

## ABOUT NOW: THE ART OF MARINA ADAMS

RAYMOND FOYE

"I'm not finished if I'm still burdened with the evidence of my will, hopes or desires. All that is a preparation for that moment when my thinking is simultaneous with what I'm doing." — Philip Guston<sup>1</sup>

Q: How do you approach improvisation every day? How do you keep it fresh?

A: Well, I play the vibrations of the day. — Marshall Allen, Sun Ra Arkestra<sup>2</sup>

On an early spring morning I sat with Marina Adams for several hours, taking in a dozen paintings created over the previous five months.<sup>3</sup> Her recently constructed studio is carefully situated between mature specimen trees on the grounds of a former nursery on eastern Long Island. There are three large painting walls; the fourth wall consists entirely of two industrial-sized garage doors that, when opened, create a natural conversation between the paintings and the trees. In the center of the studio is a low table with two comfortable chairs for viewing the paintings. The books on the table are various, but clearly relate to her working process: ecology, anthropology, mythology, mycology. There are monographs on Willem de Kooning, Alma Thomas, Joan Mitchell, Paul Cézanne, Etel Adnan, Hilma af Klint, Tantric art, and Uzbek textiles. There are many books of poetry: Norma Cole, Joanne Kyger, Marina Tsvetaeva, Bob Kaufman, William Carlos Williams, Paul Celan, Ted Berrigan.

I set this scene because all of these elements I describe are as integral to the work as the very paint itself. The ground of these paintings is a unique nexus of ideas, observations, and forces the artist has pursued for four decades with spirit, erudition, humor, and dedication. It is a place where artist and art are one, meaning there is no aspect of sensibility that cannot be directly expressed through the medium itself—love, joy, pleasure, pain, anger, even doubt. Like the side of the studio that opens to the great outdoors, the walls are down.

Adams works alone in this studio. She has a studio manager, but has never had a studio assistant and does not intend to. ("I don't know what they would do"). The linen is sized with rabbit-skin glue and primed with two coats of gesso. Paintings are usually preceded by a series of gouaches, which are sometimes used as rough studies. Adams draws lightly with charcoal first, creating lines that often remain visible in the finished work. She paints in acrylics using soft sable brushes of different sizes. Flat and squared-off like a house painter's brush, they can be turned on edge for a sharp outline. Edges themselves are crucial—the point where colors meet and sometimes blend. Although the canvases aren't shaped, they often seem to be, as color, light, and form continually bend and grip and shape one another. Colors function as overtones do in music: pitches are perceived above and below the fundamental

tones based on relative values and juxtaposition. Once underway, the process itself takes over, which the artist directs and is directed by.

Space and light: No abstract painter could possibly move to this part of eastern Long Island and not confront the ghost of Willem de Kooning. The diffused light reflected through sea mist, the flat low landscape on eye level with the water, the golden glow of mornings and evenings: this atmosphere is very much a part of these new paintings, as is the inspiration of de Kooning, the quintessential outsider who came to America because he read Walt Whitman as a boy—and remained an undocumented immigrant until the age of 58.<sup>4</sup>

Comparisons to music and musicians continually arise in conversation with Adams—not surprising for a painter whose work is about composing in the moment. She mentions Thelonious Monk frequently: “He has such intellect and spirit and they are so connected, so well integrated.” On the day I visit, Miles Davis’s masterpiece *On the Corner* (1972) is on the stereo, with its offbeat rhythms, uncommon tone colors, and a vividness that seems to say “wake up” at every moment. The ways in which music is transmuted into visual art is the subject of much theorizing. de Kooning seems to have put his finger on a sympathetic affinity: “Miles Davis bends the notes. He doesn’t play them, he bends them. I bend the paint.”<sup>5</sup> There you have it.

For Adams, pure painting means reducing the work to essentials, attentively seeing with *all* the senses. The painting takes place in a state of namelessness, outside of thoughts and words. This latter point is something one is not supposed to say. “Why would you have a thought in your head when you’re painting?” Adams asks. “In fact, they just get in your way.” Even titles are set aside until the work is finished. “The title has to be good or it is detrimental.”

In the way they embody the space and light of the studio, as well as the gestures and movements of the artist within that space, these paintings go beyond the purely perceptual: they are based in the physiological. Poet Charles Olson used the scientific term *proprioception* to describe a complex visual field he felt more accurately described the aesthetic experience, and as a way of locating the “sensibility within the organism.”<sup>6</sup> Proprioception is an embodied awareness involving nerves, muscles, balance, movement, the inner ear—it is not located in any one place. Dance might be the best way to understand these paintings: a mind-body experience, not descriptive but enactive.

Because a painting can be apprehended all at once, its many constituent (and sometimes contradictory) parts merge into a single image. This way of viewing opposites simultaneously

is integral to the power of painting. Adams has said that “in painting, contradiction can be made visible.” This combination (and reconciliation) of dissimilar elements takes place on any number of levels: sophisticated and unrefined, spontaneous and contemplative, thoughtful and instinctual. In Adams’s work these types of interactions largely take place on the formal level, through a constant play between inner and outer: mass and shape swap places; curves are both concave and convex; edges separate and blend. Philip Guston described this duality as the key moment when a painting steps into that next realm of the enigma: “When it becomes a double activity. That is, when the line defines a space and the space defines the line, then you’re somewhere.”<sup>7</sup>

I have always felt two activities uncannily close to painting are dreaming and breathing—breathing in the yogic sense of vital breath, where channels are open and energy moves without obstruction. A crucial inheritance from the Abstract Expressionists has been the notion of painting as a pure state of being: active, animated, dynamic, the manifestation of energy in the moment. Breath likewise became the basic unit of measure in poetry at this time, in the work of Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley, Joanne Kyger, and so many others. Breath can be seen as groundedness, a fundamental point to any understanding of Adams’s work, which is about presence, engagement with the world, and the non-judging state of total attentiveness.

Dreaming, like breathing, is another activity shared among all people. (Nietzsche remarked that all metaphysics begins in dreams). As with paintings, people find the need to compulsively interpret them—quite unnecessarily, as Kyger points out: “I believe dreams are just themselves, and say exactly what they say. You can interpret them on many levels in many ways, and that is what is so wonderful about dream stuff. It’s like poetry. You don’t want to wreck it by saying this dream ‘means’ this, when the dream is doing a beautiful job of reflecting what’s going on in your consciousness of the moment.”<sup>8</sup> I see painting as akin to lucid dreaming, an awareness that you are dreaming while dreaming, a balance between control and no-control.

This discussion is in part a fiction, in that it elides the fact that a painting is also the product of a struggle, backed by years of strivings and failures sufficient to deter all but the most committed. When I asked Adams what first appealed to her about Matisse and Picasso, she said it was the destructiveness of their works—the ruthless tearing down of a painting to its essentials. The work of art as an accumulation of destructions lies at the heart of the creative process, and it is one thing that makes artistic beauty such an interesting phenomenon, so difficult and so hard-won.

Adams downplays questions about studio practice and technique. Her descriptions of the process are matter of fact, but never lose sight of the bigger picture: a painting is not a purely optical matter, but the manifestation of intangibles such as intellect, temperament, research, and sensibility, all of which are accrued during long years of study. Adams expressed it this way:

There is technique in everything, but that's not what painting is about. It is not even about intuition. It has more to do with recognition, with the nature of reality. Even though it is an abstract painting, it is a very concrete situation. It's hard to explain. You are employing all kinds of things that you must learn early on. Practice is only half the job; research is the other half. Susan Sontag said "before you can be a writer you have to be a reader," and the same goes for painting. You have to go out and look. For me the internet has done a great disservice in this regard. I saw that right away. Direct apprehension is the beginning and end of the process. This is not to say the work is done in one's head. It is easy for non-artists to lose sight of the fact that paintings are not made with ideas or theories, but with paint and brushes, which come with a considerably more real burden in my view.

An enduring influence in Adams's career is her reverence for the natural world—another timeless place. When discussing her influences, Adams is always quick to step outside of art history: "The intelligence and power of nature—the intelligence of the mountains and the trees. Going way back to when I was a teenager, these kinds of things informed my belief system and fortified me on my path as an artist when everyone was questioning me and saying, 'I don't think that is a good idea.'"

This earth-awareness is at the heart of Adams's aesthetic. When discussing the painting *4 Corners of the Wind III* (2022), Adams describes the specific shapes of a group of windswept pine trees in the Presidio at the edge of the San Francisco Bay—the way their forms actually embody the wind. This in turn leads to a discussion of the Tower of the Winds in the Agora of Athens, considered the world's first meteorological station, featuring a combination of sundials, a water clock, and a weathervane. For millennia, winds were the main way people navigated the world, so a knowledge of them was essential. Adams's painting is an invitation to meditate, muse, and imagine.

The painting *GAI A* (2022) leads to a discussion of Brice Marden's *Study for the Muses (Hydra Version)* (1991–95/97) and his comment that the sinuous energy of its forms was in part based on having two teenage daughters in the house and observing the way they moved. "I get that,"



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Adams replies. "For me, Gaia is about the body and the regenerative knowledge that it has to heal itself, which is very much like the planet. In *GAIA* (2022) I feel there is also something that has to do with women's bodies, which change so much through youth and age and as we give birth. This is how form gets channeled into my paintings." This is a good example of how structure and meaning interrelate and are innate in Adams's paintings. Apertures, entrances, enfoldments: the way in is the way out. There is no separation between any of these things, just as the forms themselves in these paintings extend in multiple directions, akin to what Charles Olson said about his poems: "at once subject and object, at once and always going in two directions."<sup>9</sup>

Three of the more anomalous works in Adams's exhibition give us a chance to examine the inner dynamics of these paintings without the predominance of color: *Like a Tree*, *Song for My Mother*, and *Stone Cold Fox* (all 2022). These works give us an unexpected insight into the structural elements invisibly at play in a painting like *Twenty Springs* (2022), which is essentially built on the same armature. The experience of sheer force is almost brutalist in its explication of mass and weight. Absent color, the harmonious nature of these paintings falls away, revealing an assemblage of opposing elements and unbalanced forces, buttressed by the four sides of the composition. There is something Romanesque about these paintings in the way forces are at once elevated by vaults and arches, while being driven directly into the ground—part church, part battlement. In these paintings we most clearly see Adams's years of engagement with Picasso: the Cubist still lifes, the off-kilter *Absinthe Glass* sculptures (1914), or the massive bathers from the Boisgeloup period of the early 1930s. Like the gouaches in this exhibition, these three paintings present a very different face of Adams's work, one that I would term elemental. They represent stepping outside of a known form, crucial for any artist.

The paintings each have their own energy. *Let the River Answer* (2021) shifts the flow from vertical to horizontal, in keeping with the title. Over the years I have observed artists playing the same recording over and over again in the studio as a kind of template, or talisman. In this case Marina Adams was listening to Nina Simone's cover of Leonard Cohen's ballad "Suzanne", from which this title is taken. No matter how great the original, Nina Simone's covers always seem to take the song one step further in nuance, color, and shading. Her musical decisions are never ordinary, and seem to be made in the moment, which keeps the listener on edge. It is a rule of measure that Adams seems to adopt from the song to the painting. *Let the River Answer* (2021) also speaks to an element that is crucial to Adams's aesthetic: the frisson created when one body is proximate to another, be it animate or inanimate. It is a concept central to the work of Paul Cézanne, often referred to as the *haptic*, a phrase art historians apply to the phenomenon of visual tactility—if the eyes could feel what the hands

can touch. Cézanne is fundamental to Adams's aesthetic for many reasons, not least his still-curious relationship of self to world. Adams talks about the shimmer in the trees in a Cézanne landscape, and the way the artist depicts this phenomenon with both clarity *and* ambiguity: "I'm always trying to find an image that is accurate to the way that we see, and we don't always see clearly. Sometimes you want something soft or unclear, the way things can be in nature."

*Heads Over Heels* (2022) and *EttaEllaEartha* (2022) bear titles that slyly acknowledge the strength of women in society and culture (an immutable theme in all her work). These figural forms are a recurring motif in Adams's work and originated during a visit to Athens many years ago. While sketching the caryatids at the Parthenon—the frieze of women holding up the temple—Adams suddenly found that the gentle angles and undulations of their bodies struck her to the core. The frieze was figurative, repetitive, structural, architectural, metaphorical, mythological. It took a lot in, and it showed how an energy embedded in ancient art could be unlocked.

Adams is quick to describe her art in holistic terms—an ecosystem where all of the elements are interdependent and balanced. Like the windswept trees, plant forms are not predetermined but flexible, based on ecological conditions. Most growing things reveal their outer form and inner structure at the same time. These paintings evolve in much the same way. One must be totally present with the painting. The flow is a body-mind connection in which rigidity has no place.

Adams discusses how patterns arise in many different cultures that share no physical boundaries or connections. "In my mind these patterns emerge from the earth. They are a result of people being educated by a mountain or a river, educated by the mother, the planet. In the same way I strive to make paintings that allow us to look past our literal boundaries."

The easiest way to analyze something is to break it down into its constituent elements, but in the case of painting, that also destroys how the thing operates. This is the dilemma of analysis. Like the religious experience, I don't think the aesthetic experience will ever be fully understood or explained. Color is not separate from form, and vice versa. Figure and ground swap places, as if in quantum space. Even painting and drawing are not truly separate, for, as Cézanne noted, insofar as you paint you draw.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps no part of aesthetics is as useless as color theory. The painter Norman Bluhm is said to have remarked, "When it comes to color, nobody knows a damn thing." It is without a doubt the most mysterious element in painting, bordering on the occult. Matisse said that

color released in him an energy that “seemed to come from witchcraft.”<sup>11</sup> Adams discusses it in similar terms: “Color is alive and has mystical properties.” Calibrating colors and their interrelations and transitions is one of the main ways Adams’s paintings evolve, along with searching out unknown and unexpected color relationships.

The process of becoming visible is a mysterious thing. I ask Adams about her perseverance during decades of obscurity, when so few were looking, and if she ever lost faith in the art world. Characteristically, Adams takes full responsibility: “Faith with me didn’t have so much to do with the community, it had more to do with me: I felt like I was working blind, and I sustained myself with the metaphor of the light at the end of the tunnel. I was taking everything in, educating and exposing myself to so many things. Instead of looking for a path, I see it as finding my form. And now that I’ve found it, I laugh at myself and I think, ‘Marina, it was so simple, why couldn’t you get there earlier?’ But you can’t, and I couldn’t. Because you can only get there through the work itself, and *you cannot skip any steps.*”

For me the non-heroic stance is one of the most important virtues of these works. They embrace an energy not ego-based, but congruent with nature. The paintings are made up of many gentle gestures and observations: “The non-motivated sense of just ‘being;” as Joanne Kyger once described her own poetry.<sup>12</sup> The beauty of these paintings is actually a byproduct. I can attest they begin in great discomfort, dissatisfaction, and doubt—about self and society. The transformation of those feelings is part of the artistry. When standing before a great painting, one is looking at a crystallized moment of vision—“two days, and a lifetime,” as James McNeill Whistler supposedly told John Ruskin. These paintings are an invitation to think and feel, and change one’s mind.

#### Notes

- 1 Philip Guston, *Philip Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations*, ed. Clark Coolidge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 33.
- 2 Kevin Arrow, “Marshall Allen Looks Back On Five Decades of Sun Ra Arkestra,” *Miami New Times*, March 30, 2018.
- 3 The conversation took place on March 31, 2021, in Bridgehampton, New York. All of Adams’s quotes are from this conversation.
- 4 Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, *de Kooning: An American Master* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), xiv.
- 5 *Idem*, 562.
- 6 “Proprioception” in Charles Olson, *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 181. Olson seems to have discovered the term in Sir Charles Scott Sherrington’s *The Integrative Action of the Nervous System* (1906). For a comprehensive study of Charles Olson and the visual arts, see Eireene Nealand’s excellent “Beyond the Perceptual Model: Toward a Proprioceptive Poetics” (PhD diss., UC Santa Cruz, 2014), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/16t9p5d6>.
- 7 Guston, *Philip Guston*, 202.
- 8 Joanne Kyger, *There You Are: Interviews, Journals, and Ephemera*, ed. Cedar Sigo (Seattle: Wave Books, 2017), 140. (The title of my essay is a quotation from Kyger).
- 9 Olson, *The Maximus Poems*, ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 32.
- 10 Letter from Paul Cézanne to Emile Bernard quoted in Hilary Spurling, *The Unknown Matisse: A Life of Henri Matisse: The Early Years, 1869–1908* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 284.
- 11 Spurling, 322.
- 12 Kyger, “Artist’s Statement”, Foundation for Contemporary Arts, 2005, <https://foundationforcontemporaryarts.org/recipients/joanne-kyger>.