

Studio Visit with Elisabeth Condon

An In Practice project



AARON WEXLER

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I've always thought of Elisabeth Condon's paintings as a kind of "ecstatic abstraction." Her exuberant energy creates surfaces that seem to leap off the canvas, self-animating before the eye has fully settled. Pools of poured paint expand, collide, separate, and bloom into forms that often suggest flowers, gardens, weather systems, or other botanical worlds. There is something delightfully alive and wild about them, like some sort of psychedelic Wabi-sabi.

During my visit to Elisabeth's studio, however, I began thinking less about flowers and more about emergence itself. Her paintings often begin with a few poured events: pigments of different densities meeting on a horizontal surface. From those initial conditions, networks form—branching, merging, and redirecting through a process that feels like growth. Looking closely, I found myself thinking of root systems, fungal mycelium, and even the branching structures of neurons. The resemblance is not literal but in how they form. The work unfolds through a process of responsive emergence, where form gradually surfaces from a field of possibilities, and meaning may arrive through association.

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Here is an excerpt from our conversation in her Lower East Side studio:

Aaron Wexler: I usually begin these conversations with an intention—a word or phrase borrowed loosely from meditation practice that serves as a point of focus. For today's visit, I arrived with two words. They actually began as one word, and the second emerged unexpectedly while I was writing.

The first is **Emersion**—a gradual surfacing of awareness, as if memories, forms, or sensations are slowly rising into visibility from beneath thought. There's a sense of blooming or coming into view.

The second is **Immersion**—a state of complete absorption, where perception, sensation, and attention dissolve into the flow of experience itself.

Both words made me think of your paintings. They seem to describe not only what the paint is doing, but also how a viewer might encounter the work emotionally or experientially. There's something ecstatic about them—vibrant, alive, and constantly in motion.

What do you think about those two words?

Elisabeth Condon: I've used the word *immersion* a lot in relation to painting—what I want from it, what I think about, and what informs the work. But I'd never heard *emersion* before.

As you were reading the definition, I had the feeling that it's what painting is. I'm still getting to know the word, but it feels like an agent for what painting means to me.

Aaron: It doesn't even have to relate directly to painting. It can be something expansive on its own. Is there another word that feels connected to these? Something that has a poetic rhyme with them?

Elisabeth: I think a lot about improvisation and simultaneity. Simultaneity is important to me conceptually, but also as a painting principle. You know that I'm deeply inspired by scroll painting.

I often think of my paintings as scroll paintings sliced and layered. If time were layered on top of itself, it would become simultaneous and compressed. Compression is another word that comes up often. The surfaces may appear flat, but every mark becomes another layer of time.

Aaron: Do you start with raw canvas, or do you prime first?

Elisabeth: Sometimes I work on raw canvas. I make that decision beforehand because it receives the paint differently. I'm more interested in that now than I used to be.

For years I worked almost exclusively on portrait linen. Partly because it feels wonderful, and partly because I know it so well. If I really want to make a painting that feels completely mine, that's still where I can find my footing. But lately I've been pushing myself toward raw canvas because of the different effects it creates.

Aaron: It's funny how we know our own moves. We know the things we do and think, "That's very me." Even though there are centuries of painting behind us, the particular way we do something becomes very intimate.

Is there anything lately that's helping you break away from those habits?

Elisabeth: A few things. Around 2022, I became really interested in heavy pours. After studying ink painting for about nine months, I started painting more heavily, and that tendency kept building.

Then I attended the Golden Residency in the fall of 2022 and became attached to tar gel—not only as a surface but as a substrate. I began experimenting with it. That painting over there against the wall was one of the first experiments, just to see how complicated the pours could become.

Aaron: Did you make the purple one too?

Elisabeth: Yes, that's from 2024. That's all Golden Residency knowledge—building compositions around the pours and those strange planetary forms.

After that I began making standalone tar gel collages.

Aaron: I saw you post images from a dance performance.

Elisabeth: Yes. Some of those smaller tar gel works evolved into larger pieces for dancers, about four by eight feet.

Aaron: Do you pour the tar gel onto plastic?

Elisabeth: Yes. In Florida I have a special high-density polyethylene table. Here I was pouring directly on the floor.

I collect things from the street and embed them into the work—old wallpaper samples, drawings, found materials. Sometimes those materials tell personal stories. Sometimes they're simply things I've found.

For the dancers, I became fascinated with foil and bottle caps. There were three women involved—the choreographer and two dancers—and I found myself interpreting them through the materials I collected. I'd find a piece of pink foil and imagine it belonged to one of them. They weren't interested in those associations at all, but it became a kind of projection.

Aaron: Almost like you're adorning their personalities.

Elisabeth: Exactly. Or inventing them through materials.

Aaron: Was there backlighting involved?

Elisabeth: Yes. I did two performances—one in Brooklyn with Norte Maar and another at Black Mountain College's ReHappening.

For the Brooklyn performance, I worked with the sculptor Elise Wunderlich. I wanted a PVC structure that felt somewhere between a greenhouse and a towel rack. She developed these beautiful A-frame structures that stood on their own as sculptures.

Once I added the polymer forms, though, they became somewhat static. The dancers already had so much physical choreography to negotiate. That's one reason I switched to rolling clothing racks for Black Mountain—they could move them throughout the performance.

The lighting was actually Elise's idea. She suggested placing lights behind the structures, using gels, and it worked beautifully.

Aaron: Your work often feels animated. Have you ever thought about painting directly onto film stock? There's a whole tradition of direct animation and chemical animation that feels connected to some of your poured works.

Elisabeth: I've never done it, although I know some of that work. I grew up in a film town when film was at its peak.

I do like stretching myself. Right now I'm learning about bioplastics because they feel like a natural extension of the polymer work, even though they behave differently.

I always like having a learning component or a collaborative component that pushes me somewhere new.

Aaron: Curiosity.

Elisabeth: Exactly.

Aaron: That's what keeps us growing and keeps the work alive.

Elisabeth: Yes. We were talking before about how you sustain a practice. Right now I have the time to explore. When I was teaching, maintaining galleries, traveling to residencies, and showing regularly, life moved very differently.

Aaron: And China.

Elisabeth: Yes. I haven't been back in twelve years, although I spent six months there.

Aaron: Do you want to return?

Elisabeth: Part of me does. I was deeply attached to it. But I also feel like it was a way of borrowing another life. At this point, I think I may need to commit more fully to my own life rather than trying to return to that chapter.

I've thought about Italy, which I've never visited. I've thought about Mexico City. Lately, though, China has returned in a conceptual way because of the pouring work and because of how much I learned there.

Elisabeth: There is a museum near People's Square in Shanghai that I'd love to visit again. I remember seeing a small scroll painting there that stopped me completely. It was incredibly simple, but unforgettable.

Though, there's a tendency to imagine that returning will complete something, and I know that isn't really true.

When I moved back to New York, that felt significant too. Lately I've been thinking about abstraction at a much deeper level—about the relationship between abstraction and New York itself.

Sometimes I think abstraction carries such a heavy legacy that I should move away from it, but I always come back.

Aaron: It's endless. It's such a rich language. And I think it's more accessible than people realize.

We're surrounded by extraordinary abstract paintings in New York. I sometimes think abstraction offers people permission not to immediately understand something. The experience itself becomes the meaning.

Elisabeth: Yes.

Aaron: Maybe that's part of its value now. It feels like an antidote to screens, digital images, and constant explanation.

How open-ended do you want your paintings to be? Do you want people thinking about flowers, gardens, chemistry, biology—or something else entirely?

Elisabeth: I don't begin with a predetermined idea. The paint leads me. Sometimes it moves toward recognition.

Earlier in my career I was much more didactic. I read theory constantly and wanted to provoke specific responses. But painting never really works that way. Painting is spontaneous. It's unexpected.

Even when I made the doll paintings and knew exactly what they were about, I still didn't know what they would become. I had to wait for a kind of click in my body that told me the painting was finished.

Aaron: It's something you feel.

Elisabeth: Yes.

Aaron: That's such a rare idea. No one tells you when it's finished. There's no deadline, no external authority. Something inside you just sort of knows.

Elisabeth: It does feel good. Like reaching the summit of a mountain. Until that moment, all bets are off.

Then suddenly you know.

I had a thought earlier about emersion. The paint I pour creates suggestions. I wait for those suggestions to form themselves.

They don't have to become images, but often images help ground me. At least one foot remains on planet Earth. Flowers grow out of the ground. Trees exist. Those recognizable forms create a bridge.

I often think about form and formlessness. François Cheng writes about the cloud as the intermediary between mountain and water. Without the cloud, you have two opposites that cannot connect. The cloud's flexibility allows each to reach the other.

Aaron: Almost like connective tissue.

Elisabeth: Exactly. It connects everything.

In scroll compositions, it's really emptiness that plays that role. The emptiness gives us time to breathe and make the walk from one island of action to the next.

I think about form and formlessness, and the transformation that happens between them. I don't think about it consciously while I'm painting, but it's something that continually happens in the work. Some things come into fullness or recognizability, and some things do not. It's the balance of those things—visually, but also in the experience of looking.

When I'm deciding whether a painting is finished, that's often what I'm responding to. It's not that everything has become clear. It's that the relationship between those things feels alive.

It makes me think about your idea of emersion. Some forms are only beginning to appear, some are fully present, and others remain unresolved. A painting can hold all of those states at once.

You can see the full scope of Elisabeth's work and projects on her website:
elisabethcondon.com











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MIXTURE
IN THE
MIXTURE



Mind Leaves Body, April 3 - 21, 2024, Westbeth Gallery, New York, NY. Photo: Jason Mandella. Elisabeth Condon, *Flower Lattice*, *Prayer Mat*, and *Folded Flower*



Bonsai Garden, 2022. Acrylic and mediums on linen. 30" x 22".



Vermillion|10 Black Mountain 2026 Leaves, petals, sweet gum balls, pine needles, urban detritus, polymer, tulle From 96 x 48 inches to 48 x 48 inches Minami Ando and Lucia Betelu perform Vermillion|10 at Black Mountain College's former campus for {re}Happening 14. Commissioned by Black Mountain College Museum + Art Center, April 25, 2026 with support from Emerson Dorsch Artist Residency/EDAR. Photo Ibett Yanez del Castillo

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