

ART SPIEL

Reflections on the work of contemporary artists

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Elisabeth Condon – Responding to Contingency



Elisabeth Condon, Plant Life, 2018, ink, acrylic on parchment, 144 x 32, photo Jim Reiman

Elisabeth Condon is a traveler in life and art. Her large scale scrolls, installations, and paintings entice the viewer to join her in adventurous excursions of new and imaginative landscapes. The artist's innate sensibility for color, pattern, and form, ignited by an insatiable curiosity for cultural intersections, have resulted in an outstanding body of work. For Art Spiel, Elisabeth Condon sheds some light on her dynamic mode of visual quest, and on-going projects.

AS: Tell me a bit about your background and what brought you to art.

Elisabeth Condon: I grew up in Los Angeles on a suburban street that abutted a canyon, nestled in the hills behind the intersection of Mulholland and Sepulveda Boulevards. Though I did not speak until five years old, I clearly remember watching light filter through the Asian-inspired fretwork in the foyer of our home, the wallpaper pattern in the kitchen, staring into the Inness reproduction over the sofa. My sisters and I were born three and a half years apart. We attended a Christian Science school in Beverly Hills, where the actor who played the Professor on the television series *Gilligans Island* picked his daughter up from school. Living in a film town with a religious emphasis on spirit over matter gave experience a virtuality that relates to painting or online life today.

At ten I took private art lessons with Renate Zerner in her sunlit Westwood apartment and tasted freedom. With Judy Collins' *Send in the Clowns* blasting on the stereo, I poured food coloring on large sheets of paper. At home, my mother, who was obsessed with décor, spoke of patterns and drapes with close scrutiny. Art always felt natural, a part of my world. I started as an art major at UCSD and UCLA, but between 1980 and 1982 college was no match for LA's music scene, so I dropped out and devoted myself to nightclubs while working as a full-time visual merchandiser for a clothing chain. The desire to paint prevailed; with a BFA from Otis Art Institute of Parsons School of Design I spent summer 1986 in a hot Tribeca sublet, painting large, unstretched, scroll-like canvases before moving to Chicago for graduate school. I moved to New York in 1992.

My work throughout the 90's focused on doll portraits and multi-figure compositions, a hybrid of still life and figure that spoke about girlhood experience and the personae within each of us. I made this work for a decade or more until I began teaching in Tampa, Florida. Its landscape immersed me in a déjà vu so powerful it changed my work and experience of landscape forever. Around this

time I discovered Chinese scrolls, their infinite capacity to communicate weather, light, temperature and movement in ink. Scrolls inspired me to switch to acrylics and pour them thin like ink on linen substrates. On travels to Taipei, Beijing, Dunhuang, Yangshuo, Sydney, and throughout the US, I looked at and practiced ink painting, in addition to teaching full time and maintaining a live/work space in Brooklyn. In my paintings landscape became the container for multiple, diverse paint applications, creating atmospheres that resembled but were not collage. I resigned tenure four years ago and moved to Westbeth; Manhattan's artificial landscape necessitated adding vintage textile and wallpaper patterns to my work.

In the essay for *Near and Distant Views*, Franklin Einspruch says that the making of pattern and the making of meaning became permanently linked in your psyche. Can you elaborate on that?

Elisabeth Condon: The brevity and repetition of pattern is a natural approach to painting form. It is both abstract and representational, like ink painting or urban signage that replaces natural landmarks. Pattern suits my proclivities to move through large expanses while retaining spontaneity of movement. Pattern also links a formative childhood influence to a larger socio-economic and cultural history. It extends the harmonic principles in traditional *gongbi* (representational) bird and flower painting, contributes a distinctly feminine aesthetic both decorative and immersive in scale, and crosses multiple cultures. These factors deepen its associative significance. Einspruch's essay also alludes to adolescent ponderings whether information is reducible to a single layer. I never thought so.



Elisabeth Condon, 2016, installation image Bird and Flower, Lesley Heller, New York, NY



*Elisabeth Condon, Shards, 2018, ink, acrylic on paper, 111 x 55 inches,
photo Jim Reiman*

AS: It seems that in your earlier body of work you have alternated between abstraction and painterly figuration, and then later on navigated more towards Asian tradition. How do you see the role of Asian mode of making in your work?

Elisabeth Condon: Florida's humid air and saturated light demanded a new logic, or else it would be homogenized like Gerome's depictions of Africa. A landscape possesses unique visual terms around which culture organizes and in turn shapes identity. I often wonder how landscape inspired the nomadic Chinese painter Shi'T'ao to change his name in different phases of his life. The *shan-shui* (mountain-water, or landscape) tradition of Chinese scrolls translates script into landscape and embraces both sensory experience and observation. A studio art that is executed away from the motif, *shan-shui* invites interpretation, whereas western single point perspective and volumetric form more or less itemizes. Texture, gesture, and tonality activate form in *shan-shui* composition. Its simultaneous, butterfly perspective, time-lapse sequence and fleeting forms make perfect sense in a global world where science proves subjectivity as powerful as observation.

Pictograms on oracle bones during the Shang Dynasty, 1600 – 1400 B.C.E. evolved into calligraphic scripts that progressively loosened, from Seal to Clerical, followed by Running (Semi-Cursive) that by the Song and Yuan Dynasties, 960 -1300 AD, morphed into texture strokes for landscape. Thus painting can be read as much as viewed. Each stroke must be practiced until knowledge of it is embodied, like a martial art or moving meditation. *Shan-shui* opens visual and conceptual possibilities for landscape elements to be combined and recombined. The demands of stroke order and ink load integrate material and non-material practices. Scroll painting joins calligraphy and poetry as the *Three Perfections*. It is always permeable, open, and aesthetically inspiring for my work.

AS: What can you tell me about your trip to China in this context?

Elisabeth Condon: The six-month residency at Swatch Art Peace Hotel, Shanghai was my seventh and by far longest trip to China. I needed to engage what was happening in China *now*, not just Imperial times and scroll painting from the Song and Yuan Dynasties. From May to November I lived at the Bund and Nanjing Dong Lu, an area equivalent to Times Square. Funded by a Confucius Institute *Understanding China* grant, I interviewed five Chinese artists born under the single child policy: Wang Xin, Bi Rongrong, Gao Lei, Zhao Yi Qian, and Lu Zhengyuan. (Four can be read on the Art File archive and the fifth on Raggedy Ann's Foot). In the

studio I developed rice paper collages that re-interpret ink through a western lens, and on canvas, added glitter as both topography and surface. I also began pouring Chinese ink to acrylic. Ink conveys darkness like the deep black of the Huangpu River at midnight and Manhattan soot: the black of infinite histories accumulating on each other.



Elisabeth Condon, 2014 Black Barge Passing, 2014, ink and watercolor on rice paper, 27 x 54 inches



Elisabeth Condon, 2015 Pulse Art Fair (Shanghai paintings), Emerson Dorsch, New York, NY



Elisabeth Condon, Maple Leaf Season, 2018, acrylic/ink on linen, 30 x 47 inches, photo Jason Mandella

AS: It is evident in your work that color plays a central role for you. How do you choose your palette?

Elisabeth Condon: Clear, transparent color records the movement and speed of the pour. Sometimes I prioritize viscosity, as certain colors pour better than others. These are mostly staining colors like the pthalo hues, which unfortunately can be garish. I love to pollute color with ink, or surround clear hues with chromatic neutrals to switch on their internal light. I also love contrasting color systems, such as playing my mother's vintage wallpaper samples with their tasteful neutrals against messy fluorescent pours and smears of glitter. I stretch the range of a color from perimeter to depth, so the color assumes different characteristics or properties throughout the course of a painting. Through pouring the palette coalesces, the initial pour prompts spontaneous next steps and color guides the process.

AS: Can you talk a bit about your *Wallpaper Dragon* from 2018?

Elisabeth Condon: Paper is my immediate way to respond to contingency and to work out the terms of a landscape. I spent the first part of 2018 on residencies in Florida, New Mexico, Wyoming, and traveled to Kauai after that. On residency for three weeks at the Carrizozo Colony in New Mexico, I wanted to paint everything I was thinking about: #Me Too, Tibetan Buddhism, Mayan gods and goddesses, combining ink and wallpaper patterns, not to mention Carrizozo itself. So I shipped a roll of watercolor paper, 55 x 33 feet long, to work on while there and let the composition develop according to the circumstance. The scroll literally became a dragon, an undulating body that when moved outside to see its entirety, rose up and tore in a 25 mph wind.

The loving repair of this wound became part of its visual history, while the petroglyphs and white sand dunes of southern New Mexico transformed into patterns and signature seals. It was the first time I worked at such a large scale since graduate school; freeing and challenging to not see everything I was doing at once and just work with ideas spontaneously. I will continue making scrolls; the large scale makes sense, they are like handmade sheets of unwieldy wallpaper, which excites me, and the sheer physicality of the scroll becomes performative. In fact the scroll has been featured in highly public situations, such as Wang Xin's project *The Gallery*, an hour-long installation at the Armory Fair, Norte Maar's *Brooklyn Performance Combine at The Muse* and now Miami International Airport.

AS: What is the genesis of *Near and Distant Views*, your project at the Miami International Airport?

Elisabeth Condon: Since the 2015 Pulse art fair show of Shanghai paintings, I exhibit paintings on wallpaper or color walls that expand their influence, as if walking through a scroll and immersing us. In late 2017 I was invited to apply to the Mia Galleries, an honor since they showcase good artists and have a beautiful exhibition space, which I'd only seen in photographs until recently. At first it seemed best to consider specific groups of paintings such as nightclub or wallpaper paintings, but nothing worked until combining paintings I'd made in China in 2009 and 2014 with a 2016 wallpaper painting and *Wallpaper Dragon*, enveloping them in a deep red cave. I consider these works among my best, so I am excited about and proud of the show. I am hoping to do a walkthrough since it's in

Terminal E, behind security.



Elisabeth Condon, Near and Distant Views, 2018. Miami International Airport, Division of Fine Arts & Cultural Affairs. Photo Dan Forer

AS: What role does a specific site take in your work? Let's take, *Goddesses and Warriors*, which you define as site-specific. How did it start and what was your process?

Elisabeth Condon: I first visited Art & Museums Maitland in 2017 on a three-week residency. The site is a Mayan Revival arts colony designed and built by J. Andre Smith in 1937, a gated compound near a large lake and sweeping skies that welcomed Milton Avery among Smith's other artist friends during its twenty year activity. Now, Art & Museums Maitland is reviving the artist residency, inviting one artist at a time.

Smith's favored art form was tiles carved in wet cement combining images of Jesus, Buddha, Guan Yin, Ixchel (the Mayan harvest goddess), and numerous warriors. Despite or perhaps because of the amateur quality, Smith's Mayan

iconography appears brutally sexual, particularly among community classrooms in suburban Orlando. Ixchel's mouth is a gaping hole, flowers sprout from her vulva, her arms embrace duck-snake creatures and cats. How could I have missed such imagery, such a rich culture and landscape, in which Bronze Age Asia joins Los Angeles nightclubs right here in the Americas! It hit me like Chinese painting.

But the story of how this evolved. My 2017 residency had a 2018 exhibition attached, so I returned for a 2018 residency with the idea of making work on site creating several iterations during the show. The first iteration was work from the first residency, the departure point for what I'd make next. With #Me Too raging, I wanted to work big, take up space, lavishly pour. This introduced the watercolor rolls, which I grabbed from the studio and unfurled. By the end of the 2018 residency I was pouring on the lawn, washing the pours down and pouring again. Concurrent with the paper rolls I brought a stack of parchment a friend had given me from Mexico. I began painting these not knowing where they'd go. It took some time to get used to the parchment, which, as skin, was perfect for the mood of this work and J. Andre Smith's Mayan-derived imagery. I covered the images with ink, which soaked perfectly into the parchment pores. These became a parchment hanging with layers of décor and disturbance, which inspired *Wallpaper Dragon*, the work I made right after.

I was the only one staying in the compound, and at night after everyone left I'd work late, channeling the multiple forces of the site. I researched Mayan culture and see this as a new direction in my work, but the magic at Maitland was working with the space at hand. In the show's final iteration I showed large paper works and the parchment hanging work made from 36 smaller pieces with ink drawings of Ixchel I'd made in 2017 that inspired everything else. I remember making those first drawings and how transgressive they felt. This imagery is wild, and I can't wait to travel to Mexico and Guatemala and see their origins. Another thing about Smith's carvings is that they bring different cultures together. I feel this impulse to combine materials, texture, applications as well.

I really do believe the landscape forms us and in that sense am always responsive. In this way, site has an even faster and immediate influence. It is something I love about residencies: living and working together invites full immersion into a new

location.

AS: I would like to congratulate you on your 2018 prestigious Joan Mitchell award. You have also been travelling and spending many months in different art residencies – these are all wonderful events that you probably still need to process. What is happening in your studio these days?

Elisabeth Condon: Thank you so much. It is deeply thrilling, an honor. Joan Mitchell is a brilliant painter, whose love for landscape and release in painting provides a prime example. She even spoke at my MFA graduation! And continues to cultivate a profound artistic lineage.

In the studio I'm working slowly on four to five mid-size paintings, wanting to integrate the small bodies of worked developed in each location I've visited this year with ideas of spaces living inside other spaces. The current paintings are in the pour stages, so I'm rooting around, painting around the pours or sometimes digging in, literally, with a palette knife. I'm also practicing ink painting, having studied with Sungsook Setton at China Institute to better perfect my understanding of the Four Gentlemen of Chinese painting: bamboo, orchid, chrysanthemum, and plum. So it's busy, and I feel very excited about painting right now.



Condon in her studio at The Clemente, Photo Brian Buckley, 2018

➤ **ARTIST INTERVIEW**

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