I used to listen to: Converge, Lightning Bolt. If you want to hear what was on rotation last week it was Miles Davis, Deli Girls, Hiro Kone, Maximum Joy.

When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?

I'm still not comfortable saying that.

Is there a meal you eat on repeat when you're working?

I tend to order the same sandwich from the vegan grocery store three blocks away: tofu, fake egg, avocado, spicy mayo.

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Auerbach uses spherical Czech glass beads to create their meshlike sculptures.
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Auerbach's painting "Foam" (2023), shown on its side. Melody Melamed

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What's the weirdest object in your studio?

I have a lot of material samples, like foams made out of aluminum, and a piece of glass, called fulgurite, that's made from lightning hitting sand. I have a lot of conveyor belt samples. They're interlocking metal, often helixes. I've named several pieces after this category of things: flexible fabrics made of inflexible parts.

How often do you talk to other artists?

All the time. But I think I have more friends who are musicians than visual artists.

What do you do when you're procrastinating?

I do this kind of twisted thing where I do chores on my to-do list other than the thing that I really need to do — discrete tasks that are easy to check off the list. And that way I've tricked myself into feeling productive. It's a terrible habit.



The studio's kitchen, where Auerbach often cooks. In the foreground are several Nobody's Perfect chairs by the Italian architect and artist Gaetano Pesce. Melody Melamed

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What's the last thing that made you cry and when?

My sweet, brilliant dad having cancer and suffering. I was crying five minutes before you came over.

What do you usually wear when you work?

You're looking at it: sweats, sometimes an apron because of the kiln. It's so dusty down there, and my pants were getting so gross with dust sticking to the paint. I wear shoes that I can slip on and off because I'm often changing into and out of rain boots for spraying.

If you have windows, what do they look out on?

A whole bunch of trees with no leaves and one tree that's evergreen.

What do you bulk buy with most frequency?

Right now it's cord for the beads, and beads. But that answer would change month to month.

What's your worst habit?

Revealing too much about myself to someone I don't know very well. It's not in my nature to be secretive.

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What embarrasses you?

The sound of my voice on a recording. Recently, I've been conducting interviews with people with all kinds of different expertise. I have a vague ambition of editing it together into some Diagonal Press project. But mostly it's just for my curiosity and interest and I trade the person a drawing for a pretty serious amount of time.

Do you exercise?

I jump rope, usually on my roof or inside my apartment. And I ride a bike for transportation.

What are you reading?

A book about kilnforming. I haven't devoured a book like this in a long time. I thought it was going to be kind of a chore, like a technical thing, a reference. But it's around 200 pages of incredible glass insight by this guy Bob Leatherbarrow. It also has a sense of humor. It's called "Firing Schedules for Kilnformed Glass: Just Another Day at the Office."

What's your favorite artwork by someone else?

"Dream House" by La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela. It's a sound and light environment in a loft in TriBeCa.

What do you love about it?

I've been there an uncountable number of times, and it offers up something new every time. So I guess it's really generous and really visceral.

This interview has been condensed and edited.