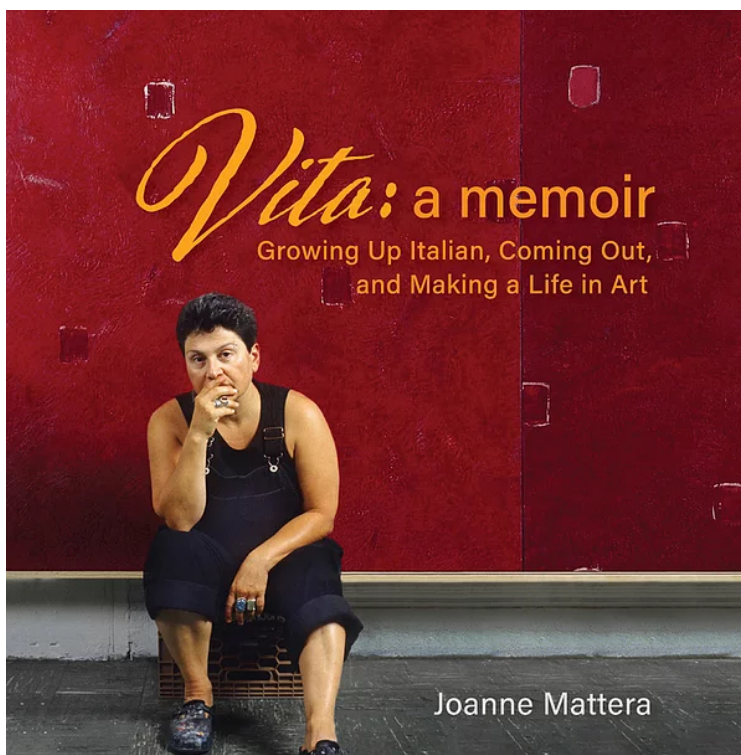


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An Online Journal of Art and Cultural Commentary

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Vita cover. Photo of the artist: Ernest Oliveri; cover design: Karen Freedman

A Life in Art A Dialogue with Joanne Mattera

by Deanna Sirlin

Joanne Mattera is a painter dedicated to color. Mattera's luminous paintings are built from layers of translucent and saturated color that transition from one hue to another. Her current exhibition, *From Dawn To Dusk*, at Odetta Gallery is a series of 18 x 18 inch square panels hung in a line that wraps around the gallery walls to suggest the movement of light as it changes though out the day. Exhibited in this manner, these abstractions give the work a connection to the natural world, one that Mattera has studied for decades in relation to color.

Much like the line of paintings in her current exhibition at Odetta, Mattera began to see her life as a series of "vignettes." She decided to write down her past and how her upbringing led her to the life as an artist in her book, *Vita: A Memoir Growing Up Italian, Coming Out and Making a Life in Art*. Her writing and archival photos provide both an intimate look at her personal history and a time capsule of growing up in an immigrant family in New England during the fifties and sixties.

As two artists who have written books about being women artists and who understand the significance of this experience in this time, we engaged in this dialogue this past summer.



Joanne Mattera in her Salem, Mass., studio circa 2006. Photo: Claudia Saimbert

Deanna Sirlin: Why did you write this memoir now, at this moment in your life?

Joanne Mattera: Thank you for asking me about the memoir, Deanna. I hadn't intended to write my story. Occasionally, when I'd relate colorful anecdotes from my past, like go-go dancing my way through art school or the drug dealers coming to my door with guns, friends would say, "You've got to write a memoir." Yeah, yeah, but who's got the time?

However, in Summer 2018, after hearing the occupant of the White House demean immigrants for the thousandth time, I was moved to write about my Italian immigrant family—my maternal grandparents and aunts—and how the immigrant experience shaped me, long before my art school adventures. I spent much of my childhood with decent, hard-working people who may not have been fluent in English but were smart enough to have made their way in a new world. Grandpa Amedeo ran his own tailoring business; Grandma Annina raised seven children and shepherded her family through the Great Depression with *pasta e faggioli* (macaroni and beans). My two unmarried aunts, Lena and Antonette, lived with them. Both worked. The other five siblings, including my mother, went on to have families of their own.

Then in the interest of equal time I wrote about my father's side of the family, which was more blue collar. Grandpa Antonio came over by himself as a stowaway. Grandma Giuseppina, whom I called Josephine, was one of five siblings who came over from Naples one by one. Everybody *wazza takka laka thees*, and yet Antonio built an auto-repair business from the ground up—twice, actually—and Giuseppina raised five children in a household where a couple of versions of Italian dialect were spoken, along with broken English, and the grammatically correct English my father and his siblings were learning in school.

As I wrote, the floodgates of memory opened. I gave myself over to writing the stories I remembered. The more I wrote, the more I remembered. And the more I remembered, the clearer those memories became. At some point I remember thinking, "This has to be a book." It took me almost a year to produce it. (The painter, Karen Freedman, designed it.) As for why I undertook such a project at this moment in my life, I turned 70 that summer, so partly it was the milestone of a new decade. Also, I have no children, so my story stops with me. Who's going to tell it if I don't?



August 1950: Me at the beach ignoring my mother. This is the dynamic that typified our lifelong relationship.

DS: What is distinctive in your particular journey of being an artist and what do you want your readers to understand from your story?

JM: As a Baby Boomer, my story comes out of the common nexus of growing up in the Cold War Fifties and then coming of age in the freewheeling Sixties. What a transition that was! We were entertained by *The Mickey Mouse Club*, scared shitless by Duck-and-Cover, and formed our ideas about love and society from Doo Wop and rock'n'roll, then folk music and soul music. The fight for Civil Rights shaped us. The Sexual Revolution liberated us. The Women's Movement empowered us. What distinguished me from other artists is the ethnicity. We all come from somewhere, and those particulars—especially if we are first- or second-generation Americans—give our stories specificity. Among artists of Italian heritage, there are the differences between immigrants from the more educated North versus the less educated, often illiterate, folks who came from the South. And even among the children of Southern Italians, as I am, there is the overlay of sexism. Girls were just not seen as important as boys.

But to answer your question about what I want readers to understand about my story, aside from the immigrant experience I'd say it's the struggle to be an artist. It is impossible to understate the the poverty and rejection that I (and so many artists) experienced while juggling so many jobs to get by. Coupled with that was my determination to be independent. I was expected to get married, have a bunch of kids, and live next door to my parents.



Mattera Studio circa 2006

DS: What aspects of your memoir do you think will enable someone to understand better your abstract work?

JM: The textile sensibility of my work could only have come from having grown up around fabric and people who worked with it. My love of materiality is, you should pardon the expression, ingrained. The appeal of process comes from a family of makers. And what is the vertical and horizontal of warp and weft if not an iteration of the modernist grid? My aesthetic, which I like to call lush minimalism, springs from that.



Joanne Mattera Silk Road 463, 2019. Encaustic on Panel, 18 x 18 inches; courtesy of Odetta Gallery

DS: Did your family's business in the textile industry influence your art?

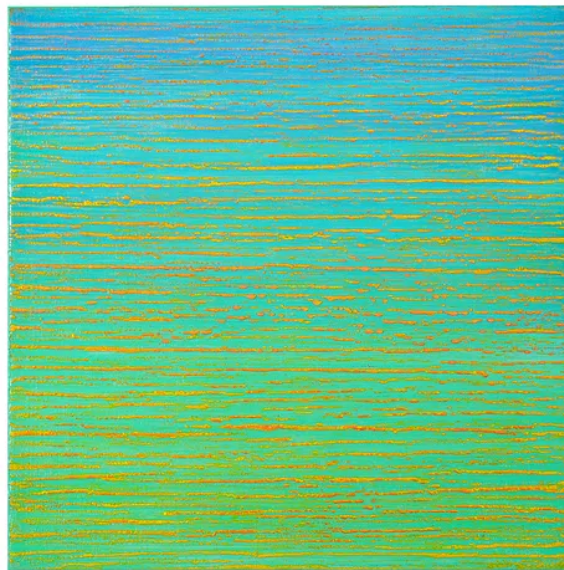
JM: Oh, yes. I was the oldest child of five, born when my mother was in her early 20s. My mother, the youngest of seven, was overwhelmed with babies, one every couple of years. She often left me in the care of Lena and Antonette, who embraced me as the daughter they never had.

Lena, born here, was a dressmaker who had been taught to sew by her father. She worked from home, out of a bedroom that was filled with fabric, notions, and clothing in all states of construction. She taught me to identify weaves and fabrics, sometimes giving me a closer look under a magnifying glass as she pulled apart the threads to show me the construction, and to identify fibers by feeling them with my thumb and forefinger. She taught me to sew. Antonette, who grew up in Italy, taught me to embroider, knit, and crochet. She came to this country at 24 with a steamer trunk full of linens handwoven by a grandmother who had a loom in her kitchen. My aunts used some of those cloths—*muppine*, we called them—in their own kitchen. I recall their various twill and bird's eye patterns. Grandma Annina was a knitter. You knew where in the house she was by the click of her metal knitting needles; usually it was in the living room, where she sat on a plastic-covered wing chair.

When Lena and Antonette were not working or keeping house or cooking, they were crocheting afghans, knitting sweaters, embroidering tablecloths, and tating the lace trim on linen handkerchiefs. I joined them with my own little needlework projects. I felt cocooned by their affection and abilities.

Fast forward to art school in the Sixties. Stain painting was the big thing and so of course we art students were pouring and pooling liquid acrylic paint. Without a gesso ground, the paint sank into the weave of the canvas. I didn't realize it initially, but the textile connection between what I did as a child and what I was doing as an art student was as straight as a dart. After graduation when I had no money for art supplies, I shredded all of my stain paintings and wove them into new paintings that would be perfectly of a piece with our provisional aesthetic now. I wish I could tell you where they are, or if they even still exist, but I have no idea.

I also made reductive drawings with thread as the linear element. Now I make small color field paintings that reference silk fabric. At first I renounced the textile connection. Craft in the Seventies and Eighties (and still sometimes now) was seen as a lesser art form, and as a woman and a lesbian, I had quite enough of second-class status. But as I found and developed my own strength, I came to embrace the textile sensibility of my work. Textiles are in my DNA, and what I make springs from it.



Joanne Mattera Silk Road 458, 2019, Encaustic on Panel, 18 x 18 inches; courtesy of Odetta Gallery

DS: Who were your significant mentors that helped you realize your life as an artist?

JM: I've thought about this a lot. I did not have many mentors early on, which may be why I am now what you might call pathologically independent. Certainly, my aunts were early role models for making things, and their unconditional love allowed me to associate creativity with everything that was safe and good.

My art teacher in high school, Joann DiDonato, is the one who suggested the possibility of my going to art school. Who even knew there was such a thing? Under her tutelage, I prepared a portfolio for Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, then as now the only state-supported art college in the country. A state college was my only option, and by some miracle I got in. However, art school then was a boy's club. Indeed, I was told, "You have to decide whether you want to be a woman or an artist." No mentors there.

For many years I was buoyed by other artists on the same path, especially the groups of women artists who created opportunities for one another. Then I found a wonderful mentor in Stephen Haller, the New York City gallerist whose program was based on material abstraction. He knew how to turn you down without diminishing you, always encouraging you to show him your next body of work. He represented me from 1995 to 2000, and by watching him interact with other gallery artists and with his clients, I learned a lot about how the art world functions. As I have broadened my network, I've learned from the other dealers I show with, many of whom have become friends: Marcia Wood in Atlanta, Hope Turner and then Zola Solamente at Arden Gallery in Boston, and Kenise Barnes in Larchmont, New York. These are dedicated gallerists, each with a brilliant eye and impeccable business sense, who have built their businesses with dogged hard work. Like artists, they had no guidebook for success, just the wisdom that comes from the experience of working at it day after day. We function at opposite ends of the spectrum, but it is the same spectrum—artists making art, dealers placing it in the world.

I think back to the bad advice I got in art school by the male professors who were protecting their own crumb of a turf. "The dealer is your enemy," they said. They could not have been more wrong.





Joanne Mattera Silk Road 462, 2019, Encaustic on Panel, 18 x 18 inches;
courtesy of Odetta Gallery

***Vita, A Memoir: Growing Up Italian, Coming Out,
and Making a Life in Art***

By Joanne Mattera
Published by Well-Fed Artist Press, 2019
208 pages

Joanne Mattera
From Dawn to Dusk
curated by Ellen Hackl Fagan
Odetta Gallery
269 11th Avenue, New York, New York,
October 15 - November 16, 2019.



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