

Exploring Color, Light the Power of Abstraction

Elise Ansel discusses her transformative approach to painting, blending Old Master influences with abstraction, exploring themes of gender, inclusivity transformation reflecting on her evolving artistic journey and inspirations.

ELISE ANSEL

Reimagines Old Masters and Explores Transformation Through Abstract Painting

As told to Noah Davis

Elise Ansel is a visionary artist whose work bridges the gap between the historical and the contemporary, the representational and the abstract. Born and raised in New York City, Ansel's artistic journey has been shaped by her deep academic foundation in Comparative Literature from Brown University and her studies in art at both Brown and the Rhode Island School of Design. Her career has taken her from the film industry to the world of painting, where she has established herself as a transformative force. With her works held in prestigious collections such as the Museum of Contemporary Art in Krakow and the Bowdoin College Museum of Art represented by renowned galleries like Miles McEnery in New York and Cadogan Gallery in London and Milan, Ansel's influence extends across the globe.

Ansel's paintings are a masterful interplay of tradition and innovation. Drawing inspiration from the Old Masters, she reimagines their works through the lens of abstraction, creating pieces that are as intellectually profound as they are visually arresting. Her ability to deconstruct historical narratives and imbue them with contemporary relevance is nothing short of extraordinary. Whether exploring themes of transformation, gender, or the interplay of opposites, Ansel's art invites viewers into a dialogue that transcends time and place. Her recent series, including the luminous works featured in *Sea Change* and *Luminous Flux*, exemplify her unique ability to weave together the past and present, offering a fresh perspective on the enduring power of art.

In this exclusive interview for *WOWwArt Magazine*, Elise Ansel shares insights into her creative process, her evolving relationship with abstraction the profound themes that shape her work. From her exploration of color and light to her reflections on gender and inclusivity, Ansel's words offer a glimpse into the mind of an artist who is redefining the boundaries of contemporary painting.



PHOTO BY PAMELA HANSON

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Your work is deeply influenced by Old Masters, but you transform these inspirations into something distinctly your own. How do you navigate the balance between honoring traditional influences and asserting your own artistic identity?

I use historical art as a point of departure for work that is intentionally improvisational, non-pictorial and abstract. Focusing on the non-pictorial aspects of the Old Master paintings helps me navigate this balance, as does my celebration of the chance accidents that occur during the painting process. I have as deep a respect for modern and contemporary art as I do for Old Master painting. The specific way I hybridize contemporary, modernist and historical approaches to making is part of how I forge work that is distinctly my own but perhaps what's more important is my desire to "unpack" the narratives embedded in historical art and explore their relevance to the contemporary moment.

I use abstraction to interrupt representational content in order to excavate and transform meanings and messages embedded in the works from which my paintings spring. I

Elise Ansel's art masterfully transforms historical narratives into contemporary abstractions, creating visually stunning works that inspire dialogue and inclusivity."

overturn narratives of violence and voyeurism and celebrate images of spiritual substance in a visual language that is not tied to any one narrative tradition but rather is as universally accessible as light, not doctrinaire, open to all.

In your recent show, "Sea Change," you seem to move away from direct references to earlier works and towards a more independent, abstract expression. Can you discuss how your approach to abstraction has evolved over time?

When I first began painting, I abstracted from nature. For the last decade plus, I have focused on interpreting Old Master painting through the lens of gestural abstraction. Recently, I expanded this approach to include and engage a type of seriality often associated with Minimalism. Working with

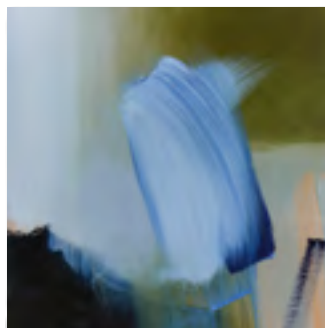
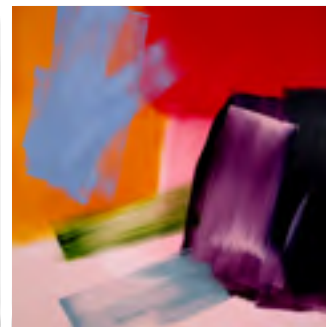
a limited palette and a consistent compositional structure, I explore the multiplicity of plastic permutations possible within a constrained set of variables. (Donald Judd's 100 untitled works in mill aluminum which is on permanent exhibition at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas is a referent.) I pay close attention to the slight variations and shifts that occur during the process of painting. Meaning is found in the incidental accidents, which provide cracks of light, source material for fresh works in the series. John Cage's idea of aleatoric or chance-controlled music informs the process. Moments of luminosity occur when colors close in value but opposite in hue or temperature are juxtaposed. These moments reference Josef Albers's seminal *Interaction of Color*, 1963. Hard edges and right angles appear in my work for the first time. These reference both Albers and his *Homage to the Square*; and the materials and means of Minimalism. The series braid together historical and modernist sources to produce a hybrid of expressionist gesture and minimalist distillation. Qualities specific to the medium of oil paint, constituent elements of the craft—transparency and opacity, darkness and light, flatness and depth, hard and soft edges, addition and subtraction—are interlaced. The synergistic energy created by circumjacent polarities is resonates with the conceptual underpinning of the project: the idea that the interaction and cooperation of opposites—whether they be organizations, substances, genders, points of view, or other agents—produces a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate effects.

Having recently completed two series, which are currently on view in *Luminous Flux* at Cadogan Gallery in Milan, I am now interested in returning to nature as a source of inspiration.

The color blue plays a prominent role in your paintings. What is the significance of this color in your work how does it shape the viewer's experience of your pieces?

Blue is the color of heaven and ocean, of blue velvet, music, clear skies, sultry moods. It is one of the colors in the spectrum, all of which are important to me and all of which carry a multiplicity of meanings

"Midsummer's Night" is a striking piece, both in scale and concept. How did the title and the idea of the solstice inspire the painting what does it represent in terms of your



Elise Ansel's recent series, *Sea Change*, blends gestural abstraction with minimalist influences, offering a fresh perspective on the interplay of opposites.

artistic journey?

My mother, who was Danish, passed away in July 2023, while I was painting this work. The title is an homage to her, to the midnight sun of Scandinavia to the Blue Hour, the remarkable quality of light of which was beautifully rendered by Danish painters Peder Severin Krøyer and Michael Ancher, in the late 1880's while working in Skagen, a village at the northernmost tip of Denmark.

Your paintings often have a sense of transformation or metamorphosis, like the references to Shakespeare's "The Tempest" in "Sea Change." Can you talk about the theme of transformation in your work and how it manifests visually?

Historical work provides a structure on which to hang paint, a structure to improvise off of. On a visual level, I transform "the look" of the Old Master paintings I work with. On a narrative and political level, I transform their meaning, to include genders and voices previously excluded from the canon. On the deepest level, the act of painting and seeing can create a positive internal transformation for both the painter and the viewer.

As a female artist in a tradition historically dominated by men, how do you see your work challenging

or contributing to that legacy what role do you think gender plays in the way your art is perceived?

I examine the impact of authorial agency and address the myriad subtle ways the gender, identity and belief systems of the artist are reflected in the art. If there is a female protagonist in the painting, I try to enter into the painting as I imagine an actress would enter into a script, in order to tell the story from her perspective/or to change the narrative. My work challenges monocular thinking. Old Master paintings were, for the most part, created by Western white men for Western white men. Abstraction allows me to interrupt this one-sided narrative and transform it into a sensually capacious non-narrative form of visual communication that embraces multiple points of view. The goal is inclusivity. We live in a highly divisive, polarized time. My paintings are an olive branch. I am trying to carve space for dialog, mutual respect, co-existence and co-operation. To be clear, my paintings are not critiques of the Old Masters but rather a use of their depth and resonance to shine light on and heal imbalances that have caused harm for centuries. In this, the Old Masters are my powerful allies.