

# Confessions of an Abstract Painter

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My nephew Alex, a college junior majoring in zoology, is one of those nice kids who's tried his hand at drawing once or twice but doesn't know much about art. Harboring romantic notions about artists, he thinks they are special people, distinguished from the rest of humanity by having mysterious talents and vision. Recently, he asked me what I think about when I paint my abstract paintings. I was utterly nonplussed. I knew he was expecting me to talk about "creativity" and "feelings," two words I find particularly useless when discussing art. In Alex's mind, when I paint I probably look like Leonard Bernstein conducting Beethoven's Ninth, and feel like Mike Tyson in the middle of a heavyweight championship fight. Not knowing even how to begin to explain to him what it is I do, and worse, to letting him in on how peripheral to mainstream contemporary art my work actually is, I ended up telling him that the way I make my paintings wasn't at all like he probably imagined.

As I write this, the 2002 Whitney Biennial is still up. This exhibition, mounted by the Whitney Museum of American Art every two years to record the pulse of American art, is internationally renowned. This particular Biennial, curated by the Whitney's own chief

curator of contemporary art, Larry Rinder, isn't shocking, or overtly political, or even particularly off-putting, as many recent Biennials have been. The artists come from all over the United States. Each floor has a particular theme—"Beings," "Tribes," and "Spaces"—and the dominant media are computer, video and installation art. There are about ten painters, but they are meager in comparison to everything else (the total number of artists is 116). At this Biennial, there is the chance to "interact" with the effects on a computer screen. And there are lots of darkened rooms in which you can watch large-screen television projections of short, plotless videos.

That artists now often make whole environments known as installations, or use computers, or video monitors and projections, wall texts, reading rooms, and industrial detritus among other various things, is not news. Nor is it news that some art hawks social and political—rather than aesthetic—wares. But the news brought home by this Biennial, as Roberta Smith noted in her review in *The New York Times*, is that contemporary-art museums—those holy grails to artists seeking fame—no longer make sense as the site for contemporary art. Why should someone schlep

to a museum to find computer and video art and a lot of installation art that doesn't require any particular kind of lighting or space? Without non-reproducible, one-of-a-kind art objects needing their own special space and light, there's no reason to have to go to a special building. It's just a matter of time before the Biennial can be watched comfortably from living room couches.

Meanwhile, people like my nephew Alex don't understand any of this. In fact, if he were to read an article about the Whitney Biennial, he wouldn't even comprehend it. Like a lot of people, he hasn't a clue about what's gone on in art over the last several years. I don't know how to break it to him that I'm actually considered a bit conservative within the art world. I'd have to explain the kinds of extremely conceptual and highly technologically-assisted art that's at the Biennial. And I'd have to bring up to him the generally anti-beauty, postmodern stance that grips most young artists. I'd have to let him know that many contemporary artists consider art-as-a-beautiful-object (which is what I try to make my paintings) to be primarily the regrettably oppressive—now moribund—legacy of dead white, European males. This information would probably turn me, in Alex's mind, into a somewhat pitiable artist. Instead of seeing me as his hip aunt, the painter, he'd see me as a modern-day version of a fretting, reclusive 9<sup>th</sup>-century Irish monk.

Since I'm not in the Biennial-potentials' loop anyway, it shouldn't matter to me if Alex thinks I'm cool or uncool. But I have an urge to explain to him, and to people like him, that irrel-

evant and uncool as I am, what I'm doing matters. That some of us artists are still painters has meaning, for me and for the culture as a whole, even if only a small group of people knows about it. The only way I can think to do this constructively, so that I don't drift into making one of those embarrassingly overreaching artist's utterances about abstract painting, is to tell my own story—of how I came to paint abstract paintings in the first place. (I use the word "story" the way E.H. Gombrich uses it in his book, *The Story of Art*, when he said that his book was written "for all who feel in need of some first orientation in a strange and fascinating field.") By doing this, perhaps I can tell Alex and anyone else who wants to listen what goes through my head when I paint.

In the novel *Ravelstein*, Saul Bellow quotes his eponymous character—who is a fictional stand-in for the late political philosopher Allan Bloom—to the effect that it is crucial for a human being to separate himself from his own era without being entirely alienated from it: "You must not be swallowed up in the history of your own time," Ravelstein would say. Bellow notes that Ravelstein was paraphrasing the German Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schiller: "Live with your century, but do not be its creature."

Wise words these may be, but they're not for artists. The history of art is all about great artists who were all but swallowed up by their own times. The clean, perfect fit of great artists to their historical eras goes a long way toward explaining how they became famous in the first instance. They were born in a particular histor-

ical era, and they made and thought about art according to the given aesthetic dictates of that era. In effect, they made art according to how it was being made around them. Brilliant artists didn't sit around philosophizing. Too much philosophical scrutiny of their own times would have been a bad thing for most of them.

At the beginning of modernism, however (in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century), a more pronounced self-consciousness about art appeared. Many artists achieved fame precisely by setting themselves against their historical era. Modern artists made art that deliberately rebelled against accepted taste. Such avant-garde artists as Manet, Monet, Van Gogh and Cézanne, made art that was shockingly different from art that appealed to the prevailing 19<sup>th</sup>-century taste (including the art of the pre-modern greats of the earlier 19th century). In fact, it took the taste of the public several decades to catch up with the artistic ideas of the early modernists. Some artists ended up suffering disillusionment and failure because of this, and fame, if it came at all, often came only after death. (These phenomena led to Clement Greenberg's pronouncement that all great art at first appears to be ugly and, eventually, to today's widely accepted idea that good taste has little if anything to do with serious art.)

I grew up liking to draw and being good at it, but I didn't paint my first painting until the late 1960s—more than 100 years after the beginning of modern art—when I was in college. It was a picture of a big ceramic pot sitting on a wooden table. The pot in my painting resembled a real pot (it even had the proportions of

the particular pot I was using as a model), and, because I was good at linear perspective, it looked as if it actually sat solidly on the table-top.

In retrospect, I see that I was already veering unconsciously toward abstraction. Subconsciously, at least, I wanted my painting to stand out from the crowd of classroom chaff, so I painted mine with some modernist distortion and invention. I painted with thick globs of paint, because I had both a somewhat clumsy touch, and the plebeian conviction that using prominent brush marks and palette-knife smears automatically made a painting "expressive." And, I concocted both the colors and background from my imagination.

Now, these mannerisms didn't in themselves make me a modern artist. A couple dozen centuries ago, the Greeks recognized that what all artists have in common is, as Aristophanes put it in his play, *Clouds*, "the longing for applause." Today, save for the supremely postmodern entrepreneurial painter Mark Kostabi (who buys ideas from struggling young artists, pays other struggling young artists to turn them into paintings, and writes an online advice column in which he happily brags about his residences in Rome and New York paid for by sales of these pictures), there's little open discussion of painters playing to an audience.

I, for one, was quite vain about my first painting. I wanted "fame" (i.e., attention from my college art department) for having painted it. That's why I deliberately left it sitting on the easel in the painting studio for everyone to see.

A few days later, as I was walking through a campus plaza where faculty and students hung out drinking coffee, one of my painting professors casually called out to me, "Hey, nice pot!"

My college art teachers, all of whom were abstract artists, encouraged me to paint abstractly. They taught me how to look at and think about abstract painting, and even to see it as a reasonable occupation. I moved quickly from my semi-abstracted pot to completely abstract paintings and, at the advent of the 1970s, emerged from college a full-blown, abstract painter. This didn't make me a pariah, however, to my suburban and culturally conservative parents. They actually saw my abstract painting as quite respectable, which was a sign of how far abstract painting had come from its salad days on Tenth Street 20 years previous. They cheerfully stored my paintings in their basement, and framed one to hang over the fireplace.

Unfortunately, my career timing was terrible. Just as I joined the ranks of postgraduate abstract painters, the mudslide of Warholian irony reached rooftop level in the art world. Straightforwardly "sincere" (but not necessarily expressionist) abstraction was finally overwhelmed by samplings from comics, advertising, television and movies. Non-painting art forms, like photography, performance, installation and video art, took over the galleries and modern museums. Nevertheless, I stuck with abstract painting, although, I freely admit, probably more out of stubbornness and habit than philosophy or nobility.

By nature, I am one of Schiller's sentimen-

tal artists, rather than one of his naïve geniuses. By his account, the naïve artist creates in a spontaneous fit of inspiration. He makes art without self-consciousness; reason and analysis have no bearing on his actions. The sentimental artist, on the other hand, is always self-consciously struggling to reconcile his longing for perfection with the imperfections of the real world. This struggle leads either to an unending search for the ideal, or to bitter irony.

I'm more or less an ideal-seeker. In the face of a disordered world, I paint to assert order. There is nothing romantic or flamboyant about either about my personality, or the way I paint my pictures. I paint in a way that's not all that different from the way I clean out and organize my closet. I have moments of inspiration or intuition, but I mostly plod along doing my job. Which is to say although my painting is non-rational (it's not testable for "truth value" or practicality), it isn't irrational, either. Painting has a meaning for me that cleaning my closet doesn't, but neither of them are rarefied activities. Whatever higher meaning there is in my paintings, even for me, shows up only after they are finished.

Typically, I begin a painting from a rough drawing, but once a painting gets going, I immediately begin to change everything in it. When I paint, I think mostly about color, proportion, shape and "touch." I slowly build up paint layers as I make shapes bigger or smaller, alter or clarify their contours, or glaze colors to make them deeper or slightly different. I worry about how things look—shapes that look too big or too small, colors that aren't quite right, or are

just plain wrong or ugly. I spend most of my painting time fixing my own mistakes. I often sit slumped down in my studio chair, staring fixedly at an unresolved painting. When I sit like this, I am usually imagining what the painting would look like if I should change a particular shape or color. I become a bit like a chess player—if I do this move, such-and-such will happen, whereas if I do this alternative move, something else will happen. For me, painting consists of continuously changing my mind until I reach the point where if I change it one more time I'll have to repaint the whole painting. Some of my concerns are merely technical—waiting the right amount of time before applying another layer, mixing the right amount of additional oil into the varnish and turp to make a new layer of paint flexible enough so that the painting doesn't develop cracks later on. The matter-of-fact results of this approach constitute my "style."

But I think about other things, too, that have nothing to do with what I'm doing when I paint. Stray ideas about what's for dinner that night, or some noxious person in my life, drift across my mind. I also think about how I've inadvertently painted myself back to the 1930s. My paintings resemble those American abstract painters who adopted the flat, brightly colored, and fairly precise visual language of synthetic cubism. Artists such as Esphyr Slobodkina, Charles Shaw, John Ferren, and George L.K. Morris were considered avant-garde painters back in the 1920's and 30's, but a decade later bigger, flashier, more romantic Abstract Expressionist paintings began to make their art look timidly conservative.

Now, if I were to make ironic references to this American art of the 1930's in my painting, or offer up a densely stated theory about such referencing, I might have a shot at being the cool artist Alex thinks I am. But neither my temperament nor my art is ironic, and I don't believe in theories. (That is, I believe the facts of my painting should dictate any theory about them, rather than the reverse.) I simply have a penchant for making clear, bright shapes similar to the ones those artists made. Despite my idealism, however, I cannot be as pure in my art as they were. I like the sexiness and happy superficiality of popular culture too much to leave it out of my art altogether. So I find myself skewing my paintings slightly toward the graphic goofiness and oddball, artificial colors that I see simply by, say, watching TV and living in New York. By lifting those goofy graphics and oddball colors out of their everyday commercial existences, and bringing them to the more nuanced world of oil paint, I try both to jazz up my paintings and to transform the pop shapes and colors into something truly beautiful.

The point of a painting is, after all, for it to hang there, to be more noticeable than the wall, and more resonant with human presence than a poster or a reproduction of a painting, but less important than the lives of those looking at it. I think it's enough for a painting to arrest a sensitive viewer with its motionless grace, even if the pleasure that affords is rather modest.

Few of my fellow artists agree with that point of view. The dedicated postmodernist painters—such as the young British artist Fiona

Rae, whose fey pictures ironically poke fun at my kind of modernism—think my kind of painting was exhausted a half-century ago. The hidebound academic artists, always among us, have always loathed modernism and its obliteration of representational "standards." The dedicated, old-guard abstract painters, although we have a lot in common on the surface of the canvas, prefer to see the abstract painter's mission as something preposterously grand and universal, and won't consider for a second that abstract painting isn't the guiding light of art that it used to be.

I used to think that abstract painting, which rapidly lost momentum as modernism's ideals were defeated by irony and glitz, would mount an enormous comeback. If the trendoids and the theorists in the art world wouldn't pay much attention to it anymore, perhaps great numbers of people in an enlightened public would. (My parents would tell their friends, and their friends would tell their friends, and...) Now I realize that, all along, only a relative handful of people ever took it seriously.

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