

Protected: Peggy Cyphers: A Studio Conversation with Robert G. Edelman

By Robert G. Edelman

14 February 2012



Peggy Cyphers with Leo Castelli

RGE: Your early paintings from the 80's *Modern Fossil* Series, shown at M-13 Gallery, have an edgy graphic style, with forms floating in contrasting textured or painterly deep spaces, structured as predellas, with colliding, stripped-down forms. What was your approach to image making at that time?

PC: I was very influenced at the time by the Miocene fossils that I was finding on the beach in Calvert Cliffs in Maryland, where I pretty much spent my summers. A lot of those forms came out of the two basic growth structures of nature, a branching V-shape and anything that had the spiraling element to it, and the bifurcation, which was really the significant, conceptual source for me. The paintings were bifurcated, predellas, and the top panels on Mylar had an essence of a painting imagery or vocabulary that was of the moment; I thought of them as a living, breathing shape and surface. They were so experiential, so alive, that they had to be painted in one sitting! They were all based on the most elemental concepts or structures of life, going back to Darwinian evolution, the origin of the species, many based on the images of the most basic and earliest forms of life. The images on the bottom panel were in a way a reflection of the forms on top, a fossilization of a sense of life, inspired in part by an 80's graffiti look, so there was a lot of tension in the contrast between life and death. That's really what I was playing with in those paintings.

RGE: In a review for Artnet of a show at Donahue/Sosinski Gallery in SoHo in 1998, David Ebony wrote "approaching each canvas as a kind of garden where organic and geometric elements intermingle with intense light, she (Cyphers) nurtures elaborate hybrid forms." Did you think of these paintings as garden-like, where images and space evolved out of a response to natural form?



PC: I really need a lot of structure in my work, even though I'm prone to improvisation in my painting process. So, the basic composition in those pieces came from the grids I was using of botanical images that I had appropriated from hundreds of un-catalogued reproductions in the New York Public library, even Da Vinci drawings among others, and I used them as my basic structure. I called the series *Mental Cities*; they were inspired by a state of mind more than by any particular reflection on nature. I was focused on conveying a sense of nature as being very inspirational to the human consciousness, and a part of our evolution in a way that we've kind of disconnected with. So those paintings had a very ecological and primal energy that would, in a sense, play with the idea of evolution.

RGE: Can you talk a bit more about your use of the diptych format in the 90's work; it often seemed to be a means for introducing illumination or magnification to the original image.



PC: By the 90's I was already playing with imagery from various sources, and even entered into a kind of feminist dialogue in my work. I was appropriating images that I was finding in *Life Magazine*, for example – the classic sexy mommy with the cute apron, feeding cookies to the kids, and the husband coming in the door; this wonderful sense of family that was played upon in the media to sell appliances, among other things. So the presence of the bifurcation in those images also suggested a sense of the moment, an awareness of the fragility of time, and that we're just humans struggling to come to terms with what life is, reflecting on the moment, rather than the past or future. So these pieces were all about that kind of time element, like a prismatic time; so illumination,

definitely! I used diamond-dust on the bottom, playing with this glittery, reflective Warholian material. I was looking at that time at illuminated manuscripts from the Pre-Renaissance, Giotto and Cimabue, so, yes, that is where the impulse for illumination came from at that time in my work.



RGE: As your work entered the new millennium, your paintings started to display a more internalized, delicate light, with forms floating on the surface. Roberta Smith wrote in her Times review of your show at The Proposition in 2003, “Now she’s just painting, in an effortless style that corrupts and complicates the staining technique originated by Color Field painters like Helen Frankenthaler, with various ideas in the air: notational, pattern-prone motifs, landscape references and allusions to textiles and fabric.” Were you conscious of this connection with Color Field work, and about these sources of your imagery?

PC: The year before I moved to New York, I remember seeing a show at the Guggenheim, *Aspects of Post-War Painting*, in 1976. I used to take the train up from Baltimore to New York to see the shows, and it was the most amazing exhibition that I had ever seen. It included all the big wigs, including Frankenthaler. I was so inspired by all that work! Yes, working on a stained, porous canvas surface was a technique that I hadn’t explored since that first encounter. In the 90’s I had been working on boards, Mylar and Plexiglas, with all kinds of other experimental materials. Yes, Roberta Smith caught the essence of coming out of that tradition. I was working with watery expanses as a structure, and the patterns of images coming out were biological growth, stars and planetary forms, and notations of plants and trees. I don’t really work with an image in mind when I start; it’s more of a stream of consciousness, like the Surrealist idea of automatic writing. It was also about text and language, and how language in nature is structure. We have that inherently in our DNA.



RGE: Do you work on both form and space simultaneously, or do you develop or resolve one or the other first? It often appears as if the atmospheric space is conceived to spawn or give life to form.

PC: In my most recent paintings, *Animal Spirits* and *Spectacle Evolution*, the image evolves out of process that could be described as a kind of weaving. I start on the top, left corner of the canvas, and I proceed to apply a sequence of marks or gestural strokes that have something to do with a specific thought space that I have in mind. Often weightless, bird-like images emerge. So the marks and the spatial elements would evolve together, but it's not programmed or preconceived in any way, and the results are always a surprise. In my earlier pieces from the *Mental Cities Series*, when I was doing a lot of staining, the stains would have shadows and imperfections, subtle elements that were a means of constructing composition and form, so there was more of a layering aspect involved. But now the process is not at all layering, it's more about a direct sense of luminosity, a spatial light, falling through the image.

RGE: Have your experiments with the variety of mediums that you have worked with over the years affected your approach to your themes, imagery or composition?



PC: I think when I'm working with the crusty sand surface now, it refers back to the panels of mineralized tarpaper that I was using in the 80's, and also my street art, like the *Fashion Modamural* which is still up in the South Bronx, and other graffiti things around the East Village. So the evolution of the image certainly comes from how things that are in a state of decomposition have the essence of the structure, but are somewhat pixilated, which is to a degree digitally inspired, and although that's not an intended reference, it has that element to it. I think that the surfaces are very much a part of how the image evolves. If the surface is really silky, nonporous, and kind of fragile, then the marks tend to work against or with that. Whatever state the surface is in at that point really has an impact on the final outcome.

RGE: Your series of monotypes from 2007, *>Quarks and Electrons*, have forms that appear to be microorganisms in an aqueous space; was this minuscule universe an opportunity for an invention and investigation of organic form?

PC: I remember when I was making those prints in Woodstock, New York, in this little press in the middle of the woods, I was listening to a series of lectures on quantum physics. It was so fascinating, as I've always been a Charles Darwin fan and enjoyed his writings, which I read when I first moved to New York. While I was working on the monoprints, I was letting the images of the most elemental forms evolve out of the impulse of my body; the wave-like forms, the spirals. Again, we are all connected to and come from the earth, or from mud, as Darwin would say. I'm just making shapes that I think come from the processes that are evident in scientific investigative imaging.



RGE: Your recent series of paintings from 2007 to the present, in particular the *>Animal Spirits, Spectacle Evolution* series, appear to have a strong connection to the ethereal spaces of traditional Chinese painting, with a sense of the flow of water through a vertical space. Are you in some way re-exploring the poetic, free interpretation of landscape form and space that is the unique vision of Asian art?

PC: When I was living in Baltimore, I would spend a lot of time looking at a modest collection of Asian art that was in the Fine Arts building at Towson University. I was influenced by a sense of movement and the calligraphy, the sense of gesture and the trace of the hand. I think that is such an important philosophical idea, the trace of the human hand – it goes back to cave painting. So when I started doing these new paintings, a series that I have been working on for the last five years, *Animal Spirits*, they really did evolve with a very Asian improvisational, mark-making process. Knowing that I was going to Beijing in 2008, as a resident at Jack Tilton's artist residency program

there at the time at Song Xuan, I was even more entrenched in their tradition, and actually edited down my colors so I could focus on the marks I was making, and the sense of patterning that was evolving from these gestural meditations.

RGE: Your use of color is both descriptive and emotive; do you have a palette preconception for a composition, or do coloristic decisions emerge from the act of painting?

PC: I have spent the last five summers up in Woodstock, NY, at Byrdcliffe Art Colony, and being so close to the historic waterfalls of Platte Clove, and the area where the Hudson River School artists were painting and finding inspiration, I find that the colors, structure and energy of the waterfall is becoming my main theme, along with the birds that rule the cavernous ravines from the skies. Maybe I have a kind of mermaid complex, being from the Chesapeake Bay area, water to me is life, and I continue to work with that sense of a cascading life force, a poetic sense of light, falling through the paintings. So the direct inspiration comes from a place here in New York State, but it does have it's energy coming also from the principles of Chinese landscape painting.



RGE: I was just looking out the window, and I was noticing a relationship to your work; the towers of lower Manhattan, on this particularly luminous cloudy day, in some ways relate to some of the spaces that you have been experimenting with in your recent paintings. I was just wondering if you have noticed that as perhaps another source of inspiration for you.

PC: Well, I'm grateful for this very amazing view, that's for sure, and I think your observation is right on target. The grid structure of all of these various historical and contemporary buildings, the Chambord inspired Stanford White building, with the golden angels being so prominent from my view, through my big windows, the very fleshy kind of buttery sense of paint that is in the clouds, so that's kind of an amazing metaphor, I'm glad you brought that up.

RGE: At times I see your work as a curious mix of a sensualist/scientist, an observer and inventor of form, clearly bringing these impulses together in the painting process. I believe you have worked from photographic and art historical images as a source. Do you usually work from an existing image, from a sketch or preliminary study, or do you just improvise in these recent works?

PC: There is no preconceived image, I let the painting emerge from the consciousness of my thoughts, I'm searching for the image to emerge, working with a kind of automatic writing style, and laying down patterns and textures against one another, and all of a sudden there emerges an

interior space. From turning the painting upside down a few times (a trick Clement Greenberg taught me) and working from the edges, the middle becomes the source of open light and a field. And when that field starts to feel like it has an integrity, or something real in it, then I know there's an image. Sometimes I have to sit there and look at it for months (it's kind of scary to say that!) but that is how these paintings evolve; out of what is the sense of something with a lot of integrity of that particular image or truth about that space. If that starts to look like it's happening, then I move in to painting the interior space and then the piece is pretty much, you know, on its way.



Peggy Cyphers was born and raised in Baltimore and Chesapeake Beach, Maryland. The artist has been working and living in New York City and Brooklyn for over 25 years. Cyphers has had one person exhibitions nationally and internationally since her first show in the East Village in 1984. Her exhibitions have been reviewed in the New York Times, New York Observer, Art in America and San Francisco Chronicle, among others. Most recent exhibitions include “Animal Spirits” at Noma Gallery, San Francisco, (November 2009) “Animal Spirits” at Creon Gallery, New York City (May 2009) and “Animal Spirits” a two person show at the Kleinert James Arts Center in Woodstock, New York (Oct 2009). She is co-founder of the curatorial project BROADTHINKING with the most recent show “Slow News International” in September 2009 in Honolulu, Hawaii.

*Writing Credits: **Robert G. Edelman** is a writer and lecturer on art, independent curator, art advisor and artist. He has lectured at the Art Institute of Chicago and MoMA in New York. Mr. Edelman worked as a director of several art galleries in New York, including Sid Deutsch, BlumHelman, Shea & Beker, Annina Nosei and Anita Friedman Fine Arts. He has written on art for the New Art Examiner, Artnews, Art in America, ArtPress in Paris, Tema Celeste and Artnet, and curated The Food Show: The Hungry Eye at the Chelsea Museum in 2007.*

Photo Credits: