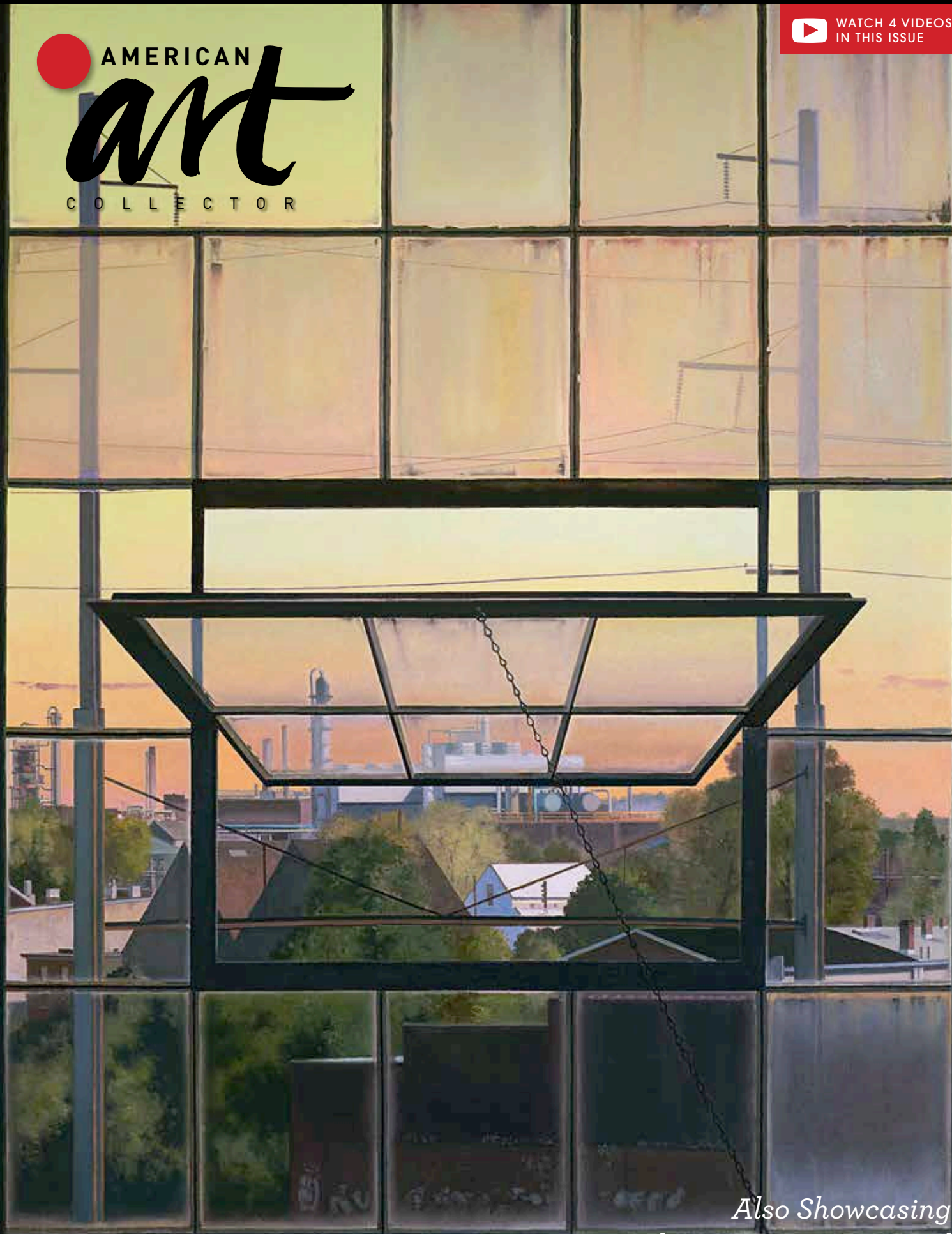


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1  
Elise Ansel in her studio.  
Photo by Winky Lewis.





# Distant MIRRORS

Elise Ansel's latest body of work references historical paintings from her own cultural perspective.

BY JOHN O'HERN



Some of the most sublime music in the Christian liturgy has been composed as the setting for the *Magnificat*, the Virgin Mary's hymn of praise. The ancient text begins, "My soul doth magnify the Lord : and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded : the lowliness of his handmaiden." Since the sixth century artists have depicted the story of the Annunciation when the angel Gabriel enters Mary's room and tells the chaste and demure young woman that she has been chosen by God to bear his son.

Denys Calvaert (ca. 1540–1619) painted and drew several versions of the Annunciation, one of which is now in the collection of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art in Brunswick, Maine. It is at the core of an exhibition *Elise Ansel: Distant Mirrors* continuing through April 17 at the museum.

Joachim Homann, the museum's curator, comments, "Conduct manuals of the early modern period encouraged unmarried women to model themselves after the chaste and pious Virgin Mary. Paintings such as Calvaert's might remind viewers of these desirable female virtues."

"Attracted by the painting's brilliant coloration and dynamic composition, but wary of its underlying assumptions about gender roles," he continues, "Elise Ansel set out to respond creatively to it."

Ansel collaborated with Hanétha Vété-Congolo, associate professor of Romance Languages and Literatures at Bowdoin, who writes about alterity, or otherness, as well as cross-cultural feminist theory. "Ansel's creation perspective is an ideation that is as generative as it is regenerative. Ansel means to draw attention to aspects of human life that are not conventionally acknowledged or that are generally decrypted, or understood, through an



2



3



4

**2**  
Denys Calvaert (ca. 1540–1619), *Annunciation*, ca. 1595, oil on copper, 20<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 15<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub>". Museum purchase, Laura T. and John H. Halford, Jr. Art Acquisition Fund, Lloyd O. and Marjorie Strong Coulter Fund, and Jane H. and Charles E. Parker, Jr. Art Acquisition Fund. Bowdoin College Museum of Art.

**3**  
Elise Ansel, *Study VI for Revelations*, graphite and felt-tip pen on paper, 11 x 8½". Photo by Luc Demers.

**4**  
Elise Ansel, *Revelations X*, oil on canvas, 12 x 9". Photo by Luc Demers.

**5**  
Elise Ansel, *Revelations V*, oil on canvas, 48 x 36". Photo by Luc Demers.







established, domineering, and exclusive lens presenting itself as uniquely objective. Elise Ansel's approach [is to draw] from the preexistent to allow for the legitimate expression of more existences, to widen the scope and meaning of alterity, to include the unheard and the unseen."

"I worked for years as an abstract painter in an evocative and minimalist sense. That work never got any traction." Ansel explains. "People enjoy being able to see a reference. The artists I work after are guides at an emotional, creative, ethical and spiritual level as I strive to make paintings that are true to my own vision of reality and relevant to our time. There is a depth and a resonance to the 'Old Master' paintings I work from that appeals to me. Historical paintings can enrich our lives even if their perspectives are different than ours."

At the time of the Old Masters there was a different perspective on the place of women and of female eroticism. "My thinking," Ansel explains, "is that eroticism is a force of energy for all beings. There is a problem when women are stripped of their erotic energy. The virtuous woman in art is not portrayed as erotic and the erotic experience is often pictured as rape."

"I came to Calvaert's *Annunciation* as a contemporary woman with Jewish and Danish ancestry. I felt very much on the outside of the Christian iconography although I could still find the beauty and spiritual energy there," she continues. "Hanétha's thoughts on alterity and inclusiveness are aligned with the way I use material from a different culture without losing my own cultural identity. On a larger scale, the world is richer if we allow people their cultural background. The idea of celebrating one's own cultural identity while at the same time finding constructive and creative ways to interact with the host culture turns out to be very timely."

*Revelations*, the title for her paintings after the Calvaert refers to Alvin Ailey's signature choreographic work. Ailey's *Revelations* references African-American spirituals. "It's an earthy, energetic evocation of spiritual energy," she says. "I was interested in creating a similarly energetic celebration in paint, using gesture, movement and swirls of luscious intense color. I get information from the paintings I work after; at first, I focus on the color, the composition and the materiality of the paint. As I continue to work, aspects that are less obvious and more subtle enter into my pictures. Sometimes I remove all narrative associations in my responses by turning the painting upside down."



6

Seeing the catalog for an exhibition Frank Auerbach had at the National Gallery in London in 1995, titled *Working After the Masters*, in conjunction with seeing Gerhard Richter's series of paintings based on Titian's *Annunciation in the Church of San Salvador* in Venice helped convince her that translations of Old Master paintings could be the subject of serious contemporary painting.

An artist sent her a post card of Vermeer's *A Young Woman Standing at a Virginal*. Initially, she thought, "He understands that I am looking at depictions of women in historical art and it's so kind that he's found and sent me one of the few images of a young woman who's got her clothes on and is engaged in

constructive, creative, intellectual activity. Then I realized that this painting held the key to my work and the key is the geometry. The geometry becomes the architecture on which to hang all of the wet, luscious, luminous paint that I like to use in a very gestural, visceral, improvisational way. She did a careful geometrical analysis of the painting and, only then, having analyzed and deconstructed the painting, could she begin her own abstract response. *In Pursuit of a Geometry of an Exact Expression V* is part of her response. "There is never a final piece," she explains.

Ansel's days begin with gesture drawing; the drawings are her "first entrance" into a painting. In London last year for the Royal Academy *Summer Exhibition* and her sold-

6  
**Johannes Vermeer**  
(1632-1675), *A  
Young Woman  
Standing at a Virginal*,  
ca. 1670-72, oil on  
canvas, 20.35 x 17.79".  
The National Gallery,  
London, England.

7  
**Elise Ansel**, *In Pursuit  
of a Geometry of an  
Exact Expression V*, oil  
on canvas, 31 x 27½".  
Private collection,  
courtesy Cadogan  
Contemporary, London,  
England. Photo by Luc  
Demers.



7

out exhibition at Cadogan Contemporary, she drew at the National Gallery. When she cannot visit museums, she draws from reproductions. “I look at the painting in terms of shape and color,” she says. “After drawing, I start painting. The more I look at the source, the more I see, and the more confident I become in terms of abstracting and improvising. I often create multiple responses to a single Old Master painting. I consider each response to be a valid painting in its own right. The series doesn’t represent a straightforward trajectory toward abstraction, but rather a crossing back and forth over the border between abstraction and figuration in the search for something fresh, innovative and inspiring.”

Her academic training is in comparative

literature. She recalls James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which parallels Homer’s *Odyssey*. In the final chapter, Joyce writes in a female voice as Molly Bloom, a voice different from his own. “He is acknowledging there is a female voice, a female way to write,” she observes. “When I made the decision to use painting as my first order medium, I became interested in examining how this idea could be applied to the visual arts. I engaged in the process of forging a visual language in a medium that has, for centuries, been involved in the objectification of women. My approach is to translate iconic images from the Western canon into a contemporary pictorial language.”

However, she continues, her work “really is about paint and painting. It’s a

celebration of what paint can do. Paint can celebrate life. My paintings are a dialogue with the Old Masters with whom I share a love of paint. The abstract forms and colors in my paintings carry the life-affirming energy that used to be communicated with illustrative pictures.” ●

## ELISE ANSEL: DISTANT MIRRORS

**When:** Through April 17, 2016

**Where:** Bowdoin College Museum of Art,  
9400 College Station, Brunswick, ME 04011

**Information:** (207) 725-3275,  
[www.bowdoin.edu/art-museum](http://www.bowdoin.edu/art-museum)