



ELISABETH CONDON

Aaron Holz interviews Elisabeth Condon on her solo exhibition *Impossible Landscape, Fiendish Plots* Lincoln, NE, November 2025

*this interview has been
excerpted from a
longer version*

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Aaron Holz

A lot of the paintings rely heavily on a stain process. Many people have provided what they think of as your lineage, so you get to embrace it, defeat it, correct it. But when I think about that lineage, it always starts with Helen Frankenthaler, of course, but then I move to Lynda Benglis, maybe Dona Nelson, certainly Jackie Saccoccio as a colleague. When I think about how heavily process-driven most of those artists are, for me your work falls into figuration, which I attribute to your being Californian. I think about the UC Davis Funk School group or the idea that Richard Diebenkorn was never willing to completely embrace the Abstract Expressionists. Am I right to attribute part of your upbringing in California to a reluctance to be a purist?

Elisabeth Condon

The West Coast has its own traditions, where purism isn't a priority. There is the Asian influence of Seattle painters Mark Tobey and Morris Graves. There are many process-based artists. As an undergraduate I worked with Lita Albuquerque, Laddie John Dill, Chris Burden, and Mike Kelly. At that time Guston's work was admired for celebrating quotidian life, and after I moved to New York Lisa Yuskavage's 1993 exhibition *Bad Babies* at Elizabeth Koury resonated. It feels natural to use my mother's décor as a reference, to riff on traditions without reconstructing them. It doesn't feel relevant to perpetuate an abstraction / representational divide. A lineage forms rhizomically.

Aaron Holz

When you bring up Eastern influences, I know you're deeply connected to China, but I'm thinking about some of the Japanese abstract painters like Kazuo Shiraga or Ushio Shinohara, who worked with their feet or punched with boxing gloves. Their intensity and deliberation links in a way to Chris Burden, because so much of what he did relied on external events. When he made *Beam Drop* [1984, Art Park, New York] and sent those steel beams into concrete from the top of a crane, he relied entirely on chance. What do we call the willingness to abandon oneself to control seeping in from such influences?

Elisabeth Condon

The willingness to abandon control coincides with a religious upbringing. I learned early that submission to a higher power is crucial for transformational healing. The University of California system revealed art as an alternative route to personal transformation. Frida Kahlo's first-ever exhibition in the United States, at the UCSD Davis Gallery when I was there, demonstrated painting's power to expose unspoken facets of existence. At UCLA I took Performance with Chris Burden. He assigned a two-hour walk on which we were to take notes. I hadn't paid that much attention to the landscape since childhood. That assignment was the first conscious awareness of the expansion I now identify with movement, travel and scroll painting. These educational experiences prioritized process and discovery. I didn't feel control was as important as process, in fact control could impede opening up.

Aaron Holz

One of my favorite painters is Howard Hodgkin, and I think you're like him, because you're a poetic painter who uses huge swaths of color to create metaphor but is never afraid of it being a recognizable thing. Sometimes they might be completely abstract, and other times you can clearly see where he's coming from, especially if you know the name of the poem referenced in the works title and read it, and see the people in it, and see the things. So what's there is simply veiled, with a lack of illustrational clarity.

Elisabeth Condon

I appreciate illustrational clarity as a point on the spectrum of recognition. If you're painting a bus parked down the street, you'll perceive it in color and shape relationships. But if you're crossing the street and the bus is heading toward you, you'll see a bus to prevent it from hitting you.

Painting operates through paint. When swimming in viscous color, detail seems like embellishment. Immersing into paint trades illustrational clarity for integrity of flow, making form from inside out. *Daisy Face* depicts a "host and guest" structure common to scroll painting, a tree bending over uplifted flowers amidst waterfalls and rocks. But the images derive from overlapping pours. The pours are reined in by line and reversals that suggest but don't refine form. This leaves the painting in an open state where imagery moves in and out of recognition. Having painted the work I know it graphically, but it still pulls me in both abstractly and as narrative. So for me it passes the acid test of painting, which is, does the painting hold over time? To discover something you hadn't seen earlier is a wonderful surprise.

Aaron Holz

At the Sheldon Museum you saw Helen Frankenthaler's *Red Frame*. It's a stained painting surrounded by a red frame. But the piece is very much a take based on an experience she had. There's a description of it somewhere that in fact you're looking at a large pool body of water, but also looking at a stain, which is water, so it's both things at once.

Elisabeth Condon

This balance in terms is something I love about Frankenthaler because you really have to look. And once you're in the painting it's almost as clear as O'Keeffe painting *Abiqui*, but it is a process to get there. You're looking through a sensibility with Frankenthaler, of which she only leaves the slightest hint. There's often a moment at which she leaves a little rise in the paint, a glitch that is the entry point, but you have to see the whole field in balance to see it. It's demanding, you have to give yourself over to understand it, and I've always loved that challenge. When you submit to the terms of the painting and you're in there, it opens up to you.

Aaron Holz

And your paintings are two things at once too. Literally *Daisy Face* is a waterfall.

Elisabeth Condon

Before the water in the paint evaporates, the amount of liquid on the substrate is doubled, so the surface was bathed in liquid for days. I genuinely wondered if the painting would dry, and how. Surrendering to the liquid is how I began to paint.

In scroll painting, gesture comes from calligraphy. The civilian can read it, and the painter can see it. It's important to me that a painting has two faces, simultaneously a field and a topography. I want painting to reveal compressed layers of time, like a Rolodex or a scroll that's cut and stacked. I see space as thick and thin layers of activity emerging from and immersing into the painting surface, inhaling and exhaling like breath. The layers generate a sense of simultaneous time that continues to unfurl with each viewing. Time is a construct for simultaneous existence of all elements, which I feel is its true nature. Landscape becomes a metaphoric container for unlike elements, including paint applications, to co-exist.



Aaron Holz

It's a beautiful show with five works total in a space about 25 by 25 feet. And the smallest work is 12 by 12 inches, while *Daisy Face* behind me looks like it's eight by five.

Elisabeth Condon

68 by 110 inches, a little more than 5 by 9 feet.

Aaron Holz

How do you transition between scales? The scale of small works can be a relief or a frustration. Sometimes I make a small painting and think it's going to be easy, and it takes me just as much time.

Elisabeth Condon

Small paintings pull you in as much as a big painting, sometimes they bring an unexpected economy. I work on a lot of them at once to test ideas and moves. An abundance of surfaces can feel reassuring.

Aaron Holz

And the larger works are definitely performative because you're lifting, pulling, dancing.

Elisabeth Condon

I start on the floor and work until the tilted perspective prevents me from seeing the painting. At that point I move back and forth between wall and floor until the painting is done. I couldn't lift *Daisy Face* and *Bullseye* off the ground for weeks because they had to cure. Additionally, they are heavy. I dragged them around like a body, developing a strange symbiosis with them. Sometimes I need help hanging the canvases and sometimes I literally dance with them, feinting with my brush.

Aaron Holz

We'll go into your family background and two things that come to mind. One is the way your mother decorated the rooms and the influence of her crazy wallpapers. The other is your mother's religious belief and where you came from, how that might differ from Chinese philosophy.

Elisabeth Condon

They inform each other.

In adolescence I wrote notes inside the flowers on the wallpaper of my bedroom, to subvert the control of the décor. I stared at the flowers, which had navy blue centers and yellow petals, until they vibrated optically. Remembering this now is a lot like staring into Frankenthaler, looking deeply until elements shift into focus. I also see wallpaper as an adaptation of scroll painting, regulating gestures for visual communication. I've been painting more critically recently, offsetting the feminine references and lightness of pattern with heavier, ungainlier pours.

Nobody in my Christian Science family went to doctors. My mother was an ardent practitioner of the faith as the sole source of healing. Healing was a process of recognizing kinship with God to override any belief of illness. If you had a raging headache, you honed your conviction of God's perfect vision until overcoming the "material claim" of pain. Healing one's perceptions from the inside made transformation a part of the process. I relate transformation to pushing painting to the limit of what I can see or do. Learning is also a form of transformation.

Yet Christian Science suggested a hierarchy of a controlling mind and supplicant, unruly body. I yearned for philosophies extending beyond binaries, like the balancing of opposite forces in scroll painting. In scrolls text transforms into landscape. This fuels ideas. I paint my mother's lattice wallpaper so often it has become a personal calligraphy. Lattice presents a shorthand for familial and divine authority, made pliable with gesture, and compromised with pours.

Aaron Holz

If Chinese is mind and spirit and European is body and form in the ideas of art, you're saying that the mind and spirit plus the body and form unite in the Christian Science church?

Elisabeth Condon

I'm saying that painting unites mind, spirit, body and form, and the studio is the site of transformation. Painting records the transformation.

Aaron Holz

Did your parents maintain their belief their whole life?

Elisabeth Condon

My father was skeptical, searching; my mother faithful to the end. Though the physical frailties of age challenged her last years, her passing was so harmonious that I can't doubt the energetic force of her belief. Together, they championed abstract thinking and the internal processes behind external results.

Aaron Holz

Describe an ideal day in the studio. What's the best day?

Elisabeth Condon

The best day brings limpidly and advances the work with clarity and insight. Despite my love of process, not knowing can be challenging. Cutting through, pushing forward, working on instinct doesn't always make it easy to understand for myself what I am making. Limpidity clarifies questioning. Walking in, knowing what's to be done, and just doing it is truly the best day.

Aaron Holz

In sync, your hand and brain, mind and material.

Elisabeth Condon

Yes. In Guston's Minnesota talk in 1972 he says how it's hard for him to see what he's painting, how he paints to be able to see it, as if a canvas is a body reflecting his mind. I get that. With heavy pours, I fight the urge to tidy them up. But living through their resolution is part of the job. I must know the weight of the pour to combine heavy and diaphanous pours. These heavier pours started with *Daisy Face*. When I poured the centers of the flowers and the leaves around them, they didn't attach pictorially. To join them required deeper gradations of yellow in the pale yellow petals. Instead, I let the material take over, as if the centers had landed inside the petals from outer space. Relinquishing control opened up the reading, and in turn opened the form. In his recent published lectures from 1981, Deleuze speaks of the catastrophe in confronting and eliminating cliché. A painter must liberate the work from clichés, both internal and external, by passing through the catastrophe of knowing and not knowing. This reckoning process is akin to the healing process in Christian Science.

My resistance to cliché is restless. I shift between bodies of work and paint applications, evolving a multi-layered landscape from motifs combining décor and landscape. This is my response to the urban environment.

Aaron Holz

You chose to do the show here at *Fiendish Plots* partly for your friendship with Nancy. Talk about living a life as an artist and the importance of friends in the art world.

Elisabeth Condon

The rigor of *Fiendish Plots* always interested me, from when Nancy and Charley started it.

In Lincoln, discussing painting with Nancy and Charley revealed how deep their insight is, from their knowledge of my work for forty years. Their sharp eye and measure is a rigorous vetting process. Selecting the work, they were all in, and I really respect that. *Fiendish Plots* has been a well-established, artist-run gallery for over fifteen years. Showing there been an extremely rewarding experience.

Aaron Holz

I agree. I think what they do is wonderful. Every show they've done here could stand equally into any city in the world. There isn't a compromise about what will be shown and how it will be shown.

Jenny Dubnau and I were the second show in 2014. My thought was to do something I don't get to do in commercial spaces. I didn't know Jenny at the time, but I knew who she was. This brought a different rigor and more challenging project.

Well, it's a treat to have the work here. It's a treat to talk to you. Thank you.

Elisabeth Condon

Thank you.