

HESSE FLATOW

*Ada Friedman by Alina Tenser, Bomb Magazine, November 20, 2024. Online.*

# BOMB

INTERVIEW

## Ada Friedman by Alina Tenser

Painting a dancing mind.

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Ada Friedman, *Performance Proposal, Pathwork: Counting Days 1*, 2021–22, acrylic, papers, charcoal, foil, glassine, gouache, graphite, pastels, ink, silk curtain and markers on canvas, approximately 110 × 63 inches. Yeh Art Gallery, St. John's University. Photo by Max Warsh. Courtesy of the artist and Kendra Jayne Patrick.

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Ada Friedman’s art practice celebrates many tethered webs, including the ghosts of artists who have influenced her, marks of studio process and circumstance, and everyday life’s residue. Her work is vibrant with idiosyncratic logic, personal taxonomies, and a blend of inward- and outward-facing research. We first met in our twenties as studio mates before graduate school, exhibitions, or any significant opportunities. Over nearly two decades, we’ve witnessed each other’s evolving practices and lives. It was in those early studio days that I saw Ada take bold steps: first with her two-sided paintings, titled *Thought Forms* (2011–15), and soon after with performance-based activations of her paintings. Although our practices differ—mine being predominantly sculptural and hers focused on painting—we share a common interest in activating material and form through performance, making this conversation a natural exploration of our intersecting ideas and in tandem with Ada’s exhibition *Ballads*, which conducts a posthumous conversation with the poet Helen Adam.

**Alina Tenser** Your paintings often capture the physical gestures and movements involved in their creation. How do you view your relationship in this context with performance?

**Ada Friedman** A painting question I’ve been concerned with since 2010 is, How can a stationary painting move? I see my paintings as holders of my dancing mind and the vitality of my studio. In *Performance Proposal, Pathwork: Floor 1* (2021–22), individual marks—from wiping excess paint off my brush while walking past—are visible on translucent Mylar. This painting defined my studio walking path; its negative space was where I stepped. Daily, I paced this loop at least fifteen times, marking another painting at the turn. The ritual, born from my need to energize myself and transition my focus from teaching and heartbreak to studio work, was shaped by the architecture of my studio at the University of Tennessee–Knoxville. This routine became the foundation for *Pathwork* (2021–), transforming mundane private studio activity into art.

**“I ground my work by simultaneously writing scripts and making paintings.”**

— Ada Friedman

**AT** Relating to this, you activate your paintings through actual performances and plays, such as *Helen Rides* (2017–) and others. What is the importance, for you, of animating painting as you do?

**AF** I ground my work by simultaneously writing scripts and making paintings. I call this the Anna Oppermann method. Oppermann made what she termed “ensembles,” which are sprawling, flexible installations usually extending from the corner of a room and generated from repeated encounters with objects and ideas. My “script” is an accumulation of research, concepts, people, places, phrases, and studio procedures I am exploring. This writing evolves into drawings, typed pages, lists, character descriptions, operational scores, and more. It serves as a world-making strategy that creates distance between myself and my work. Toying with theatrical terminology lightens up the studio and jolts my

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imagination. It also helps me paint atmospheric picture space, while pushing my paintings to function as literal architecture, backdrops, and space dividers for both my body and others. Since 2015, I've referred to my plays—their performance as an arm of a larger, multimedia body of work—as time-based paintings.



Ada Friedman, *Performance Proposal, Pathwork: Floor 1*, 2021–22, tin foil, acrylic, oil, papers, textiles, wax pastel, archival artist tape, cloth, Mylar, acrylic mediums, lighting gels, grommets, wire, hardware, and acetate, 60 × 288 inches. Tri-Star Arts, Knoxville, Tennessee. Photo by Jake Woods. Courtesy of the artist and Kendra Jayne Patrick.

**AT** I notice that your titles often carry significant intention and seem to function as categories for your work. For example, titles like *Performance Proposals* (2016) and *Everyday Drawings* (2017–) not only guide the viewer's understanding of the paintings' forms but also extend the context beyond the traditional canvas and wall. How do you go about naming your bodies of work?

**AF** My studio work is currently divided into two main categories: *Performance Proposals* and *Everyday Drawings*. Anything relating to a “play” is a *Performance Proposal*. So all works in *Helen Rides* and *Pathwork* fall into this bracket. *Ballads* presents a new iteration of *Helen Rides*.

I take wordplay seriously. This manifests in various aspects of my work, including titles for artworks, private names for specific works or their components, and designations related to my studio rules. I also subvert meanings as a shorthand studio language. For example, I refer to the painted linen strips in *Performance Proposal, Pathwork: Threshold 2* (2023) as

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bones, which are crucial structurally and aesthetically. A key rule for this type of painting is to maintain consistent bones. Naming is taming. Naming makes a new world. I have a specific mind. I'm what they called in the '90s a kid with "learning disabilities." To get through grade school and beyond I had to get used to watching how my mind works and to make up systems to work and live. In the studio, I get to follow my made-up logic all the way, fully acting it out and listening to it.



Detail of Ada Friedman, *Performance Proposal, Pathwork: Floor 1*, 2021–22, tin foil, acrylic, oil, papers, textiles, wax pastel, archival artist tape, cloth, Mylar, acrylic mediums, lighting gels, grommets, wire, hardware, and acetate, 60 × 288 inches. Tri-Star Arts, Knoxville, Tennessee. Photo by Jake Woods. Courtesy of the artist and Kendra Jayne Patrick.

**AT** Your serial categorization goes well beyond titles. Your studio rituals are also rigorously structured, which bleeds into the work. There is a way that you live that is highly organized and disciplined, while also being completely porous between daily life, self-care, relationships, studio life, and artistic research. Perhaps you have better language to describe this flow and ways of structuring to promote it?

**AF** I love the way you describe it! Building a sustainable artist's life is an ongoing process. Projects like Howard Finster's *Paradise Garden* and Lee Lozano's *Dropout Piece* resonate with me. I make and collect things at home, even if I have a separate studio. There is power in the domestic. Working art-related jobs for almost two decades in New York City has taught me the importance of respecting my own pace and fostering community so as to be able to sustain a long-term artistic vocation and career. Making art is central to how I create

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meaning and a trajectory in my life, so I've gotten used to stomaching some blurry boundaries and anxiety-provoking financials.

I'm embarking on balancing my time between New York City and a Texas Hill Country experiment. In Texas, I'm building out a modest studio environment on land that was part of a noncompetitive, child-centered Jewish summer camp my grandparents founded in the 1950s. While NYC offers the comfort of anonymous crowds and vibrant energy, rural Texas sings existence with the *big* sky. Though challenging, I recognize the need to dedicate time to this live-work project to grow my art and self. I envision the Texas space eventually becoming a supportive outpost for others' art, artists, and education.

My surroundings can easily absorb and overwhelm me, so I've developed strategies to manage my empathic and sensitive nature. One key routine is completing a Studio Check-in Form (2020–) at each studio session. These self-fashioned, institutional-style forms feature sections like "Now Head," "Now Studio," and "Schedule for Later." Filling these out and drawing in the mandala on their reverse helps channel my manic maker impulses. The 2023 Studio Check-in Form binder was included in the [Files](#) exhibition at Kunsthalle Zurich's Backrooms space this fall.



Ada Friedman, *Everyday Drawing, Green Focus*, 2022–23, acrylic, gauche, watercolor color pencils, colored pencils, seed catalog cutting, plastic gems, L-nails for large two-sided with grommets paintings, glassine, pen, and crayon on paper, 24 × 18 inches. Photo by Stefany Lazar. Courtesy of the artist and Kendra Jayne Patrick.

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**AT** Your practice integrates both inner and outer research, which is synthesized in the work itself. Your exploration into the work of Rosemary Mayer and Helen Adam is a good example of this outer research. Both artists were somewhat on the margins during their lifetimes but made significant contributions to important movements. Can you describe how you seek out these intergenerational connections and what specifically draws you to historical figures like Mayer and Adam?

**AF** I need a lot of alone time in my studio to do my work. Cultivating a direct conversation and closeness over years with an artist on another plane—a ghost—cuts at this. This approach stands in contrast to the stance made popular by Phillip Guston that artists must banish the ghosts from their studio to work properly.

Soon after Rosemary died in 2014, I started working with Marie Warsh on what she called the Rosemary project, which is now the Rosemary Mayer estate. This involved going through Rosemary's works, making her inventory system and website, and studying her methods through her notebooks. This hands-on research has brought me remarkably close to Rosemary's practice, which is something I am truly thankful for. Initiated by Nick Mauss for his exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel, I played a significant role in developing a structure for how the estate reenacts her ephemeral *Ghost* sculptures. Her *Scarecrow* was reconstructed for one of the first times in my Brooklyn studio.

My introduction to Helen Adam came through her "Initiation to the Magic Workshop" in *The Kenning Anthology of Poets Theater: 1945–1985*. Since 2017, Adam's ghost story "Riders to Blockula" serves as a significant jumping-off point for me. Prompted by my forthcoming exhibition with Helen, I made a recent trip, for the second time, to the Poetry Collection at the University at Buffalo Libraries. There, I immersed myself in her archive of magical collages and scrapbooks, often created in collaboration with her sister, Pat. Perhaps Helen used her visual work to help construct the worlds in her writing, much as I use her writing and my own to shape and conjure my painting world. I gain insights, engage in a kind of internal dialogue, and receive valuable acknowledgment and support from my relationships with Helen and Rosemary.

[Ada Friedman: Ballads](#) is on view at David Peter Francis in New York City until December 7.

Alina Tenser is a Ukrainian-born artist currently living and working in Brooklyn, New York. Working across sculpture, performance, and video, she makes propositions that elicit physical activation and play. Utilizing industrial and domestic materials and processes, she reimagines taken-for-granted social and material relations, mining the entanglements of her experience as an immigrant and parent. Tenser is currently an assistant professor at Lehigh University.