

BOMB

Iva Gueorguieva by Dona Nelson

Mark-making as the practice of touch.

JULY 2, 2025



I met Iva Gueorguieva in the summer of 1996 when I was briefly acting chair of the painting department at the Tyler School of Art at Temple University. I was at school on a hot summer day when Iva dropped by to check out graduate studios. She told me she had majored in philosophy at Goucher College and asked me how to go about applying for graduate school in painting. I told her she would have to get together a portfolio of drawings and paintings. In 1998 she was accepted to Tyler, where she could always be found in her studio, drawing continuously, as she still does, even when we talk on the phone.

In 1996, I moved from Tribeca in New York City to Germantown in Philadelphia. After Iva graduated, she and her husband, Matthew McGarvey, also moved to Germantown, where Iva and I continued our conversations about art—fabulous, winding conversations that have become ever more intense and important to me as the years have gone by. Iva has since moved to Los Angeles, and this interview took place in her studio in one of the oldest buildings in the city. Walls were blanketed with Iva's richly complex muslin and canvas paintings, which also covered the floor and hung from the ceiling.

Women by Women, a series of interviews between women visual artists, is supported in part by the Deborah Buck Foundation with additional funding from the Judith Whitney Godwin Foundation.

Dona Nelson

One of the unique qualities of your work is the speed with which you make it.

Iva Gueorguieva

Drawing marks happens fast because of the way I make the drawing, which relies on pigment-saturated gauze, and then laying the material on top, and then drawing with the wooden part of the brush.

DN

The handle of the brush you're using to draw with all of your strength, while drawing on the floor or on the table, is moved not only by the power of your own muscles but by gravity.

IG

It's gravity and the way I hold the brush in my fist. It requires my whole arm. I go fast because each layer gets fainter, while the line gets more and more precise. The first layers pick up a lot of the accidental staining marks. Every time I press, I compress the fabric into the wet gauze. As the gauze dries, my line becomes precise. Only where I press hard does it register. My drawing registers the terrain as well as the interaction between the flatness of the terrain and my strength. It's exhausting. I call them sessions. I prepare. I cannot do that every day. It has to be done when I am ready to immerse myself completely for multiple hours with absolutely no interruption.

“When thinking is freed from its attachment to either intention or objects, it runs like a river.”

— Iva Gueorguieva

DN

What comes first as mark-making? Does the drawing come first, or does the sprinkle of small staining that’s all over the muslin come first?

IG

They are simultaneous. The accidental little black marks in a work like *Book* (2025) happened when the muslin touched the wet gauze as I drew, picking up tracks, like animal tracks. I am fascinated with the history of walking in relationship to thought. For example, Søren Kierkegaard couldn’t think without walking. He always just walked around, and Friedrich Nietzsche walked around. The locomotion along the ground is that connection to the Earth as an engine of thinking. When thinking is freed from its attachment to either intention or objects, it runs like a river.



Iva Gueorguieva, *Field 10*, 2025, acrylic, charcoal, and gauze on canvas, 76 × 51 inches. Courtesy of Derek Eller Gallery.

DN

Do you literally walk on these works?

IG

Oh, yeah. They're always on the floor, and I walk on them. I sit on them.

DN

What is the gauze? Is that cheesecloth?

IG

Yes, but for me gauze is more important in the naming of that material because of its association with the body and the bandaging of wounds. Growing up, I was always rescuing and taking care of wounded animals, bandaging, wrapping. The blue marks are wadded-up gauze that I roll across the muslin, so it leaves a continuous track line.

DN

The rows of blue stains suggest the spine.

IG

Yeah, the spine. Mountains have spines. All creatures have spines. The spine is incredibly articulated. Also, it's like a network, right? It is antithetical to the dominant image of a hierarchical relationship of the body in the service of the mind. I'm always trying to find other ways of being. The spine is a network connected to the nervous system. Its orientation feels horizontal. We tend to think of the body as vertical, upright. I've become so interested in the horizontality of the painting on the floor.

DN

That's interesting in relation to Jackson Pollock because the whole idea of dripping on a canvas that's on the floor is almost like a shadow of the body that's directed by the mind. You live in Los Angeles, and you love to hike in the mountains. Pollock was from LA, wasn't he?

IG

Yeah, he grew up here. I understand Pollock from that experience of walking and being inside of these mountains that do not have large trees except at high elevations. When I'm up there, I feel like I'm inside the brain of the mountain and have this ability to see in all directions. To me, it's utterly life-affirming. It feels connected to the perspective of a crow.



Iva Gueorguieva, *Field 5*, 2025, acrylic, charcoal, and gauze on canvas, 76 × 51 inches. Courtesy of Derek Eller Gallery.

DN

You've also discovered the petroglyphs up there in the mountains.

IG

There are so many misunderstood narratives of the American West. When you immerse yourself in the particularities of this landscape, you realize the farce of your European perspective that considers it empty. It's not empty. It's filled with marks and is a landscape marked by human presence, weather, and animals. What's remarkable to me is that when you look at petroglyphs, you recognize references to the natural world, the movements of celestial bodies, or ways of marking time or location.

DN

You went to Spain last summer and looked at the cave drawings near Altamira. Are those different, being underground, than the petroglyphs that are up in the mountains around LA?

IG

I drove with my son from Barcelona north to the Basque region. I didn't go to Spain because I wanted to go to Spain. I had to go. I knew in this moment in my painting life that I had to go and see those drawings. It was a twelve-hour drive until we reached the north. I was confronted with the mountains and clouds. I moved through the desert, and then I had to cross over the mountains. Because of the way they trap the moisture from the Atlantic, they create a microclimate. All of a sudden, you're in a completely different environment, culturally and environmentally.

I had a feeling that I had been there before. When I walked into the Cueva El Pendo, the cathedral scale of it was mind-blowing because I was like, Oh, gosh, all of these ways that we've distorted even this idea of the cathedral as a kind of relationship to the celestial or the way that we keep perpetuating this mythology around the cosmos as our primary orientation. Here I was inside this earth. The sounds, the color; everything was moving, bubbling in shades of iridescent greens, and browns, and blacks. Oh, the sweet wetness of it.



Iva Gueorguieva, *Animal 16*, 2025, acrylic and gauze on canvas, 65 × 60 inches. Courtesy of Derek Eller Gallery.

DN

Where are the drawings in that cathedral space? Where are they located?

IG

That was what was so fascinating. We passed the place where they were excavating, which the guide pointed out was the main space of activity for the community. The drawings are far away in the depth of the space, all the way at the end on this curving wall, at a rather extreme angle. They are populated with animals; one of them is a mother with her babies. It is the

relationship between the turn of her head toward some sudden sound. You can see the response of another group. I was deeply aware that the hands that marked the wall completed what was already there.

I needed to go to Barcelona because I needed to understand for myself Joan Miró, Pablo Picasso, and Antoni Tàpies, who are all extremely important painters to me. I was in Barcelona walking through the Gothic Quarter, and I looked up and saw the screaming gargoyles on the facades of the buildings. All I could think about is *Guernica*. Picasso had heard them too. Then I was in Montblanc, a perfectly intact medieval town a few hours away from Barcelona. Every surface was scratched with mysterious symbols meant to keep away the evil spirits. These facades have been marked for centuries. I was like, Oh, there are those iconic Miró sort of star shapes, spirals, circles, and ladders. They were all over the surfaces. In the case of Tàpies, I found his paintings to be the same in quality as the stone used to build the city and marked by piss stains and ceaseless scratching everywhere. This human impulse to mark is just like the graffiti Brassai photographed in the streets of Paris. I feel that it's a misunderstanding of this impulse that it comes from some kind of egocentric need for humans to leave their mark. I think it's much more complicated than that. I think it's born of our longing. Touch is our primary connection to the world. It's the precondition for actual understanding: that through all that marking and scratching, we are practicing touching. It's not just figurative or abstract. It's always both.

Iva Gueorguieva: Gallop, to retrieve the sunlight! (<https://www.derekeller.com/exhibitions/iva-gueorguieva>) is on view at Derek Eller Gallery in New York City until July 11.

Dona Nelson taught at Tyler School of Art and Architecture, Temple University, Philadelphia, from 1992 to 2023. She shows at Locks Gallery in Philadelphia and Thomas Erben Gallery in New York City. Her paintings are included in museum collections such as the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Princeton University Art Museum, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Des Moines Art Center, and the Carnegie Museum of Art.