

Seeing Portuguese

By **Betsy DiJulio**

When Marlowe Emerson landed in Portugal and arrived in Messejana, “a tiny village in the middle of nowhere” for the Buinho Creative Residency, it was intentionally without art supplies. This was not her first residency rodeo, though it was only her second. Based on the first experience, she knew that lugging heavy and cumbersome art supplies was a drag, literally. But based on this, the second, she was about to learn what it means to “make do” artistically.

Emerson’s drop-me-within-50-miles-of-a-Home-Depot-and-I-can-do-anything philosophy was met with only one problem: there was no Home Depot even 50 miles away. She good-naturedly explains that “We were very much on our own, even for food and transportation...there was an element of being stranded.” But, with a little reliance on the kindness of a stranger—one

of two other fellow artists sharing a house and studio space—Emerson hitched a ride to the neighboring village where she was able to buy some house paints, sold only as pigments. Scavenging and dumpster diving netted her cardboard and such.

“A sense of place”—a strong and deeply felt sense of identity—has long been a multidimensional construct in both art and literature. Because of this unique local context, Emerson’s body of work produced during the two-week residency derives its sense of place not only from the influence of the colors and forms surrounding her in Messejana, but from the very materials she extracted from it.

For many contemporary artists, making art is about solving puzzles and problems. With the problem of materials mostly solved, Emerson could then turn her thoughts to her process. She recalls wondering what her re-

sponse was going to be as she “walked and absorbed.” Ambling through the remote village, noting works of art that previous resident artists had left behind, she decided to “drink this in and see what comes out.” Among what came out were several series which was a new way of working for this intuitive abstract expressionist painter. Engaging with a number of pieces at once, a body of ten works on paper with natural subdivisions into five pairs emerged along with a large canvas, smaller pieces on wood and cardboard, and some wooden laser-cut pieces.

The title of the resulting show, “Portuguese Playground,” refers to the “wide open freedom” accorded the residents, as well as to an actual playground in the center of the village. Part of the MIT Fablab and European Creative Hubs networks, founder Carlos Alcabia’s residency has attracted artists from virtually every



continent to “come and do whatever they want,” including partnering with a school or organization when time allows.

Emerson’s relatively short residency found her “out of my comfort zone,” but within another zone that afforded her the opportunity to temporarily leave behind her marketing and communications position with United Healthcare to be “24-7 focused on art,” exchanging ideas with her fellow residents and seeing how they work.

Additive and subtractive mark-making and small blocks of color characterize much of the new work and share their vocabulary, to a degree, with her previous work. However, the greater expanses of white, the arches, and accents of a very particular blue appear derived from the distinctive architecture of Messejana. How it all comes together seems to come straight from the playground of Emerson’s mind. 