

MARY McDONNELL: Back and Forth

Six years ago, Mary McDonnell worked herself out of her Brooklyn loft. Needing space and ready for country life, she searched up- and downstate New York until she found the right piece of land on which to build. McDonnell now lives and works far enough from New York City to provide the solitude she requires for painting, yet close enough to permit frequent visits for gallery-going and social life—the ideal of many New York painters of her generation.

McDonnell's home and studio—two-storey, freestanding clapboard buildings divided by a stone walkway of alley width—are in the woods. They are barely visible from the road but close enough so that she hears the occasional traffic, while behind her house a stream runs between mossy banks.

Her studio, which she helped design and build, has windows, high up and roughly four feet square, and skylights. When working, McDonnell likes to “eke out the last light,” by which hour she is splattered with paint and her studio painting floor is a mess. There's a room off the studio for storage, and up a circular staircase, there's a loft. McDonnell climbs up there to look down and get a bird's-eye view of paintings in progress. Finished paintings lean against her unmarked studio walls, and against these she leans paintings in progress, liking a crowd around her as she paints.

The wood panels she has gessoed “a billion times”—actually about seven coats—go on the studio floor. Her tools are various: a household broom, its straw thick with paint; bamboo brooms found in Chinatown favored for their stiffness; small brushes, their bristles lost under dried paint; and sticks picked up off the forest floor. She has joined four wide housepainter’s brushes to make a broad squeegee. There’s a photo of her pulling paint across a panel with what appears to be a strip of metal or a yardstick. McDonnell draws with paint, in broad strokes and thin lines, which means that she finds art supplies in hardware stores.

Her favorite tool is a brush held in place between a pair of paint stirrers by silicone-soaked burlap, a by-product of a mold-making job in a Brooklyn foundry. Mold-maker Sabrina Lessard and artist Nathaniel Lieb customized this and other tools for McDonnell. The brush is stiff with paint. She can hold it like a pen or brush and, depending on how much paint she loads on, her line can be heavy or light as a scratch.

For oil paint, McDonnell prefers Williamsburg Handmade Oil Colors, developed by the late painter Carl Plansky. Joan Mitchell used Plansky’s paint. McDonnell likes their real pigments, their Italian colors, and that, unlike other paints that have the consistency of toothpaste, some

Williamsburg colors are smooth and some gritty. And she uses lots of turps and rags, which give her a range of tones and textures.

So equipped, McDonnell will go at her panel from every possible angle. She likes the resistance her floor-bound panels give as she works, and she likes feeling free to “beat them up a little.” She works hunkered down and hunched over. She will straddle her larger paintings as she builds up her surface and takes it down with turpentine. “For me,” she says, “it’s not one point of entry, but lots of back and forth before I decide on a painting’s orientation.” If she’s begun a painting but hasn’t found her way, McDonnell says, “We’re not talking together yet.” She speaks of “stalking” her paintings.

McDonnell’s vocabulary of marks and forms derives from abstract painting, the work of her artistic grandparents, especially from the 1950s drawings of Philip Guston and—in her recent *Invitation* paintings and *Willard’s Red*—from the massed strokes of Joan Mitchell. Other masters like Franz Kline come to mind. So too, in her drawings, does Robert Ryman. This is to say that McDonnell’s art has roots in an American way of painting that she is inspired to reinvigorate.

Her *Untitled* diptych from 2009 and the smaller *Untitled* diptych from 2010 resemble the work of Bradley Walker Tomlin, of whose paintings

McDonnell had recently heard but had not yet seen. Guston wrote a note on his friend Tomlin's work, in which he pointed out that, "his spontaneity was earned." McDonnell's diptychs show a similar earned spontaneity. You feel that they have been discovered in the act of painting. *Acts of painting* is, perhaps, a better way to describe her process, because the diptychs reveal their histories. In the smaller diptych, ghosts of paint balance the fury of cold black, which has a lot of blue in it, and the veils and wide scribbles where the blue is more pronounced. In the larger white on near-black diptych, thin white horizontal strokes have soaked into the background over time or emerge from it. Guston wrote of Tomlin's "anguish of alternatives." In this large diptych (144 x 48 inches), white disappears into and strides forth from a ground of indanthrone blue, which didn't quite work so, as McDonnell remarks, "I obliterated the blue with turkey umber." At a glance the painting looks black. If you pause and look closer, umber comes across. The horizontal elements are poised in a structure that implies not either/or but both.

The large ink on paper *Untitled* (60 x 78 inches) also has its forms both ways. Rough, smudged vertical forms advance from the left and disappear into a thinness of black scratched on white like winter trees against snow. These scratches are obscured by black horizontal strokes, darker in color and more intensely painted. At their center squats a rough M, like two saplings snapped over. Since woods surround McDonnell's house, it's hard to avoid a landscape reference. This drawing suggests the invention necessary to find one's way and to mark one's passage. The novelist and poet Jim Harrison, one of McDonnell's favorite writers, begins a poem with the line, "Form is the woods." A bobcat stalks a pheasant through these woods, "and trees rich green, the

moving of boughs / and the separate leaf, yield / to conclusions they do not care about." McDonnell's drawing advances into similar terrain and records what can be found there.

McDonnell's six-foot-square oil on panel, also untitled and also from 2009, is a work of heightened intensity, showing the sort of fury abstraction can command. Again what came early can be glimpsed through the scrawl of brown, the color of dried blood, horizontal and vertical lines and thinned-down skids of paint. There are distances behind the surface frenzy. Some of these are veils that suggest there is light behind them. The heavier brown forms stand out, backlit. A line curves up, stopping at the painting's height. Another thicker stroke, dark at its crown, also stops at the painting's top edge. From it protrudes a V, like a figure four painted in four strokes. This *Untitled* entangles and then releases the eye in a surge of everywhichway kinetic energy.

The "conversations" McDonnell carries on in her studio are serial until one painting opens itself to her total attention. During the back and forth this requires, drawing constantly enters the mix. In 2009, McDonnell put together a set of ten small drawings. Here she added to her palette bright red, a buff yellow and the brown of cardboard. These are not explorations and, with one exception, are not directly related to her paintings. They are stand-alone works. Rounded forms suggestive of fruit or stones are played off against thick, black vertical and horizontal strokes. A few of these drawings meld forms into abstract images, packing them into the small rectangular space. In contrast to her paintings, there is no air in these drawings. McDonnell's images attain a sculptural presence, and their scale is larger than seems possible within the actual dimensions of the drawings.

These are works solidly in the abstract tradition, down to the cardboard salvaged from boxes—Franz Kline drew on telephone book pages. Some of the drawings are simple and refined. Where the cardboard is as much color as surface and the paint is thin, McDonnell seems to have had an “Aha!” moment—no hesitation. Other drawings are all muscle emphasizing substance and thrust. Under McDonnell’s quick and energetic hand these are familiar marks and they resonate. She wields a loaded brush giving fullness to forms, and her images seem less plotted than arrived at. This set of drawings has the matter-of-fact elegance and offhand charm that can occur when the mind and hand are one.

Bright color, absent from McDonnell’s paintings for some years, reappeared in 2010. Behind the stack of white horizontal and vertical swaths in *Invitation*, there are distant blues and grays. Perhaps a storm has passed, giving way to intense sunlight. In the diptych *one night or day*, the colors are yellow, oxblood (actually a blend of Spanish earth and alizarin crimson), battleship gray with bolts of cobalt blue. The action is left to right, horizontals into verticals, a McDonnell signature structure. The verticals fall like soldiers and then...darkness. The air is heavier and the strokes more forceful than in previous paintings. In *Invitation II* bright color arrives like a blast of morning light.

“Certain paintings,” McDonnell has said in describing *Invitation II*, “become like teachers. I like having this one in the studio for reference.” The sun-drenched sky, a stack of broad orange and gold strokes built up from ten layers of yellow with a hint of green, recalls passages in Joan Mitchell’s paintings and may nod to the master. Pilings or posts in a variety of colors hold up this sky. McDonnell’s broom-work is quick, as if

eager to get down the color. You can read this painting as a landscape, but *Invitation II* is more open to possibilities than that. It’s a frank and frankly appealing painting that delivers pleasure through a muchness of matter confidently pulled and pushed to command space. And there are the pleasures of back and forth, of up and down, the wide strokes alive for their own sake.

Willard’s Red, with its tilted triangle and blocky forms, follows *Invitation II*’s adventure in color—three different reds, dirty mauve, midnight blue, white—but it is a freer, more restless, gathered and dispersed painting. It could be leading up to a narrative or what’s left after the story is told. The painting’s coherence is the balance, the reality of disparate forms, like looking out your window at the view and not imposing a hierarchy on what you see.

In his poem *February*, James Schuyler looks out on Manhattan’s Second Avenue and thinks, “I can’t get over / how it all works in together.” Like *Willard’s Red*, Schuyler’s response is not a summation but reflects an ongoing sense of wonder. This will resolve itself—forms of light and color intensified—in a poem or painting, but no resolution is final.

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