An Expressionistic Approach to Painting About Human Behavior

by

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Philosophies on Painting

“Like poetry or any other creative enterprise, painting is something that is worked out in the making, and the work and its maker exchange ideas and change one another.” - James Elkins (1)

Painting is a spiritual, personal language that is open to translation and offers a unique experience to each creator and viewer. Like music, the intentions of the artist are relevant, but not always crucial or necessarily important. Although a specific concept directs the paint, ink, and collage, the materials guide the process. I paint to find a visual language for emotional exploration and expression. Painting activates a subconscious layer of thought and allows me to explore what motivates behavior. Often taking an autobiographical route, the works incorporate a personal set of symbols that may not be readily decipherable, yet I hope they feel translatable. I am seduced by the possibilities held within the raw, physical, gooey nature of paint and collage. I make expressionist paintings by exploring and struggling to understand human behavior, often looking to personal ideas that may reveal a universal truth.
II: Visual Language, Process, and Influences

"It is no wonder that painters can be so entranced by paint. There is no meaning that cannot seem to flow from the paint itself. From the spectator’s standpoint, looking at the finished paintings, marks can become eloquent records of the painter’s body, and through the body come undependable but powerful ideas about the painter’s feelings and moods. Paint incites motions, or the thought of motions, and through them it implies emotions and other wordless experiences."

- James Elkins (1)

When beginning a painting or drawing I follow my intuition. Although each painting begins with a specific idea, the form of the work emerges from the instinctive physical process. I want to show the dynamic between deliberate action and serendipity. Color and the texture of paint significantly impact my approach to the canvas: they are exciting and physical, and allow me to convey so much emotion. Each color and texture adopts its own personality within a work. Applying color in a thick and drippy manner is liberating and invigorating, and makes the viewer take notice of a particular symbol. When approaching color, I do not adhere to logic in terms of color theory: colors do not cast shadows and are not necessarily coherently set off of one another. I like to experiment with colors that deliberately clash with one another to create areas of emphasis, tension, and drama.

I have always been drawn to the possibilities and limitations of the two-dimensional surface, which invites me to play vacillate between shallow and deep space
within my works. The ambiguous space often found in expressive Modernism has always been visually appealing to me, and I naturally gravitated to this way of working. Some works have areas of deep space, but I love to bring the viewer back to the flat plane of the canvas with texture, patterns, and or colors that sit right on top of the work.

I enjoy considering the intersection of material and concept. The physicality of materials provokes my imagination. I create and deconstruct on the canvas using paint, paper, fabric, glitter, found objects, and anything else that can create texture and thickness. I love how this process can lead me to unexpected territory. The paintings reveal a history of creation, destruction, and revision. Each layer forces me to react to the previous marks on the canvas, and the works become a record of my ideas and movement. (Image 1)

"Imagine a man brought up from birth in a white room cell so that he has never seen anything except the growth of his own body. And then imagine that suddenly he is given some sticks and bright paints. If he were a man with an innate sense of balance and color harmony, he would, then, I think, cover the white walls of his cell... He would want to express his ideas and feelings about growth, time, energy, death, but he would lack any vocabulary of seen or remembered visual images with which to do so. He would have nothing more than the gestures he could discover thorough the act of applying his colored marks to his white walls." - Jeremy Lewison (2)

I am very drawn to the modernist idea that art can serve as a vehicle for retreating into the childlike and subconscious. Returning to nature and primitive thought can lead
to a personal revelation. David Parker wrote, “Most of the experiments of avant-garde art throughout modernism have really, in essence, been strategic and (in an expanded sense of the word) therapeutic, are reactions to a perceived emptiness and loss of meaning.”

I believe my interests in understanding human behavior, and often my disappointment in human action, have led me to feel camaraderie with modern artists who felt disillusioned with the world around them. As modern artists sought enlightenment or freedom through art, I too seek to elaborate on my own feelings and dip into my subconscious. Visually and thematically, some of the strongest influences on my work have been Paul Klee, Jackson Pollock, Henri Matisse, and Wassily Kandinsky.

Borrowing visual and symbolic approaches from these artists have greatly impacted my approach to painting. These artists gave me license to play with line, shape, and abstracted figures and forms, often with the figure outlined against a chaotic background. I find the grids and line work of Klee so entrancing that I look to it often, and it regularly shows up referenced in my work. I am always drawn to artists who can remind me how simple line can demand attention and take authority in a painting. It can divide and hold the space simultaneously. One of the first paintings I ever fell in love with was Klee’s *Twittering Machine* (image 26.) The economy of the line is stark against the soft background. The abstracted tweeting birds becoming one with a simplistic turn-crank machine resonated with me; it felt ominous and melancholy, but at the same time the image brought me joy. Klee’s *Crosses and Columns* (image 2) showed me a way of rhythmic mark-making that seemed effortless, raw and spontaneous. My love of his simplistic approach led me to experiment with a similar spontaneity and simplicity with the paintbrush (image 3.)
In contrast to Klee’s tranquil results, my experiments were chaotic, turbulent, chunky, and physical. For this reason I was drawn to Pollock’s paintings and how one can feel his body’s movements through the work. I feel a kinship in Pollock’s belief in the mysticism that brought the subconscious to the canvas. His unrefined use of materials feels authentic to me in the same way that Klee’s mark-making feels authentic. Paintings like *She Wolf* (Image 4) and *Twittering Machine* influenced, and perhaps justified, my love for working with thick and thin lines, outlines, and drawing with paint (image 5 and 6.)

Matisse’s use of cutouts, stencils, and simplified forms, such as those in *Polynesia* (image 7) led me to consider a simple shape being able to become a silhouette, a shadow, or even a hole in the canvas (images 8.) His uncomplicated shapes influenced my approach to symbols and metaphors in the work. The evolution of my shapes allowed for the creation of the rabbit symbol that became prominent in my thesis work.

Kandinsky simplifies images very differently from Matisse; he deconstructs his symbols to the point of almost complete abstraction, and then layers them on top of one another in a single image, as in *With a White Border* (image 9.) Although he has a very specific idea in his works, the abstracted results are about shape, line, color, and rhythm. Recognizing his ability to condense his symbols into one flowing landscape influenced works like *Bunny* (image 10.) His style was instructive and assisted me through the thought process as I began to create my own language of symbols.
Image 1: *In 1990*, 2011, acrylic, paper and ink on canvas, 48 x 48 inches
Image 2: Paul Klee, *Crosses and Columns*

Image 3: *Tedious Nature*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 64 inches
Image 4: Jackson Pollock, *She Wolf*

Image 5: *Things with Teeth*, 2010
Acrylic, pastel, ink, pencil on paper
59 x 38 inches

Image 6: *We Used To*, 2006
Acrylic, sequins, glitter on paper
56 x 36 inches
Image 7: Henri Matisse, *Polynesia*

Image 8: *Birds Number Two*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 54 x 72 inches
Image 9: Kandinsky, *With a White Border*

Image 10: *Bunny*, 2011, acrylic, pencil, pastel, ink on paper, 50 x 38 inches
Early Explorations

In early work my concepts focused on the painterly intersections of animals, nature, and humans engaged in moral struggles. The works were colorful, abstract and ambiguous. Prior to graduate school I had spent several years working in animal welfare at a non-profit animal shelter. Animal activism has been a part of my life since I was fifteen years old, and heavily influenced me in these paintings and drawings. I am very interested in how humans regard the lives of other living things, and how there is often selective disregard for life. People seem to be capable of both great compassion and great cruelty. I decided that this dichotomy would be the chief subject matter for the work, and would allow me to deal with my emotional responses to the issues. Anger, confusion, disillusionment, and sadness fueled the expressionist color and marks, and the chaotic compositional structure. Working through thick, saturated acrylic and latex paint, I created anamorphic figures both loving and abusing one another (image 11.) I depicted humans disregarding animal life, only to begin transforming into animalistic beings themselves. (Images 12 and 13) In other works, several animals would morph into one strange creature that seems out of place in its environment (image 14.) These works ruminated on how we are bending the environment to our human needs, and how we expect the rest of the planet to adapt or perish. (Images 15 and 16)

During this phase my goal was to create art that considered our complicity in how we deal with the environment and other animals, and to examine an emotional response to the work. Ultimately, I had hoped to discover a way to use art as a vehicle for activism. However, after several years of exploration, I discovered that the work was at
odds with itself. I was not succeeding in communicating a universal truth or idea that was visually satisfying. After these paintings I decided to work towards more local images with personal roots.
Image 11: *Piglet*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 71 x 158 inches

Image 12: *Street Lamp Desire*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 78 x 68 inches
Image 13: *Failing to Help*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 71 inches

Image 14: *Mountain Creation*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 62 x 84 inches
Image 15: *Ant Snatcher*, 2011, acrylic, pastel on panel, 48 x 48 inches

Image 16: *Shark*, 2011, acrylic and pastel on canvas, 72 x 133 inches
Transitions

"Painting is the art of metamorphosis." (1)

The paintings that marked a transition from my early explorations into my current body of work explored the sky and the ocean as gateways into the subconscious. The sky and ocean are used metaphorically to indicate journeys into my memories, dreams, and imagination. The sky and ocean represented freedom, liberation, and echoed the idea of the painting as a dream space. While still engaged with my interest in human behavior, I began to focus more on my own subconscious world. I am interested in how my subconscious affects and determines my behavior, and now allowed this to play out across the canvas. (Images 17 and 18.)

During this time I was just beginning to build my own personal set of symbols. My “sea urchin” motif was developed in these works. In my works this black, spiky, dense creature floats deep under the surface of the ocean, creating a sense of fear and danger. I use these urchins to indicate a traumatic or disturbing event. While the urchin resides deep in the ocean, I also created a bird to fly across the canvas to bring to mind the idea of freedom. Yet, my bird symbol is a flat, single-colored stencil, which effectively clipped its wings, making the bird static and frozen in its space. Now the bird seems pathetic, trapped, and isolated instead of free. (Image 19)

In addition to painting, I was also working through these symbols and ideas in three-dimensional ways. I spent several weeks experimenting with materials, symbolism, and dimension in an installation about dreams called Little Dreamer Can Fly and Swim.
(Images 20 and 21) The three-dimensional work allowed me to take a break from painting to be able to think more critically about expression. I wanted and needed to see the lines, shapes, and colors in a physical, emotive space. This divergence from the illusion of paint on canvas into an actual space allowed me to better understand how to put my ideas back into paint. The slow, methodical approach necessary for dealing with structure, physics, and gravity cleared my thoughts and helped me to see that I was attempting to pack too much emotion, meaning, and symbolism into each individual painting.
Image 17: Driftwood, 2011, acrylic, pencil, pastel on canvas, 66 x 77 inches
Image 18: *Bulbs Number One*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 77 x 66 inches

Image 19: *Voyage Number One*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 32 x 24 inches
Image 20: detail from *Little Dreamer Can Fly and Swim*, 2011

Development of Thesis Work

"Every shape becomes an organic entity, inviting the multiplicity of associations inherent in all living things. To me they form a theogony of the most elementary consciousness, hardly aware of itself beyond the will to live – a profound and moving experience." – Mark Rothko (3)

These thesis paintings are all about human behavior from a personal and familial point of view. In my previous work I had a hesitation to blatantly focus the work on my own emotional behavior; in these I embrace it. I am interested in how personality and morality develop, and how these change and adapt over a lifetime, so I decided to explore these ideas through my own experiences. I wanted to consider duality in personality by focusing on my own subconscious world, dreams, and childhood experiences, and the childhood experiences of my immediate family members. By taking a personal approach the expression became more authentic. In each painting I wanted to create an inviting world in which to experience emotion. Through the painting, layering, destroying, and recreating, I worked through my feelings about the waverin quality of my behavior. Guilt, confusion, anger, love and nostalgia echo inside the hills, skies, and valleys of the environments.

The symbol of the rabbit as self-referencing truly evolved in these works. For me the rabbit has always been a significant creature – it is at the heart of the stories that kept me awake at night, from the Velveteen Rabbit to Watership Down. My mother started a collection of porcelain rabbits for me as a child, and the eyes of the rabbits were
constantly peering down on me from their shelf throughout my childhood. Rabbits can take on so many qualities: lovable, scary, violent, aloof, pitiful, gross, beautiful, or cute. The idea of a rabbit has always been in my subconscious, and in these paintings evolved from a self-portrait into stand-in for all of my family members. Like the people in my life, the rabbit is always taking on new roles, personalities and auras. In *Voyage Number Two* (image 21) the rabbit is purely a self-portrait, but by the time I finished *Lynn and Little Ones, Family*, and *Twilight*, the rabbit had multiplied and morphed into my parents, siblings, and grandparents. (Images 22, 23, 24)

While working through specific experiences, more symbols began to repeat and become part of the language of the work. The most prominent symbols are the sea urchins and the rabbits. The sea urchins reemerge to alert of danger, fear, and sadness. In *Lynn and Little Ones*, the large faceless rabbit in the foreground keeps the urchins at bay, leaving them to bounce around in an empty yellow void of nothingness. A turn crank machine, borrowed from Klee’s *Twittering Machine* (image 26), keeps the world in motion for the three little rabbits on the hill. The large rabbit is protecting the little rabbits, but they, also faceless and powerless, are trapped – simply part of the cranking machine. The machine is a metaphor for the idea of being confined, with a false sense of control over our fates. This mechanical metaphor shows up again in *Twittering* (image 25). In *Family* there is a feeling of nostalgia and love, but the menacing urchins are not contained. The ears of a large paternal rabbit peek up from the bottom of the canvas. The urchins slowly float across the hills as if they were still underwater, both towards and away from the three little rabbits. *Twilight* is the most nostalgic of the series, inviting the viewer into a scene at dusk, where the three rabbits ruminate over their shared fate.
My sincere affection for process and working with materials is evident in these thesis paintings. They are chunky, sparkly, bumpy, gritty, and drip with the motion of my hands. The physical act of making these paintings led me into my own subconscious world where I could confront how my family has changed me. I became obsessed with incorporating meaningful fabrics into the work. Pajamas, shirts, tablecloths, drapes, and even bath sponges from people in my life are buried under paint or stuck onto the surface. For me these fabrics allow for a transfer of energy from their previous owner into my work. They behave as memory anchors for an experience or place, and inspired motifs that allude to specific family members. Even when the collaged fabric became obscured, the energy still remained and affected my behavior as I approached the canvas.

My work has become autobiographical, but through this autobiography I hope to uncover something universal. These paintings retrace events and through them I relive experiences, all with the intent to understand why we are the way we are and what determines our inner-most self. Only through self-examination can we begin to truly understand human nature and to become better human beings. Painting provides an active mode of expression and investigation, and a reflective space to better understand my world.
Image 21: *Voyage Number Two*, 2013, acrylic, paper, ink, pastel, fabric on canvas, 30 x 32 inches
Image 22: *Lynn and Little Ones*, 2013, acrylic, fabric, plastic screen, spray paint, ink on canvas, 56 ½ x 60 inches
Image 23: *Family (Bob and Little Ones)*, 2013, acrylic, fabric, spray paint, ink on canvas, 56 x 42 inches
Image 24: Twilight, 2013, acrylic, fabric, plastic screen, spray paint, pastel, ink on canvas, 72 x 60 inches
Image 25: *Twittering*, 2013, acrylic, fabric, plastic screen, spray paint, ink on canvas, 36 x 60 inches

Image 26: Klee, *Twittering Machine*
Quotations Cited


