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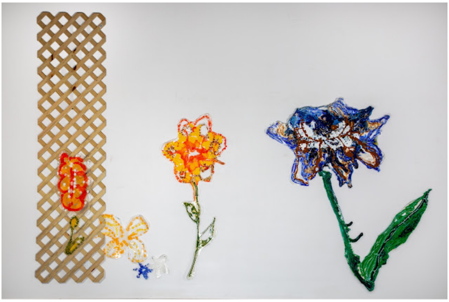
- Art Institute of Chicago
- Chinese Painting
- Chinese Scroll Painting
- Elisabeth Condon
- Emerson Dorsch Gallery
- Floral
- Irregular Linear Forms
- Natural Environment
- Scrolls
- Secret Landscapes

May 01, 2023

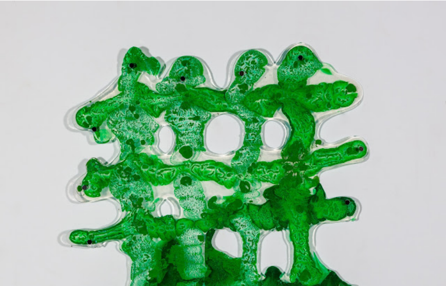
MAY 2023 UNICORN OF THE MONTH: ELISABETH CONDON

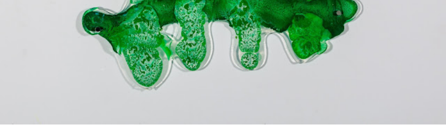


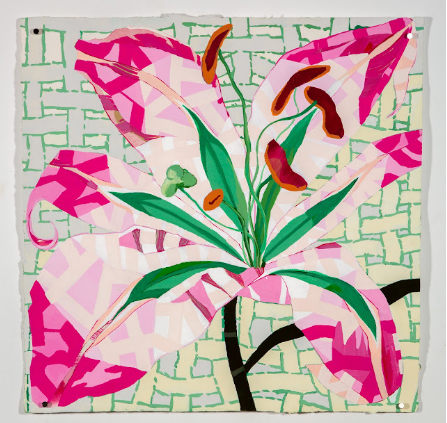
1. Tell me about you as a person. The name in which you prefer to go by. Where are you based? What are your origins, where are you from, etc.?

I use my full name. I'm based in the West Village of Manhattan, and I have a studio in The Clemente building on the Lower East Side. From teaching days, I also have a house and studio in Tampa, Florida, where my partner is based. I grew up in Los Angeles, a multi-layered landscape: desert, snow-capped mountains, Pacific Ocean, Hollywood. I'm second-generation Angelino on my mom's side. My dad was from the Midwest. Past generations of my family lived in New York, Missouri, and Oklahoma, which resonates with my moves from LA to Chicago to New York. My LA grandparents traveled to Hong Kong and Thailand, and I lived in Shanghai for six months. The numerous residencies I have attended shape my perception of landscape as layered, permeable, and provisional. That is because landscape is my secret collaborator: wherever I am insinuates its way into my work immediately. Walking through landscape and absorbing the way it feels inspires me to pour and paint. I travel a lot to see paintings and attend residencies. My partner is a painter and paint maker. We've been together since grad school. We often travel together.

2. How long have you been practicing art professionally, when did you consider yourself a real artist?







I earned my MFA over thirty years ago. Though the degree is considered a benchmark it took many more years of studio work and exhibiting to establish what being an artist meant for myself. First-hand experience takes years to accrue, and I wanted that. My professional path had to align with the development of my work, and it took time. I related to Ab Ex painters who didn't have their first shows until forty, although I started showing in my thirties. Unfolding over time feels more natural to me.

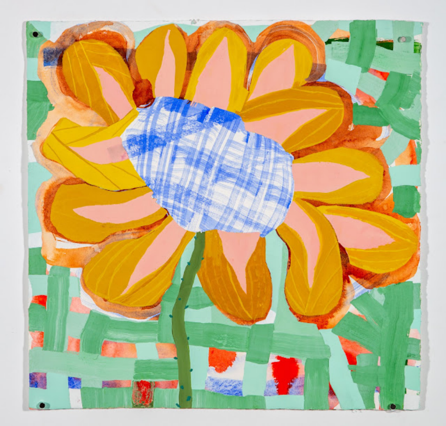
3. Did you go to art school? Tell me about your training, formal and informal.

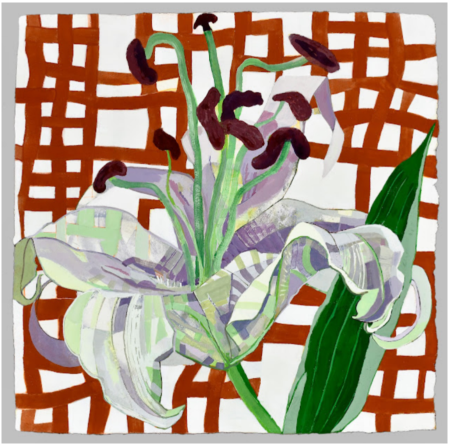
I always drew and looked at art. There was never a question as to what my major would be when I first attend UCSD in the late 1970s. The foundation year was completely conceptual. As I'd grown up religious, the conceptual focus made sense to me. It kept art abstract. I transferred to UCLA my second year, but LA's punk scene was a siren song and I dropped out to work in window display and go clubbing. Nightclubs, performances, and windows offered dimensional, immersive environments. I returned to Otis/Parsons to complete a BFA. Art school introduced a focus on making, grounding art in the body and material. I left LA to earn my masters at the Art Institute of Chicago. Looking back, studying with David Antin, Allan Kaprow, Chris Burden, Lita Albuquerque, Mike Kelley, Susanna Coffey, and Barbara Rossi instigated a dual focus on concept and form. How do concepts become real?

When I discovered Chinese scroll painting, in which philosophy, process, and painting intermingle with landscape, its all-encompassing language answered my question with the balance of unlike elements. Formal training didn't end with degrees but continued with teaching and taking courses. As a painting instructor at Bennington in 1997-8 I worked with the painter Susanna Heller, and with the painter Mernet Larsen at the University of South Florida in the 'aughts. Both were seminal influences for me, although we were colleagues. Mernet and I curated a show together about contemporary artists looking at ancient Asian painting techniques (Dragon Veins, 2006). On a sabbatical, I took a New York Studio School Drawing Marathon with Graham Nickson, and later, Chinese painting classes with Sungsook Setton at the China Institute in New York to expand my understanding of pictorial space and scroll painting.

4. What are the medium(s) that you prefer to work in and tell why?

I prefer thin, even runny mediums with a hint of resistance, whether shellac in ink or a granular pigment in paint or dispersion ink. I offset the thin transparency with gummy, gel-soaked pours and densely pigmented gouache, which my partner makes. I mix my paint with acrylic gels, glitter, and pumice for extra body, shine, or matte qualities. When I first moved to New York in 1992 as a representational oil painter, painting was a window, but after switching to acrylic, it became a scroll. I left empty areas of linen as I poured water-based media, overlaying scroll painting tropes with the landscapes I painted. Lately I've been getting into paint skins, as well.





5. Who are some of your art inspirations? What are some of your non-art inspirations?

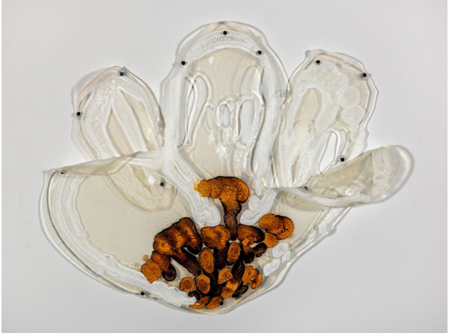
I've been looking hard at Pattern and Decoration in the past few years, including Ree Morton's Signs of Love shown in the recent Craft show at the Whitney. Non-art-wise, films like Superstar and Boogie Nights, directed by Todd Haynes and Paul Thomas Anderson respectively, expose complex truths about human relationships that hearken back to my favorite novel Middlemarch, by George Eliot. Now, I mostly read nonfiction, Anne Truitt's Yield or Maggie Nelson's Freedom, NY Review of Books, and NY Times. I relish flowers and their interface with urban landscape. The ease of walking through changing scenery brings great pleasure, whether the NY Botanical Garden or Prince Street.

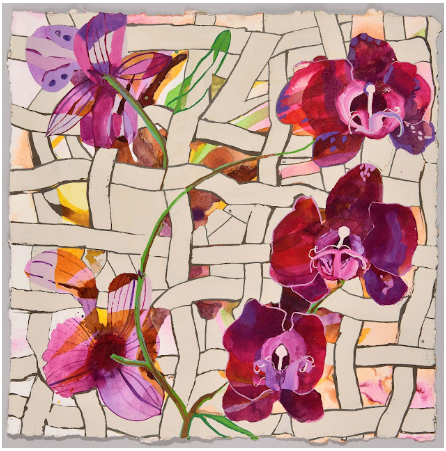
6. When do you know when a work is finished?

Sometimes it clicks with satisfying completion, and your eye and interior nod in harmony that it's done. Other times, there's nowhere else for the process to go. The work hits a pause, when not knowing and disinterest converge. That's a call for time to discern the next move or conclude the painting finished. It can get tricky, because I can think a painting is finished then rework it, or likewise fall in love with the effects of paint and later deem them insufficient. Having overworked and underworked plenty of paintings, time becomes increasingly crucial: time to paint, time to discern, time to edit.

7. Tell me about your process when working. Do you listen to music or do any rituals to get yourself ready to make art?

I usually work in the afternoons when starting a new body of work and as the work builds start earlier and earlier. I listen to Pandora. Its soundscapes bathe me in neutralized sound akin to pours. I'll play podcasts to enliven repetitive tasks or satisfy the need for voices. In a state of maximum focus, I work in silence. Sometimes when concentrating, I stop hearing whatever is playing. If a course of action is not already present when I enter the studio, I sit with the painting to see what it needs. When that becomes clear, I begin. I feel a burning curiosity and intense focus when pouring, because it's pure, direct experience. When the composition needs definition, I slow down and work incrementally. To balance I work between canvases in various stages. I also switch media, working on paper, or linen, or ink. When the day ends, I wash brushes, cover bowls of paint with foil, and prepare the studio for tomorrow. Then, I sit with the work for a while.





8. What are the meanings and the concepts behind this particular body of work?

Inspired by scroll painting, I perceive landscape as a construct as much as a physical reality, both real and fake. I paint it as a combination of nature and décor, combining interior and exterior perceptions. Landscape is movement, and I pour paint to enact a similar effect on canvas. It is also pattern. I combine pours and patterns to explore structural extremes, to push ideas of restraint toward impulse, and to surround impulse with restraint. Once I understood that ink painting derives from an intimate understanding of bamboo, orchid, plum blossom, and chrysanthemum and is not a replacement for nature, I purchased flowers from bodegas and florists, my closest access to nature in the city. Though my interest in flowers derives from calligraphy practice and the Asian-inspired wallpaper and textiles I grew up with, I paint them with gouache to negotiate the heavy, handmade paper they are painted on.

Recently at the Sam and Adele Golden Foundation residency, I began making flowers with paint skins. Polymer is fragile, and without a substrate or binder will sag and tear, but the wallpaper cheer of my flowers maintains hope. These polymer flowers can be combined and recombined in a calligraphy of forms. The prospect of pouring a painting in one go remains profoundly exciting; to make a dimensional one-go painting irresistible.

9.What do you want viewers would take away from your work?

Everything, really. Buoyancy. Space that inspires, imaginary landscapes, worlds within worlds.Visually challenging interior logic. Epic life force. Joy and interest. A life that extends over time.

10.What are your biggest goals as a visual artist? And what has been your proudest moment professionally?

My biggest goal as a visual artist is to make paintings as powerful as those that made me want to be an artist in the first place. Paintings that continually surprise, that one always comes back to, that one can't stop looking at and want to live inside of, filled with feeling and interior life. Paintings that reveal new ideas and associations over the passage of time. Paintings that become beautiful in a complex way.

I've had many proud professional moments, made full by having lived the experience of making the work. Receiving the Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant and the Pollock Krasner Foundation Grant were magical moments. Every residency, every exhibition, public *commission, and opportunity that acknowledges the work and moves it forward is cherished, not only because recognition is a sign of encouragement but because each experience has magnified my experience in ways I could never imagine.*

To see more of Elisabeth's work, visit her website and be sure to follow her IG and Emerson Dorsch Gallery.

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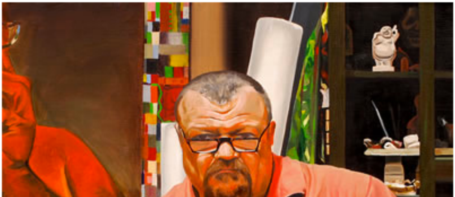

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