

## ESQnA with Lauren Clay for Hermès New York-based artist Lauren Clay talks dreams and the idea behind her first window installation for Hermès, "The Traveller"

"The Spirit of the Faubourg" is Hermès' theme for the year, referencing the Maison's iconic first flagship that still stands at its original address at 24 rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré. You may think that it's somewhat of a disconnect then that Lauren Clay, a visual artist based in New York, was given carte blanche to design artist windows for Hermès' Singapore flagship. But perhaps Clay's dream-like, almost mystical oeuvre is the perfect way to channel the Hermès spirit. Clay tells us all about it as she readies to present her first ever window to fellow artists in Singapore.



Artist Lauren Clay.  
(KRISTEN WASIK)

ESQUIRE SINGAPORE: The theme for Hermès this year is “The Spirit of the Faubourg”. What does it mean to you?

LAUREN CLAY: I’m fascinated by the concept of “place” and the unique qualities that a city or building holds. Sometimes we refer to this as “vibes.” The ancient Romans had a term, “genius loci,” which is Latin and translates to “the spirit of a place.” This term, “genius loci,” also describes the atmosphere or character of a space. This is an idea that I’ve been inspired by for many years.

Regarding the theme “The Spirit of the Faubourg”, I aimed to capture the feeling of visiting the Hermès rue du Faubourg store, which for me, resonates with the experience of visiting Paris. The store embodies all of the beautiful aspects of Paris that we all love. I also wanted to convey the sense of discovery within the store, highlighting the various elements and unique architectural details it contains. There are numerous pieces from the collection and Hermès family history throughout the store. In my window installation, I wanted to evoke the feeling of exploring and encountering the unexpected.



The latest instalment of Hermès’ artist windows sees Lauren Clay reimagining the rue du Faubourg store in “The Traveller”.  
(HERMÈS)

ESQ: Is that how the name "The Traveller" came about for the windows?

LC: Yes. In the rue du Faubourg store, I particularly admire the main staircase— the curvature of the marble steps and the way they wrap through the different levels of the store. I aimed to capture that in the window display.

In my work, I often try to evoke the feeling of standing on the threshold between the natural world and some other realm. I think this sensation is familiar to most of us in dreams, where we encounter the familiar juxtaposed with the strange or unexpected. It's similar to the feeling of being a traveler. I appreciate the way Hermès often captures this sensation in their storytelling.

I have a deep appreciation for architecture and ancient art history. Although I studied painting in school, my love for architecture and decorative arts significantly influences my work. The Hermès Faubourg store stands out in that regard.

ESQ: It reminds me of your work as well, because you do feature a lot of stairs in your artworks.

LC: Exactly. I frequently use stairs as a symbol in my work, drawing on art history. Many painters and sculptors have used stairs as a psychological symbol of transition. For example, William Blake's painting of Jacob's Ladder and Martin Puryear's "Ladder for Booker T. Washington" come to mind.

ESQ: What's the process like in creating "The Traveller"? Was it a deviation from your usual process?

LC: This installation was slightly different. Typically, when I create an exhibition for a gallery or museum, I start by making a model of the space and studying its architecture. Usually, I consider the path and vantage points that the viewer has as they walk through the space. However, for the Hermès window installation, the viewer has one main vantage point, which in a way, gave me more freedom. I knew I wanted to create an illusion of depth and space beyond the window. I began with sketches—probably around 20 ideas that only my husband saw—before choosing one and developing it further.

ESQ: Because you're also interested in architecture, did the architecture of the Liat Tower building kind of informed how it was going to look like as well?

LC: Because I live in New York, I hadn't visited the Hermès Singapore store before, but I studied photos provided by the Hermès team and also different views of the building from the street view on Google Maps. In planning the window, I considered the architectural features, such as the height of the window. Creating this installation felt similar to creating a diorama or tableau, which aligns with my background in painting. A window offers a controlled view, similar to a painting.



Clay's interpretation of "The Spirit of the Faubourg" stays true to her dreamy stylings, with the entire installation wrapped in different marbling patterns that she developed.  
(HERMÈS)

ESQ: What was the biggest challenge in designing a window for Hermès?

LC: A key challenge was finding where my artistic vision and the Hermès aesthetic would intersect. I had to ensure both worlds remained distinct while complementing each other.

ESQ: Did you also have to consider where products would be placed or how they would be placed?

LC: Yes, I had a lot of freedom—pretty much full creative license, which was exciting, like a shopping experience.

ESQ: I've looked through a lot of what you've done before and there's clearly a sense of fantasy, dream-like reality to your work. And you often use a lot of pastel colours. Has anything from your own childhood informed or influenced the use of these colours?

LC: I think my colour palette is heavily influenced by growing up in the southern part of the United States. I went to school at the Savannah College of Art and Design, in Savannah, Georgia, one of America's oldest cities known for its beautiful pastel Victorian and colonial architecture. After Savannah, I went to graduate school in Richmond, Virginia—also an old southern city. It's hard to explain, but both of those cities have a distinct feeling of place and history. The unique atmosphere there contrasted with my suburban upbringing and profoundly influenced my artistic sensibility. All of my work, going back to college has been influenced by that experience.





(HERMÈS)

ESQ: Is there a story behind the use of the specific colours for "The Traveller"?

LC: The colour palette emerged from collaboration with the Hermès team. Some of my initial sketches were darker, but I'm pleased it evolved into brighter tones. The pastels reflect the stone and marble of the original Faubourg store and work really well with Hermès' colour palette.

ESQ: I read in previous interviews that you also kind of tie some of your works to dreams that you've had. Was there a specific dream that you had for "The Traveller"?

LC: I've been studying my dreams carefully for about five years now. In my dreams, I often find myself in familiar places, like a grandparent's house, but I keep discovering hidden doors, stairwells, or entire rooms that I didn't know were there. I have this type of dream frequently, and I wanted to bring that sensation into the Hermès installation—that feeling of discovery and mystery.



(HERMÈS)

ESQ: Have you learnt anything from studying your dreams?

LC: Definitely. Yes, I feel like a completely different person after spending five years studying my dreams. I agree with Carl Jung's idea that dreams often reveal parts of yourself that you didn't know were there. Dreams come from the unconscious realm—quite literally, the part of you that you're not aware of. Sometimes the unconscious can reveal something encouraging; other times, it stings a little. But it's valuable information, and I've found studying my dreams to be really rewarding.

ESQ: Do you dream in colour?

LC: I do, and some dreams have particularly vivid colours, though not always. Colour is a whole other type of symbolic language.

ESQ: It does seem as well that your work mostly has this positive, dream-like energy. But I do feel that there are some darker influences in certain pieces.

LC: I'm curious what pieces you're thinking of.

ESQ: For example, "Fix your eyes on the unseen realm" and "Lover's Knot" I feel had darker undertones.

LC: I think what you're picking up on is that feeling of witnessing something that is simultaneously familiar and uncanny. I'm intrigued by spiritual ideas and the realm of the unconscious, which is why I often discuss dreams in relationship to my work. I think most of us have experienced this feeling in our dreams; there's a mysterious aspect to dreams. Carl Jung referred to it as "the numinous" aspect of dreams. The sculpture, "Lover's Knot" is inspired by an old Scottish folk song, "Barbara Allen", which is about unrequited love and a couple who die and are buried next to each other. Out of one's grave, a thorn bush grows, and out of the other, a rose bush, and they grow together, intertwined. It's a folk song that influenced early country music, but there's definitely a dark element to that reference.

ESQ: Is it important for you to keep your artwork kind of lighthearted?

LC: Given the darkness in the world, I prefer to bring light. The New York art scene can be very cynical and political, which isn't my focus.

ESQ: It feels like your work is a collage of different ideas and references, that you then twist into your own vision. In some ways, to me, it echoes what AI does, right? Pulling out information from everywhere, and then generating an image. What are your thoughts on AI with respect to art?

LC: I find it fascinating. I've experimented with AI for generating ideas, and I think it's an exciting tool. There are artists who have been successfully using it for years—like Jon Rafman. I've only played with it a bit but I've used it to inspire new concepts, feeding in



images of my work and observing the results. It has sparked ideas for a few of my drawings. Sometimes it has good ideas. (laughs)

ESQ: There's this saying that likens a painting to a window and now that you've done an Hermès window, how do you feel about it?

LC: Working on this installation for Hermès felt particularly poignant because it literally serves as a window, offering a curated view into a space that is simultaneously real but impossible. Just as I do in all my work, for this project, I wanted to create a bridge between the familiar and the fantastical, allowing viewers to experience a moment of discovery.



(HERMÈS)

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

—ASRI JASMAN