

Artist to Know: Dru DeSantis

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A marketing creative director explores New York's streets (literally) through her photography.



In her debut exhibition, “Ground Rules,” [Dru DeSantis](#) looks at how our city controls the paths we take—where we walk, bike, and drive—through a series of photographs of the actual lines painted on streets. DeSantis, co-founder of a design firm where she’s led strategy and marketing for 20 years, has a way of seeing things that others look right past—in this case, entire narratives at our feet. “People live their lives at eye level,” says DeSantis. “And life is not about eye level. There’s a lot more going on.” The exhibition, which runs through July 31, is the first in a series of installments highlighting Manhattan street surfaces, held at the new [1stdibs showroom at the New York Design Center](#).

How did you go from two decades on the business end to getting your hands on the camera and developing “Ground Rules”?

I studied photography at the Rhode Island School of Design, but when I graduated I went into the business end of design—and I just got really busy at work. We all have things in the back of our minds that we want to get back to...so one day on my way to work, I noticed the way one crosswalk intersected with another and how part of it had been rubbed away by traffic. I thought it was just this beautiful piece of poetry. I took a picture with my phone and then returned the next day with my camera. After that, I began deliberately looking at the streets. I found that there was this magical visual moment in how these lines—which were painted to control traffic and people—were being destroyed.

Were there any spots that you were particularly drawn to?

I deliberately went to Union Square, because the way the traffic flow and the pedestrian flow intersect there is different from other places in the city. There are so many more arrows and different types of lines; there seems to be a more deliberate attempt to keep people in certain places.

The photos are so focused on rules, yet you cite Abstract Expressionism as a major influence. Is there something that draws you to that opposition?

I don't like to put rules on my work, so I wanted to pose these "ground rules" in contrast to their intention, which is to keep people confined. The artist in me kind of likes to see how people are breaking down those rules.

How do you go about finding your spots to shoot?

The "process" is a journey of discovery. But because New York is so chaotic, you have to identify what you want to capture and get there before someone runs into you, or a car or a bike comes along to obstruct it. It's a bit of an adrenaline rush.

Is there a certain time of day that works best?

Early morning. On most of the streets in Manhattan, the sun really does rise in the east and set in the west, so it streams down the streets that go east to west and provides a good skim light over the surface. That is when the details and shadows are the most prominent.

Are there any shots that didn't work out the way you thought they would?

I photographed *Untitled #4* three or four times throughout the day to get it right. It was taken on 21st Street [between 5th and 6th avenues] across from my office. The shape of the pavement changed in such an interesting way at different times of day that it was hard to choose one image. The one I ended up selecting was taken at 7:30 a.m.

What's next for you?

Immediately after this, I'm going to Paris and then to Tokyo, which I think will be interesting comparisons. I love New York, because anything goes; they put down the rules, and the rules are obliterated. I have a feeling it will be remarkably different in other cities. I will look up a bit while I am there too, though.

Dru DeSantis at 1stdibs, New York Design Center: 200 Lexington Avenue, 10th floor, 212.679.9500

—CHRISTINA GAROFALO