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An essay about Elisabeth Condon by Stephanie Buhmann

Elisabeth Condon: The Confluence of Consciousness

BY STEPHANIE BUHMANN

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In discussing her recent body of paintings and design objects, it becomes evident that Condon is achieving two seemingly opposing goals: pushing her work into uncharted territory and, simultaneously, drawing it back into a close circle. This duality is clarified when one recognizes that the former relates to her painting technique, while the latter is connected to her personal heritage. Following her residency at the Golden Foundation in 2022 in New Berlin, New York, Condon honed her skills and gained valuable insights into working with innovative techniques in the acrylic medium. Concurrently, grappling with the recent loss of her mother and the profound closeness they shared, she has been collecting memories of family life, discerning a profound connection between her present and her origins.

Since 2005, around the time when she began splitting her time between Tampa, Florida, and after spending years in New York, Condon has incorporated the pouring of paint as a preliminary step in her artistic process. “The move completely unearthed me,” she notes when explaining how this radical step in her personal biography had found reflection in developing a new visual language. “I thought that I had been completely cut off as I had spent years in large cities before.” It is a technique that at first glance may link her to some of the leading protagonists of Abstract Expressionism, such as Jackson Pollock, Helen Frankenthaler, Sam Francis, Jules Olitski, and Kenneth Noland, as well as fellow contemporaries like Peggy Bates. However, for Condon, pouring paint marks only the initial, spontaneous phase of a complex exploration that does not solely unfold in abstraction. Rather, it is employed as a means to allow her compositions to emerge organically while the inherent unpredictability of the process propels unexpected turns and outcomes that ignite her imagination. In essence, Condon employs each pour as a key to unlock the door to an individual painting experience. In subsequent steps, she gathers various forms and premeditated marks, which occasionally encompass detailed renderings of plants or insects. Consequently, Condon’s paintings materialize as intriguing brainstorm. They are captivating tapestries where the fusion of rapid visual note-taking and extended observations succeeds in seamlessly integrating diverse forms and modes of conveying information. Meanwhile, the extent of detailed elements varies between works. For example, *Summer Afternoon* gathers various insects, lush leaves, and one bird-of-paradise, among others. These create a distinct juxtaposition against the almost translucent green layers of the background, in which splatters of dissolving pigment contribute to the overall sense of dynamism. Similar to the smaller canvases *Nectar* and *Radiant Flower*, where a single butterfly assumes an iconic presence, *Summer Afternoon* is grounded in a collage-like effect. This approach accentuates the interplay between tangible and indistinct elements, creating a dynamic tension within the artwork.

“I found escape in staring at the wallpaper, but décor doubled as God, the patterns in my childhood home surrounding and surveilling me.”

Elisabeth Condon Gooley Center, 2023 Acrylic mediums on linen 21 x 30 inches

In fact, in perusing Condon’s paintings, one will detect an embrace of both dichotomies and pairings. For instance, cool and hot hues are frequently in dialogue, including in *Forest*. In addition, the definition of negative and positive space is often interchangeable, such as in *Gooley Center*, where the white background morphs from describing a vast space in the background to defining forms that could sit on top. There also is the interplay of soft and clearly defined edges of translucent washes and opaque shapes. For example, in *Body of Landscape*, the poured yellow ochre shape at the center becomes framed by diverse forms. It is surrounded by dark biomorphic clusters whose accent marks in yellow resemble graphic simplifications of folds and shading. Meanwhile, a saturated green used for a “casual, alternative” line on the lower left and lower right side of the composition describes formations reminiscent of leaves.

Many of Condon’s paintings seem to simultaneously offer both a microscopic and macrocosmic perspective. In *Body of Landscape*, we might be facing the dense undergrowth of a tropical rainforest or a cosmic nebula. Indeed, literal translations and interpretations are of no importance in Condon’s work, which instead thrives on the exhilarating feeling of new discoveries. In the spirit of Umberto Eco’s literary milestone *The Open Work* (1962), which Condon lists as a seminal reference, her work remains ambiguous, inviting the audience to form their own associations and find their own meaning. Delving into the unknown, we embrace plantlike shapes as our starting point for creative exploration. With the artist, we embark on journeys without a destination. One is reminded of Confucius and the saying “the path is the goal.”

Overall, the interplay of vibrant colors functions as a unifying force in Condon’s paintings. It is the binding agent for her diverse array of forms. In fact, she skillfully utilizes a complex palette without sacrificing control over a prevailing sense of balance. Her work may be dense, layered, and nuanced, and pushing our senses, yet without ever overwhelming them. Rather, her complex language is one of many roads traveled, a process that takes time but is also fleeting. This is the core sentiment of *Tempus Fugit* (Latin for “time flies”) which connects viewers with glimpses of Condon’s life as it has unfolded across various landscapes and climate zones.

Born in 1959, Condon’s formative years unfolded in what she describes as a “sleepier version” of Los Angeles, marked by vivid memories of its distinctive light. Afterward, she resided in Chicago, earning her MFA from The School of The Art Institute of Chicago. Since 2005, she has divided her time between New York City and Florida. Throughout her artistic journey, Condon has drawn inspiration from diverse sources, spanning the 1970s Los Angeles glam rock scene, children’s picture books, to war photographs. Her work echoes American modernism, particularly Color Field painting, and is influenced by calligraphy, Shan Shui (traditional Chinese mountain-water painting), contemporary graphic design patterning, and the rapid pace of consuming images in the digital realm. Along the way, Condon acquired proficiency in sumi-e brush painting, a technique where form and gesture converge in a single stroke.

All these influences are reflected in her work, especially in one of Condon’s three largest paintings in the exhibition, entitled *Bulls Eye*. At the bottom right, a group of red flowers, and on the top left, a group of semi-circles—possibly (and regardless of the work’s title) alluding to the sun, a distant planet, or rainbow—immediately impart a landscape-like quality to the horizontal composition. The top left shape stands out in form and color. It was created with a technique in which different paints are loaded onto the same brush and applied in one smooth movement. As a result, it forms a stark contrast with the rest of the composition. “I wanted to disrupt the color logic that had started to emerge,” Condon notes, adding, “I also wanted to disrupt my own desire for equilibrium.” This element is counterbalanced by a muted, snake-like shape undulating in and out of the forefront in the lower left and background. *Bulls Eye* poignantly reflects what Condon refers to as a “confluence of consciousness,” capturing moments of concentrated observation that contrast with intuitively emerging sections.

However, recently, it is memories of her childhood and mother’s later home that have infiltrated Condon’s consciousness. As the younger of several siblings, she grew up in a conservative and religious household that was lavishly decorated. “I found escape in staring at the wallpaper, but décor doubled as God, the patterns in my childhood home surrounding and surveilling me,” she remembers. A black and white photograph of the bedroom in the house, to which her mother had moved when she was about forty years old, Condon shares as a strong reference point to her latest work. In this striking image, in which every detail conveys a sense of its inhabitant’s personality, a wall becomes a montage of family history, showcasing portraits of the children against a lattice wallpaper backdrop. The whimsy of the personal objects and stark elegance of a white bedspread in the center completes the otherwise dense layering of visual information. In conversation, Condon reflects on her mother’s mindset, noting, “My mother had a very abstract and metaphysical brain, which is all about layering, I think.”

It is the kind of contemplation and subsequent introspection that vividly underscores the substantial influence of the memory of the distinctive interior on Condon’s current emotional landscape. This home, where art, nostalgic and even whimsical objects, furniture, textures, and forms coalesced into a layered installation, leaves a visually traceable imprint on several of her recent paintings. For example, in *Red Lattice* and *Plant Form* the pattern of said wallpaper, samples of which Condon had received from her mother in recent years, is used to frame if not somewhat even tame the free pours with which these paintings began. The same is true for works in which the lattice has transformed into a grid-like web, a skeleton structure that holds the fluid forms in place.

Condon’s work stands out for its departure from straightforward observation of the immediate environment. Instead, she delves into the impressions and sensations inspired by her surroundings, which manifest as paintings that construct enigmatic and captivating worlds. This infinite quality has long been a distinctive characteristic of her artistic expression.

Hence, it is exciting to see Condon dare to occasionally leave the picture plane. A couple of pieces of furniture (or better, designed pieces of sculpture) add to this exhibition. In these objects, paintings have become part of seating arrangements, and vice versa. One might be reminded of Robert Rauchenberg or Frederick Kiesler, artists who in the 1950s started to challenge the divide between the genres of painting, sculpture, and architecture. In her paintings, Condon has long liberated herself from any sense of constraint that the edges of a canvas may hold. She does not recognize limitations, allowing her compositions to push beyond the measurements of the frame. Furthermore, she has made a compelling case for compositions whose fluid and growing forms extend rather than contract. Now, by pushing her works physically into space and toward the viewer, Condon is providing a tangible bridge between the landscapes of her imagination and the immersive realm she envisions for all of us to be able to share.

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