



Elise Ansel's paintings are based on historicity and the experience of real paintings rather than that of the real world. This is part of her subject matter, as she believes the images we ingest determine our experience of the world around us. She

also works with digital print, which fuses painting and technology, while expanding and redefining the boundaries of photography. That is the most successful concretion of her ideas, as they are continuously evolving.

You have a wide and varied background. Did you try different disciplines in order to find yours?

Things that seem like mistakes can actually become assets and sources of knowledge and inspiration. In my case, they have provided a methodological approach. The first visual medium I worked in was photography, which I studied growing up in NYC and then again at RISD when I was a student at Brown. My work now involves creating large-scale abstract oil paintings and digital prints by translating Old Master paintings into a contemporary pictorial language. The idea of translation and transcription is influenced by my background in Comparative Literature, which was my undergraduate degree from Brown. I also use the tools of photography so that circles back to my history with that medium.

Did you like University back then?

I liked University very much. I was happy to have the opportunity to explore various disciplines and ideas. Also, I met a lot of terrific people, some of whom I am still close to. When I went to University, there was an emphasis on interdisciplinary dialog or interdisciplinarity, which continues to inform my work.

How is the experience the other way round, you teaching?

When I teach, I encourage students to make work that comes from their experience, their other avenues of study, and things they are genuinely interested in.



Your “greatest achievement as an artist to date is survival.” Does this mean it has been a difficult path for you? Do you think it still is, in general?

An older artist said this to me about himself when I was starting out and it has always stayed with me. He was actually a very successful and accomplished painter, so the fact that he put the emphasis on survival struck me as important. It takes the power away from other people and the vicissitudes of the market, taste, and style, and puts it back into the hands of the artist, who can then focus on developing and remaining true to her/his vision as it evolves, and finding a material way to express that vision.

“My paintings are actually more indebted to artists working in Europe today.” Where do you feel your work is best regarded and appreciated?

I find the strong tradition of and commitment to painting in Europe energizing and inspiring. My mother is Danish and my father’s parents are Jewish refugees from Germany and Austria-Hungary so it is possible that I absorbed some sort of European sensibility from them.

My paintings have been well received in London. I am grateful to Christopher Burness at Cadogan Contemporary for taking a chance on my work and giving me the opportunity to exhibit there. I am scheduled to have a show with Danese/Corey in Chelsea in New York City in February 2017, so I am hopeful that my work will find a receptive audience there as well.

You mention improvisation quite a lot. Is it harder for you when you leave the artwork for a longer time or think too much about it?

My paintings are most successful when the entire surface is worked wet into wet in one long session. I create large-scale paintings by making small abstract oil studies of Old Master paintings and then enlarging them. I use Renaissance methods and a grid to scale up the small paintings. Spontaneity, improvisation, instinct and intuition eclipse rational, linear thinking during the process of making the small paintings. The large paintings, however, follow the choreography of the small paintings quite specifically so though they look spontaneous, they are actually the product of forethought and planning. In a sense, my work is about exploring the balance between spontaneity and control, or intuition and intellect. Intuition is always the guiding principle, and if I feel a painting needs it, I am willing to make an improvisational move or large gestural mark at the last minute. This type of additive erasure can initially seem very destructive but it is sometimes what it takes to shake some life into a painting that is not working and turn a failure into a success.



“Gesture and movement are my point of access into improvisation.” Has cinema had something to do with this in terms of influence?

This is a very interesting question. I have always thought of gesture and movement as being related to dance and music, but now that you mention it, they are related to cinema or moving pictures as well. Gesture and movement are a way of letting go of conscious control and allowing the subconscious to take the reins. I think this phenomenon of getting out of my own way and allowing something deeper to take over is the source of my best work.

Tell us about your start in the film industry. Was it there where you learnt the most about cameras? How come you ended up assisting in a studio?

My father worked as a cameraman and I knew a lot of people in the film industry, so when I got out of University and needed to find a way to support myself as painter, I was able to get jobs working on commercials and films, first as a production assistant and later as an assistant in the art department, assisting the set decorator and the production designer. I had studied photography and was interested in camera work so at one point I got a job assisting on the B Camera.

On film crews, there was an easy flow between advertising, television and cinema. I met some very talented cinematographers who were working on television commercials in between films such as Gordon Willis, who had been the Director of Photography on Francis Ford Coppola's Godfather films. He was interested in Baroque painting and tried to emulate the palette and the feel of Rembrandt and Caravaggio. It was very challenging for the art department because everything on the set had to be muted, brown or beige, and then he would put a little spot of red in and it would pop. His use of Old Master paintings to fulfill a contemporary vision continues to have an impact upon me to this day. I also worked with Andrzej Bartkowiak, a talented cinematographer who understood and was interested in using chiaroscuro.

Your work has always involved the use of photographic and digital tools. Up to what point do you enjoy this subject?

I am interested in exploring the fusion of painting and technology, and also in examining the implications of this fusion. One film that actually changed the way I think is Wim Wenders' Wings of Desire. At one point in the film, Peter Falk, who plays an angel, expresses the desire to be alive again so that he can smell a cup of coffee. I think that the desire (and ability) to experience reality through the five senses, unmediated by digital or photographic tools, is extremely important. Recently, I have started to enlarge my small paintings by using a flatbed scanner and a digital printer. Here, while the

concept of scaling up continues to be linked to the Old Masters, the traditional technique of using a grid to enlarge a drawing has been replaced by a mechanical, photographic process. I consider the digital prints to be a further step in my project of translating historical paintings into a contemporary pictorial language.

My work involves using various photographic tools in the service of ever-greater degrees of abstraction. The dialogue between painting and photography has often centered on painters' use of the tools of photography in the service of ever-greater degrees of realism. This is evident in the work of photorealist painters and also in the paintings of artists such as Vermeer and Caravaggio who used lenses to help them make their extraordinarily lucid and presciently cinematic paintings of moments frozen in time. Whereas historical painters used lens-based technologies in the service of a deeply human depiction of beauty and realism, lens-based technologies in our time, certainly as they are used in advertising, fashion and print media, have often been used to damaging effect by presenting a distorted and photoshopped image as uniquely objective and real. By holding up an idealized standard of beauty that is impossible to meet, this type of photography has been used in a destructive way. The digital prints represent the search for a constructive way to reclaim the tools of photography by using them in the opposite direction and in the service of emotional authenticity, and another conceptualization of beauty or quality. My work has always involved the use of photographic and digital reproductions, but this series now more explicitly acknowledges the extent to which the photographic apparatus mediates the way I see, think, and make my work.



You transmit feelings and emotional content of the original paintings but without detailed renderings of figures.

Are you an emotional person?

Yes.

There is a feminist reinterpretation of the historical pieces that inspire you. How do you want to contribute or manifest within this feminist position

I didn't set out to become a feminist artist. I set out to become an artist. I ran into some roadblocks. I realized that these obstructions were related to the way women were being depicted in many of the films I was watching and in many of the canonical pieces of artwork I was looking at. A fundamental issue for me was that everything seemed to be presented from a male point of view, and that this point of view was encoded in both verbal and visual language. A by-product of this issue was that artists whose talent I respected were representing women in either a sexually objectified kind of way, or in an idealized way. I didn't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak. I wanted to hold on to and interact with aspects of the paintings that I enjoyed while discarding aspects I found less appealing. My method involves re-working and re-presenting canonical images from my own point of view, through the lens of abstraction. Abstraction allows me to interrupt a linear narrative that is disturbing and replace it with a sensually capacious, more present-centered point of view that embraces multiple perspectives.

What's your favorite piece done by yourself being currently exhibited in the galleries?

My favorite piece is the Revelations series that was shown in the Distant Mirrors exhibition at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art (BCMA). The series, which is an abstract and feminist interpretation of Denys Calvaert's Annunciation, is an implicit examination of the impact authorial agency on the depiction ecstatic experience. BCMA bought Revelations IV for their permanent collection. Revelations VII, which was the centerpiece of the show, is now at Danese/Corey in New York City. Revelations V, IX, and X are at Cadogan Contemporary in London. In June, I went to London and made a large scale pigment print from Revelations X.



Distant mirrors has been your last, most recent solo showcase. How different has it been from the first one?

I exhibited a sequence of paintings and drawings, all based on a single work from the museum's permanent collection. The original masterpiece was included in the body of the exhibition and that didn't happen in my first exhibition. Another difference is that, because BCMA is a teaching museum, we decided to include all of the preparatory sketches and paintings leading up to the final culminating most abstract paintings in the exhibition. In another circumstance, I would not show preliminary work, but rather would exhibit only those paintings that fully succeeded in stepping away from their historical and figurative origins into a modernist or post-modern present.

The BCMA exhibition gave the viewer a real window into my working process. Also, it very explicitly acknowledged the idea of multiplicity of response as a valid approach.

Matisse, Picasso, and de Kooning, you mentioned, are the main influencers of the 20th century. What about the 21st?

Gerhard Richter.

You embrace and critique the past at the same level. What about the present?

Presently, women are not only making outstanding work in painting, sculpture, performance, digital media, literature—in all of the creative arts, in fact—, but also exhibiting that work and receiving critical acclaim for it. In addition, women are doing exceptional work in Photography, Film and Television, both behind and in front of the camera, and in some cases, both at the same time. The truth is, there have always been talented and intelligent women working, some of whom, miraculously and against all kinds of odds and obstacles, have managed to get their work out to the public. At present, we have more women working and succeeding in creative fields than ever before. This is real cause for celebration.

There is still some room for improvement and expanded opportunity, so that is where critique comes into play. As a society, we continue to have rape, domestic violence, inequality of various sorts, so there is still work to be done. My paintings and prints are not so much about critiquing the past as they are about using the past to shine a light on issues that continue to be a problem today. My particular artistic territory is the ambiguous, complicated, unclear areas where there is cause for both celebration and critique. I think that this interlacing of dark and light, of positive and negative, is what much of life is about and is also a precise reflection of how the eye sees, and how both the medium of drawing and the fiction of black and white photography work.











Words

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