

Three Strikes:

The Evolution of a Creative Practice Through
Discovery, Connection, and Structure

or

We Should All Be Artists, Anthropologists, and Feminists

By

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Sing in me, muse, and through me tell your story.¹

We are always in everything that we do in the world limited by subjectivity.

But our perspective can have enormous wingspan, if we give it the freedom to unfurl.

—Lily King, *Euphoria*

¹ This is the mantra or small prayer that I try to remember to say three times before I start to work in my studio. It's the "Invocation of the Muse" and is borrowed from the first line of Homer's *Odyssey*. Not only does this practice help to center me before I start to create, but I also like to think that the invisible sentiment is woven throughout my artistic output, and in this way, it goes out into the world with my work. I wish that I had thought up the idea to do this myself, but I didn't. I stole it from the book *The War of Art: Break Through the Blocks and Win Your Inner Creative Battles*, by Steven Pressfield. Thank you, Steven! Somehow, the process always tends to go much smoother in the studio when I take a moment to engage in this small ritual.

Abstract

By identifying the three areas that merge to form my artistic practice: discovery, connection, and structure; this thesis uses my creative process as a way to form the link between my intellectual and material impulses, and to identify the connections I make between what abstract painting means to me, my feminist ideals and how they are informed by the gender inequality persistent in the art world today,² as well as thoughts I have around the concept of the “feminine” as viewed through the lens of art history. In this way, I demonstrate how these elements are woven together and the ways in which I filter my cultural perspectives and lived experiences into my paintings in a symbolic way.

² For the record, it has become clear to me through my studies, that the art-historical timeline that is drawn upon in many important academic and critical writings is based on an overly male dominated tradition. Thus, leaving many women artists who may have actually “gotten there first,” out of the story. Therefore, in a *very small* attempt to right a wrong, I have intentionally only chosen women artists to talk about in this thesis.

On a more positive note, it seems that how art history is taught may be changing. Indeed, Yale University recently announced that it is “eliminating its [most popular] art history survey course over complaints that it prioritizes a white, Western [and therefore male] canon over other narratives.” From a statement made by the Yale Art History Department, “Essential to this decision is the department’s belief that no one survey course taught in the space of a semester could ever be comprehensive, and that no one survey course can be taken as *the* definitive survey of our discipline.” (Dafoe)

Introduction

How does my culture and the inherent perspective that it endows me with affect the choices I make around what I create? How do I process my life experiences, the world in which I live, and intentionally or subconsciously imbue my work with symbolic content? And how has my thinking around these questions evolved along with my artistic process? In an attempt to understand my creative urges, these are the vital questions I have been thinking about as I have worked to hone the artistic process inherent to my work.

Additionally, the intertwined nature of my creative impulses, as well as my intellectual and art-historical preoccupations, have taken on a visual form. As I work, I envision a vast web-like, interwoven diagram, or maybe a colorful abstracted tapestry or a map. One that appears interspersed throughout with glimmering imperceptible threads that contain within them the answers to these questions. In this way, it seems that weaving has become an apt metaphor for the creative process I employ as I paint. Through the use of multiple mediums, artistic techniques, and the embedded ephemera that I collect as I go about my daily life, my paintings become richly woven with symbolic meaning culled from my personal history, interests, accrued knowledge, belief systems, and aesthetic codes.

Along those lines, and by employing some of the technical language of the craft, I have identified the areas that merge to form the “warp” and the “weft” of my creative output. The warp—the vertical threads—form the discovery, connection, and structure that allude to my process and the materiality of my artwork. And the weft—the horizontal threads—are interwoven throughout to form the link between my intellectual and material impulses, as well as to identify the connections I make between what abstract

painting means to me, my feminist ideals and how they are informed by the gender inequality persistent in the art world today, as well as the thoughts I have around the concept of the “feminine” as viewed through the lens of art history.



Figure 1: Anne Barnes. *In This World and Beyond: Diptych*, 2016. Acrylic, collage, Flashe, oil-based paint stick, plaster on canvas, 72” x 36”

Discovery: We Should All Be Artists

Discovery can be thought of along two lines. There is the *discovery* in my studio practice, where I experiment with new materials, tools, and mark-making gesture. Constantly honing my artistic technique and working towards a unique and authentic “creative voice.” This method of discovery is made tangible through the physical form of my paintings and other artistic output. And then, there is the *discovery* that comes with education and accrued knowledge. This type of discovery is gained in multiple ways by an artist, and I have found that this part of my practice is the aspect that requires the most persistence, as well as patience. While concrete information is gained through my academic reading and research, there is also much to be gained through observation and experiential discovery. As I go about my day-to-day life, I constantly remind myself to

really look at the world around me. To train my artist's eye. To look up and to look down. To change my visual perspective in order to *not* miss anything. To be in the moment, and to remember to slow down and really *see*. In this way, I absorb my world and translate the details into my paintings.



Figure 2: Anne Barnes. *C is for Cheetah* and *H is for Hedgehog*, 2017. Acrylic, collage, graphite, ink, watercolor on paper, each 10" x 10"

The paintings that I entered the Lesley Art & Design MFA program with are more on the “retinal” side, to borrow the term from Marcel Duchamp. They are less fully informed by concrete ideas, rely more on my graphic design skills and interests (i.e., typography, collaged book pages, literary references), and fall more on the decorative side (see Figures 1 and 2). While there may be a basic concept behind the work, it is shallow and not based on any knowledge of art history or theory.

As I have learned more of the technical language of the visual arts and how what I am creating fits within the art-historical canon, I have come to rely less on being intuitive

in my process and merely decorative in my creative choices and have begun to experiment by paring down my work to the basic forms of pure abstraction.

At first, I felt the need to remove all subjective matter, to concentrate instead on thinking about the basic building blocks of an abstract painting: chroma, gesture, mark-making, and materiality (see Figures 6, 8, and 9). By doing this, I could start to build my artistic process back up from what was a place of pure *reaction*, into one that was more fully informed by *intent*. Then, once I had a better grasp of my medium, I could start to add the subjective elements back into my work in a way that comes from a place of *knowledge*. In other words, as my thinking and knowledge expand, my creative process can become more finely honed.

*The warps are the parallel paths of her choices that bear her in a single direction, the teeth of the comb fit them, for a moment the colors appear superfluous to the continuing texture.*³ (Burnside 27)

Color Theory: Is Pink a Luxury Color?

While I have taken many art classes, I did not go to art school per se. Because of this, while pursuing my MFA, there were some specific areas that I wanted to delve into academically and technically within my studio practice. One of these areas is color

³ I intentionally allude to the “idiom of weaving” throughout this thesis as a way to: 1) Comment on the gendered binary between craft and high art, and therefore in a sense to *own* the association with the feminine in my work; 2) Draw a connection to an element of my own creative process in which I use many different mediums—including collage—to weave color, texture, and marks throughout the layers of my paintings; and 3) In *Heresies*, Volume 1, Number 4, 1978 (a publication produced by a second wave feminist art collective in New York City in the 1970’s) one of the articles, entitled “Weaving” by Madeleine Burnside, is a short descriptive text about weaving that is interspersed throughout with prose that are what the author—a writer and weaver—referred to as “a metaphor for [her] craft.” I thought that certain lines, when distilled out from the rest of the text, were beautifully poetic. I have pulled some of these lines of text from the article and woven them throughout this paper, thus creating not only a visual metaphor of weaving within the text, but also as a literary device to bridge one section of this thesis to the next. I also use images of my work, and the other artists whom I write about, similarly.

theory. Therefore, I spent much of my first semester learning about color theory and working on my color mixing skills in the studio. This in turn led to a body of work that encompassed the creation of two handmade artist books that visually explored the theme of “color” (see Figure 3) and a diptych on paper interpreting the color spectrum through the symbolic representation of the color wheel.



Figure 3: Anne Barnes. *Color Theory Tabs*, 2018. Pages from a handmade artist book. Acrylic, collage, graphite, ink on paper, each 3” x 9”

Through this exploration, I spent significant time considering chroma, and the love of a bold high-keyed color palette, which has long been a hallmark of both my visual art and graphic design⁴ practices. This is what I gravitate towards in my work, it is what is visually pleasing to me and I attempted to learn more about this through my research and reading.

⁴ I worked in the publishing industry for sixteen years, where I ultimately ended up designing books. I also have a master’s degree in publications design. Additionally, my graphic design experience is the genesis of my interest in artist books, as well as the interplay between words, typography, and imagery in my art. And it continues to foster experimentation in my process towards the development of a unique style of painting that marries my love of pattern, color, typography, the written word, and books.

For example, *Chromophobia*, as described by David Batchelor in his philosophical book by the same name, is “a fear of corruption or contamination through [color].” Logically then, he describes the inverse of this obscure cultural phenomenon as *Chromophilia*—the love of or obsession *with* color.

Batchelor writes that the fear of color has woven its way “through Western culture since ancient times,” which is “apparent from the many attempts to purge [color] from art, literature and architecture, either by making it the property of some ‘foreign’ body—the oriental, the feminine, the infantile, the vulgar or the pathological—or by relegating it to the realm of the superficial. . .” (79) He goes on to state:

[Color] is dangerous. It is a drug, a loss of consciousness, a kind of blindness—at least for a moment. [Color] requires, or results in, or perhaps just is, a loss of focus, of identity, of self. A loss of mind, a kind of delirium, a kind of madness perhaps. (Batchelor 51)

This is almost poetic, but when I think about my own preoccupations with the topic, I prefer his use of the two metaphors “falling” and “leaving” in reference to color:

Their terminologies—of dreams, of joys, of uprootings or undoings of self—remain more or less the same. More than that, perhaps, the descent into [color] often involves lateral as well as vertical displacement; it means being blown sideways at the same time as falling downwards.

(Batchelor 41)

Indeed, there seems to be something about my chromophilia that is unsettling, aggressive even. It knocks you slightly off your feet for a moment and then begs you to

regain your balance so you can come in for another look in order to see the more intricate universe contained within the painting's layers (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Anne Barnes. *Organized Chaos: Polyptych*, 2019. Acrylic, collage, Flashe, glitter, Neocolor I crayon, plaster, Stabilo pencil on canvas, 6' x 6'

Besides chroma, other foundations to color are the meaning, symbolism, history, and social and cultural associations that can be attached to it; all aspects that I find to be an endless source of inspiration.⁵

There are many interesting historical facts about all of the colors in the spectrum, but one color in particular—Pink—has a rather remarkable history. In *The Secret Lives of*

⁵ In Kassia St. Clair's book, *The Secret Lives of Color*, she gives what she calls a "character sketch" of the 75 shades in the spectrum that intrigued her the most, along with quotes like this one by John Ruskin, "The purest and most thoughtful minds are those which love color the most." (St. Clair v) Of course, I tend to agree with this sentiment!

Color the author writes, “Pink’s current image problem is partly due to the feminist backlash against old-fashioned sexism. It is seen as simultaneously infantilizing and... [when used] to depict naked female flesh, sexualizing.” (St. Clair 117) But then fascinatingly, she goes on to state:

Recently it was revealed that products for women...routinely cost more than products for men and boys that are practically identical. In November 2014 French secretary of state for women’s rights Pascale Boistard demanded to know “*Le rose est-il une couleur de luxe?*” (“Is pink a luxury color?”) when it was discovered Monoprix [a major French retail chain] was selling a pack of five disposable pink razors at \$1.93. A ten-pack of blue disposable razors, meanwhile, cost \$1.85. The phenomenon has come to be known as the “pink tax.” (St. Clair 117)

Somehow a *color* has been used to not only infantilize *and* sexualize women, but to also *penalize* us economically! It never ceases to amaze me how deeply embedded within our cultural systems and societal norms that patriarchal inequities can exist. It is for this reason I have begun to comment on this inequity by consciously using vibrant shades of pink, as well as other colors that might be deemed “feminine” in my paintings.

Mark-Making: Left up to Chance and Intention

I have translated my “discovery” mindset into my studio practice in many ways, but it has occurred to me that there is a contradiction to my process. On the one hand, it relies heavily upon *chance*—like the random drips, pours, and gestural marks that I quickly add to the underlayers of a painting. But, eventually, over time as I continue to add layers and detail, it also involves *intention* and a *deliberate* thought process.

Usually, in the beginning layers of a painting, I find that relying on the unplanned and random marks that I create through movement, experimentation with different mark-making tools, and an expressionistic technique allows me to just get started. I create from an intuitive, experimental, almost meditative space. Making the beginning of the work of art about the process, the materials I use, and the act of pure creation—a collaboration with chance.

Relying on chance is the opposite of being in control, and it can be extremely hard to let go of control. More importantly, I find that it is through this process of letting go, that some of the most interesting parts of an artwork are created. I don't think that I could ever achieve some of the many moments of sublime beauty and unique detail that I do in my work if I created from a fully intentional space at all times.

But then, finally, I get to a point where I can no longer rely purely on chance and expressionistic mark-making, and I know that I need to spend some time *really looking* at the work. I must *think deeply* about what I need to do next. This can be difficult, because it's usually somewhere in the middle of the dreaded “ugly stage” of the process, and I have to fight the critical voice in my head that is urging me to destroy it all and just start over. But I know that if I can push through this uncomfortable phase, if I can be patient, that through thoughtful observation the painting will eventually reveal to me what I need to do next.

I recently had the pleasure of attending the opening for the exhibition and artist talk for *Pat Steir: Color Wheel* (see Figure 5), as well as a screening of the documentary *Pat Steir: Artist* by Veronica Gonzalez Peña, at the Hirshhorn Museum.



Figure 5: Pat Steir. *Ten* 2018-19, (one of 30 paintings from *Color Wheel*). Oil on canvas, 108” x 84”⁶

Pat Steir is an abstract painter whose fifty-year career has spanned (and survived) multiple art-historical movements. In both her recent talk and film, she frequently points to her reliance on “chance” in making her iconic “waterfall” paintings, as well as then spending considerable time with her paintings just looking and waiting for them to reveal to her when they are done. She pours the paint and then comes back the next day to “look at what the paint does” overnight. Indeed, she credits the acceptance of chance in her work to her relationship with the musician and composer John Cage whom she said, “Choreographed chance into his work.” Steir took his cue in this regard, but thought “Why do I need to choreograph chance? Just let it happen.” (Peña) And according to the

⁶ *Pat Steir: Color Wheel* is currently on exhibit at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC (October 24, 2019–September 7, 2020). It is the “largest painting installation to date by the acclaimed abstract painter. The exhibition is an expansive new suite of paintings by the artist, spanning the entire perimeter of the Museum’s second-floor inner-circle galleries, extending nearly four hundred linear feet. These immersive works transform the Museum into a vibrant spectrum of color. The thirty large-scale paintings, when presented together as a group, create an immense color wheel that shifts hues with each painting, with the pours on each canvas often appearing in the complementary hue of the monochrome background.” From the Museum’s website: hirshhorn.si.edu/exhibitions/pat-steir

artist herself, she pours, throws, and splashes paint, but never drips because “dripping isn’t macho enough for me!” (Steir)

While I think an argument could be made that Steir’s “waterfall” marks *are* actually drips, I unlike Steir, have no issue owning the “drip as mark” in my process, whether it is made by chance or in an intentional way.

Like other contemporary female abstract painters, such as Jaqueline Humphries and Charline von Heyl, I have embraced the drip, “formerly a symbol of feckless artistic abandon” to the Abstract Expressionists, and employ it more specifically, as an intended “structuring agent” within the layers of my paintings. (Godfrey 297) I use it in order to physically draw the viewer into the painting by forcing their gaze to travel from one part of the canvas to another (see Figure 6). Additionally, pops of color from the understrata, usually made through my exploration into “chance,” and etched markings intentionally brought to the forefront, are employed to further draw the eye across the work.



Figure 6: Anne Barnes. *Heartbeat*, 2019. Acrylic, collage, plaster on canvas, 36” x 36”

Similarly, Humphries and von Heyl embrace a comparable duality in their process when it comes to “chance” and “intention,” or what the curator Mark Godfrey

characterizes as the ability to “mine both the subjective gesture and the contingent event” in their paintings (see Figure 7). (Godfrey 298)⁷

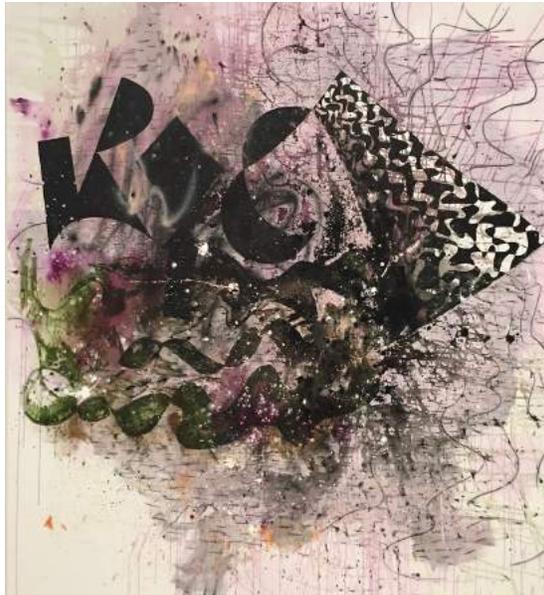


Figure 7: Charline von Heyl. *Retox*, 2018. Acrylic, charcoal, oil on canvas

Connection: We Should All Be Anthropologists

From a purely visual standpoint, the word connection makes me think of *connecting the dots*, *interlocking circles*, or of *multitudinous lines intersecting*, and these are all patterns that you will recognize repeatedly in my work. Intellectually, I see how it can lead from one idea to the next, or how many ideas can intersect to form a perspective. We can have multiple perspectives, and how we experience anything depends on the lens through which we are viewing it.

For example, my perspective may change depending on whether I am looking at something through the lens of being a woman, mother, wife, daughter, sister, white middleclass American, artist, graphic designer et cetera. Although, I suppose that often I

⁷ Godfrey, Mark. “Statements of Intent: Mark Godfrey on the Art of Jaqueline Humphries, Laura Owens, Amy Sillman, and Charline von Heyl,” *Artforum*, May 2014, 294-344.

am looking at events through the lens of more than one perspective at once. Either way, perspective is gained through the absorption of social conventions, cultural codes and signals, knowledge, and life experience. I am very interested in how, depending on a person's perspective, we can view the same event and have a totally different experience or come to drastically different conclusions about the same thing, and how this can bring about questions regarding reality and truth.

Through my artwork, I try to translate these connections and my own perspectives abstractly through the use of pattern, mark-making, text, collage, symbolism, and color. Thus, creating a visual meditation of personal memories and emotions that represent my reality (see Figure 8 and Footnote 8).



Figure 8: Anne Barnes. *Legs*, 2019. Acrylic, collage, plaster on canvas, 36" x 36"⁸

⁸ The title of this painting, *Legs*, is a nod to the artist Louise Bourgeois' sculpture of the same name. I saw the piece when it was on display at Glenstone in Potomac, MD in May 2019. At the time, I was struck by the simple and delicate vulnerability of the piece, and as there is no photography allowed inside Glenstone's galleries, I drew a tiny sketch of it. Later, I intentionally poured the white drips of paint down the center of this painting, in a shape that echoed the sculpture's, as a memorial to Bourgeois' work and artistic legacy.

This is her substance in which the moments are caught, their outline fingered, and their matter consumed in such a way that they themselves become the fiber of the web. (Burnside 27)

Gaining Perspective

In a 2019 article in *The New Yorker* entitled “How Cultural Anthropologists Defined Humanity,” the author Louis Menand discusses the book *Gods of the Upper Air* by Charles King. In the book King writes about how, at the beginning of the 20th century, the cultural anthropologist Franz Boas “established cultural anthropology as an academic discipline in the United States” and how many of his protégés, including Zora Neale Hurston and Margaret Mead were “on the front lines of the greatest moral battle of our time: the struggle to prove that—despite differences of skin color, gender, ability, or custom—humanity is one undivided thing.” In the article, Menand goes on to write:

Cultural anthropologists changed people’s attitudes and . . . behavior. “If it is now unremarkable for a gay couple to kiss goodbye on a train platform,” [or] “for a college student to read the *Bhagavad Gita* in a Great Books class, for racism to be rejected as both morally bankrupt and self-evidently stupid, and for anyone, regardless of their gender expression, to claim workplaces and boardrooms as fully theirs—if all of these things are not innovations or aspirations but the regular, taken-for-granted way of organizing society, then we have the ideas championed by the Boas circle to thank for it.” They moved the explanation for human differences from biology to culture, from nature to nurture. (Menand)

Indeed, as a cultural anthropology major in undergraduate school, I was taught that you cannot view another culture or society through the lens of your own experience (i.e., culture), but that you need to study a foreign culture from its perspective, in a nonjudgmental, almost clinical way—to be an ethnologist. Or as Menand puts it, “This [means] leaving one’s ethnocentrism at home.” Further, “The idea ... is that we can’t see our way of life from the inside, just as we can’t see our own faces. The culture of the ‘other’ serves as a looking glass.” (Menand)

I have been thinking about how, even though anthropology is not a profession that I pursued after college, its message of detached nonjudgmental observation has stuck with me and greatly colors how I view my world. And I wonder if there is something about abstraction that provides this same distance in my art? (see Figure 9)

In an artist talk at the Guggenheim in September 2019, the contemporary abstract painter Julie Mehretu, when asked about her thoughts on being a woman abstract painter—a status that also includes being a person of color and a member of the LGBTQ + community—said (paraphrasing slightly from my notes taken at the talk), “In abstraction there is a place of ambiguity and invention that resonates. Abstraction is a way to avoid explanation. It offers a place to exist, to occupy, and to be opaque and that allows for freedom.”⁹ (Mehretu) Further, the curator Helen Molesworth in her article

⁹ This artist talk was in conjunction with the Museum’s exhibition *Artistic License: Six Takes on the Guggenheim Collection*. The first-ever artist-curated exhibition mounted at the Guggenheim in New York City, and curated by Cai Guo-Qiang, Paul Chan, Jenny Holzer, Julie Mehretu, Richard Prince, and Carrie Mae Weems—artists who each have had influential solo shows at the museum. It brought together both well-known and rarely seen works from the Museum’s 9,000 object collection.

In her talk, Mehretu elaborated on the selection process for her curated “ramp” of the exhibit, and said that originally she had set out to populate her collection with choices that included only artists she had never heard of or with minority artists (i.e., women and people of color). But she quickly found out that due to the limitations of the Guggenheim’s collection within the date parameters set for the exhibition (which were 1900 through the 1980s), that this was going to be virtually impossible to do. (Actually, she didn’t say it quite that succinctly, she glossed over it a little because I suspect it was a

Painting with Ambivalence stated—when referring to the feminist-identifying, women abstract painters of the 1960s and 70s—“The putatively sexless nature of art (particularly that of abstract art) was for many women a refuge from the brutal gendering of the world as they knew it.” (430)



Figure 9: Anne Barnes. *Stop*, 2019. Acrylic, collage, plaster on canvas, 36” x 36”

She perceives this stage as a part of a chain, the links placed in her life as an offering. (Burnside 27)

Something else that I continue to ponder when it comes to my being a woman and an artist is how these realities and subsequent perspectives inform and impact my creative practice.

sensitive point for the museum. But it became clear as the conversation continued that this was part of the issue.)

Consequently, I found it interesting that in order to diversify what Mehretu chose: she had the Guggenheim borrow one painting from another institution; she lent one painting from her own collection to the series; and the museum expedited the purchase of a third piece (already in the works before the conception for this exhibit) that she wanted to use in this show. Yet *still*, her choices included many of the “good old boys” of the modern art world—Rauschenberg, Bacon, Giacometti, Sierra. Now, I'm not saying that their art wasn't deserving to be in the show, on the contrary, it was exciting to be able to see the artworks because they are all unique and rarely seen pieces; but this situation just so thoroughly illustrates a persistent theme that is dogging the institutional art world; the one where women and people of color are so woefully underrepresented. (Mehretu)

What Does it Mean to Be a Woman and an Artist?

In a 2019 article in *The New York Times Magazine* entitled “Where the Body is Buried,” the journalist Rachel Cusk profiles the female painters Celia Paul and Cecily Brown, while also exploring how contemporary women artists “navigate a medium historically dominated by men.” (42) Additionally, Cusk asks a few very thought provoking questions: “How do women become more than objects in art?”; “To what extent does the creative artist experience herself as gendered?”; “Can a women artist—however virtuosic and talented, however disciplined—ever attain a fundamental freedom from the fact of her own womanhood?”; and “Must the politics of femininity invariably be accounted for, whether by determinedly ignoring them or by deliberately confronting them?”(48)

Mary Gabriel’s book *Ninth Street Women*¹⁰ touches on all of these questions at a decisive moment in art history—the Abstract Expressionist (AbEx) movement in New York City that emerged after World War II. Gabriel writes:

Artistic concerns are gender neutral. But there are social and personal issues a woman artist faces that cannot be found in the stories of men; these are the obstacles confronted and obstacles overcome. The poet Adrienne Rich wrote, “For spiritual values and a creative tradition to continue unbroken we need concrete artifacts, the work of hands, written words to read, images to look at, a dialogue with brave and imaginative women who came before us.” It’s instructive as well as comforting to

¹⁰ Gabriel, Mary. *Ninth Street Women, Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler: Five Painters and the Movement That Changed Modern Art*. Little Brown and Company, 2018.

know how other women have managed and what other women have dared.

It's also gratifying to find in their stories an occasional energizing dose of inspiration. (xiii-xiv)

Gabriel goes on to state that she recognized the irony of writing about the five artists in her book as “women artists” at all as “none of them would have wanted to be characterized as such...they did not constitute a subgroup. They were painters. Period.” (xiv) Indeed, it is not hard to understand why they all felt so strongly about this, Gabriel details countless instances in which they were discriminated against on the basis of their gender from both a cultural and professional standpoint. Therefore, why would a woman artist ever want to draw attention to the fact of her gender in her work? In an eloquent passage on the subject, Gabriel says:

The obstacles faced by women who hoped to leave a mark on humankind have, through the millennium, varied in height but not in stubborn persistence. And yet, a great many women have just as stubbornly ignored them. The desire to put words on a page or marks on a canvas was greater than the accrued social forces that told them they had no right to do so, that they were excluded by their gender from that priestly class called artist. The reason, according to Western tradition, was as old as creation itself: For many, God was the original artist and society had assigned its creator a gender—He. The woman who dared to declare herself an artist in defiance of centuries of such unwavering belief required monstrous strength... (468-469)

In 1953, Joan Mitchell famously said, in regard to the topic of whether a woman could ever actually be a real and talented painter, “How did I feel, like how? I felt, you know, when I was discouraged I wondered if really women couldn’t paint, the way all men said they couldn’t paint. But then at other times I said, ‘Fuck them,’ you know.”

(Gabriel 468) (see Figure 10)



Figure 10: Joan Mitchell. *Cercando un Ago*, 1959. Oil on canvas, 63” x 67”

While Joan Mitchell made that rather “salty” statement sixty-seven years ago, it has become painfully clear to me that not all that much has changed when it comes to cultural perception, as women artists’ work still only represent around 12% (Topaz 8) of the art we consume today in many major museums and other cultural institutions. From an economic perspective, this translates to women artist’s work selling for less than 40% than work made by men. Additionally, a study done in December 2017 shows that while people are not able to predict an artist’s gender by looking at an unlabeled work, when

they do know the gender, they like the artwork *less* when they think it was created by a woman. (Adams 26-27)^{11 12}

Sadly, it seems that many of the obstacles faced by the women artists of the original AbEx movement still exist today. And yet, as was the case then, a great many women, including myself, are “still just as stubbornly ignoring them.”

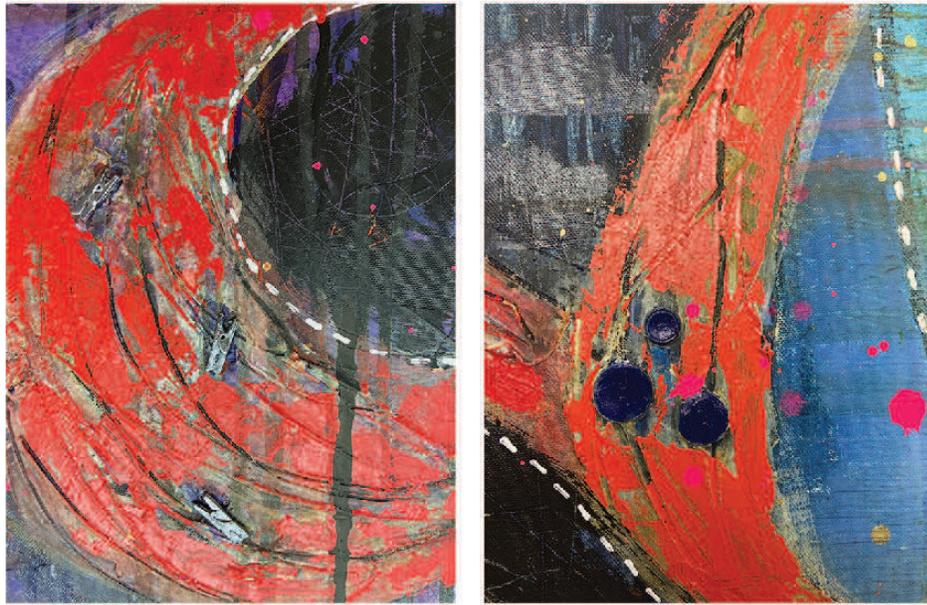


Figure 11: Anne Barnes. Details from *Meander and Flow: Diptych*, 2020. Acrylic, collage, Flashe, found objects, plaster, Stabilo pencil on canvas, 8' x 6' (Photographs from the work in progress. Completed paintings will be on display in the Lesley Art & Design Graduate Exhibition in December 2020)

¹¹ From the most recent study on diversity of artists in major museums, “The U.S. art museum sector is grappling with diversity. While previous work has investigated the demographic diversity of museum staffs and visitors, the diversity of artists in their collections has remained unreported. We conduct the first large-scale study of artist diversity in museums. By scraping the public online catalogs of 18 major U.S. museums, deploying a sample of 10,000 artist records comprising over 9,000 unique artists to crowdsourcing, and analyzing 45,000 responses, we infer artist genders, ethnicities, geographic origins, and birth decades...estimates of gender and ethnic diversity at each museum, and overall, we find that 85% of artists are white and 87% are men.”

“With respect to gender, our overall pool of individual, identifiable artists across all museums consists of 12.6% women. With respect to ethnicity, the pool is 85.4% white, 9.0% Asian, 2.8% Hispanic/Latinx, 1.2% Black/African American, and 1.5% other ethnicities. The four largest groups represented across all 18 museums in terms of gender and ethnicity are white men (75.7%), white women (10.8%), Asian men (7.5%), and Hispanic/Latinx men (2.6%). All other groups are represented in proportions less than 1%.” Topaz, Chad M. et al. “Diversity of Artists in Major U.S. Museums.” *PLOS Submission*, 2018, p. 1, 15.

¹² From a January 21, 2020 story on NPR, which was based on a podcast episode from *The Indicator from Planet Money*, “Can You Name Five Fine Artists That Are Women?”

In my thesis work (see Figure 11), I comment on this form of gender bias by inserting objects (such as clothes pins, buttons, and sewing patterns) into the picture plane. These objects symbolically represent what has traditionally been thought of as “women’s work” (much of which remains socially invisible and culturally undervalued), and they allude to the relationship I have with the concept of the “feminine” in art and my desire to assign it a more valuable cultural currency. While these familiar objects can evoke both a sense of comfort and nostalgia, their unlikely presentation challenges the viewer to reconsider them from another perspective, by turning craft into art.

Structure: We Should All Be Feminists¹³

Structure can refer to the materiality of a work of art, but it can also point to underlying *cultural and social structures*. Those sometimes invisible, but most often times glaringly obvious, through-lines that run just beneath the surface of all institutions and systems. This type of structure can condition our thinking and cultural presuppositions. This type of structure can affect how our social rules, education, innovative, legal, medical, technological and value systems function, as well as the core of our individualistic thinking. Sometimes these structures support inherent biases (like sexism and racism) that we are not even aware of, and even when we are made aware of them, they can be so ingrained to our ways of thinking and behaving that it can be hard to alter them even after having been exposed as being flawed.

¹³ I borrowed (and expanded on) the idea for part of the title to this thesis, as well as some of the ideas in my thesis statement, from the December 2012 TEDx Talk, and subsequent book by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie entitled, *We Should All Be Feminists*. Adichie “offers a unique definition of feminism for the twenty-first century, one rooted in inclusion and awareness. Drawing extensively on her own experiences and her deep understanding of the often-masked realities of sexual politics, here is ... [an] exploration of what it means to be a woman now—and an of-the-moment rallying cry for why we should all be feminists.” (From the cover copy of the book.)

The Importance of Materiality

The *structure* in my creative process is material. Often, I start with spackling plaster as a first layer and etch texture and pattern into it. I like to think of this element as the skeleton or vertebrae of the underpainting. I then add coatings of paint and other mediums on top of this “skeleton” until it is completely covered. Eventually though, usually towards the end of my process, I spend considerable time looking closely at the background textures that this creates, and then choose to bring parts of it back to the forefront of the painting. This process turns the “skeleton” into more of an “exoskeleton” or exterior structure. Thus, making it an armor or protective covering of sorts.

In an article by Anni Albers¹⁴ from 1938 entitled “Work with Material,” Albers states:

Material, that is to say unformed or unshaped matter, is the field where authority blocks independent experimentation less than in many other fields, and for this reason it seems well fitted to become the training ground for invention and free speculation... (Albers)

Indeed, I have come to realize that much of my own creative practice revolves around not only the process, but the materiality of the mediums that I engage with. Getting my hands dirty and interacting with the paint and other mediums that I use is very important to me. Further, to go back to the metaphor of weaving (and when thinking about some of the impulses in my own work) Albers writes about the craft:

¹⁴ Anni Albers (1899–1994) was a textile designer, weaver, writer, and printmaker who inspired a reconsideration of fabrics as an art form, both in their functional roles and as wall-hangings. She was married to Josef Albers (1888–1976) an influential teacher, writer, painter, and color theorist. (From the albersfoundation.org website.)

Weaving is an example of a craft which is many-sided. Besides surface qualities, such as rough and smooth, dull and shiny, hard and soft, it also includes color, and, as the dominating element, texture, which is the result of the construction of weaves. Like any craft it may end in producing useful objects, or it may rise to the level of art. (Albers)

The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same

When I think about cultural and social structure, particularly the complex ones that inform the content of my own work as a women artist, it seems that women and their art (especially painters)¹⁵ are having a moment. Specifically, it feels as though we are at *the tipping point*¹⁶ of something, but as we are still firmly in the midst of it, I am not sure that the proper language has been coined yet in order to allow me to adequately describe what is happening or how it may all turn out. And yet, strangely, at the same time I feel a sense of déjà vu. Somehow, we have also been here before.

It was 49 years ago when the art historian and critic Linda Nochlin in her seminal article *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* asked us, when talking about the field of art history, to “pierce through the cultural-ideological limitations of the time and its specific ‘professionalism’ to reveal biases and inadequacies not merely in dealing with the question of women, but in the very way of formulating the crucial questions of the

¹⁵ In late 2018 there was an article on *Artnews.com* about the record setting sale for a living female artist of a 1992 Jenny Saville painting for \$12.4 million, as well as a 1973 Joan Mitchell abstraction for \$4.09 million. Although, the title for the most paid ever for a living artist’s work still goes to a man; a Jeff Koons “Balloon Dog” sculpture for \$58.4 million. www.artnews.com/2018/10/05/jenny-saville-painting-sells-12-4-m-sothebys-london-record-living-female-artist

¹⁶ In 2000 Malcolm Gladwell published his book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* where he argued his theory about “that magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire.” (From the cover copy of the book.)

discipline as a whole.” (Nochlin 146) She goes on to answer the important question—memorialized in the title of her piece—by stating:

Things as they are and as they have been, in the arts as in a hundred other areas, are stultifying, oppressive, and discouraging to all those, women among them, who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middleclass and, above all, male. The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education—education understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs, and signals. The miracle is, in fact, that given the overwhelming odds against women, or blacks, that so many of both have managed to achieve so much sheer excellence, in those bailiwicks of white masculine prerogative like science, politics, or the arts (150).

Nochlin then goes on to write:

It is when one really starts thinking about the implications of “Why have there been no great women artists?” that one begins to realize to what extent our consciousness of how things are in the world has been conditioned—and often falsified—by the way the important questions are posed. (Nochlin 150)

The Feminine in Art

Now, I will pose a few “important questions” of my own. Why is it that in art (and in many other realms it seems) when an element of an artwork is deemed as having a “feminine” quality (i.e., colorful, crafty, decorative, emotional, happy, handmade,

intuitive, pink, romantic, sensuous, soft, vulnerable, weak, whimsical, et cetera, et cetera) that it carries the whiff of a negative taint to it? And why, as women, *have we allowed this to go on for so long?* Indeed, as is the case with women working in many professions, women artists have tried to distance themselves from the very notion that their work is feminine or, as mentioned earlier, even claiming the label of “women” artist at all. And really, who is to blame them?

From the time that women started to steadily enter the workforce in the 1970s and 80s, in order to compete in a man’s world, to be taken seriously and to succeed; We needed to act, dress, and think like a man would if *he* were a woman, effectively denying any distinctly feminine quality we may bring to the table, *even if it is one that may make us better at what we do.* This is what Nochlin is referring to when she talks about the “extent our consciousness of how things are in the world has been conditioned.” Further, as the black feminist author bell hooks states, “How can we produce change if we continue to be trapped within boundaries that promote alienation? Most of us abhor prejudice and domination but have not yet learned to recognize the ways in which we support the very structures we wish to eradicate.” (113)

In 2017 Shirley Kaneda revisited the ideas she had written about 25 years earlier¹⁷ in another article, *The Feminine in Abstract Painting Reconsidered*, and in it she asserts:

If we accept the view that culture and high art in particular is the site of the ideological, or the struggle of societies’ standards and values, and that there is presently a crisis in our society, a fundamental re-examination of

¹⁷ Shirley Kaneda’s first article in which she considered this topic, *Painting and Its Others: In the Realm of the Feminine*, was published in *Arts Magazine*’s summer 1991 edition.

identity for example, then we must be conscious not only of what we say, but how we say it. (Kaneda 2017)

I agree with this, but would add that we need to also be conscious of what we *don't* say, and one place where we as women artists can start, is to truly embrace the feminine and “what we say” about it and “how we say it.” It is crucially important for us to advance the idea that we are not just artists, but *women* artists, and that we are proud to embrace “feminine” qualities in our work if we so choose (of course not all women artists’ work has any so called “feminine qualities” to it and that is just fine too). Kaneda seems to echo this sentiment when she writes, “What needs to be emphasized is that if we as women want our experiences and our culture to be recognized [as] specifically female, then we must claim a position, not as *other*, but independent of the masculine world and this is to be in favor of a concept of the feminine which would take as many forms as there are women.” In other words, don’t reject something about your work, especially if it is distinctly feminine, just because we are conditioned to think that it is not “high art.”

The Way Forward; Humor?

Where does this leave us, and more specifically, where does this leave me and my creative practice as an abstract painter? Obviously, I am already onboard with my proud status as a women artist, but I’m not exactly sure yet about whether I even want to start to insert symbolic feminist imagery or messages into my work. I do know that if I start, one way in which I would consider it is through humor. Most likely not “stand-up comedy” type humor, but something subtler and not too obvious. In order to see it and understand it in my work, you would have to work for it yourself.



Figure 12: Amy Sillman. *Blue Diagram*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 90 ³/₄" x 84 ³/₄"

In a 2016 interview with Fabian Schöneich the artist Amy Sillman (see Figure 12) responds to the question “What do you think abstraction offers today?” by saying:

I think abstraction is very much like humor in a way, because it’s a form that resists or refuses—refuses what? I guess the preconceived. It’s a kind of negation, but it’s also a generous condition, “not this, maybe that, or maybe somewhere between,” a way to compress what is there with what is remembered, or to admit what is wrong, or confusion, or just coming into being, or not there yet, or emotional, or imaginary—in other words, everything *other*. And it’s where the formal language of color, shape, line, layer, scale, size, is used, respected, on its own terms, not as illustration.

When it comes to my painting practice, I am not sure I could state it better than Sillman does above (Sillman 2016, 51). But I also appreciate the inherently simple, yet highly effective, use of humor by the “anonymous feminist art collective” the Guerrilla Girls. The group’s subtle poster-style designs tend to mask the in-your-face messages that they contain, but once you *get it*, you really get the message (see Figure 13).

Recently, upon noticing that the official presidential portrait of Bill Clinton, currently hanging in Washington DC's National Portrait Gallery, was painted by Chuck Close;¹⁸ "One accused sexual predator painting another!" The Guerrilla Girls released a few ideas for some newly designed wall labels for the painting that suggest more appropriate wording in light of recent #MeToo concerns. In January 2018 the National Gallery of Art canceled a planned Chuck Close show due to the allegations of his predatory sexual behavior (Pes), yet it's not clear if the former President of the United States will ever be held accountable for his behavior.¹⁹

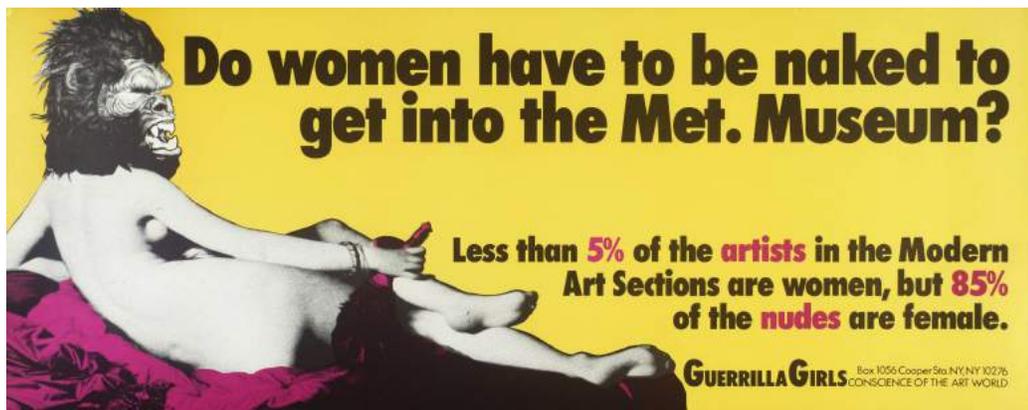


Figure 13: Guerrilla Girls. *Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?* 1989

Conclusion

In a 2006 review for *The Village Voice* of the contemporary abstract painter Charline von Heyl's work by the critic Jerry Saltz, he wrote:

Given that for every five solo shows of a living artist in a New York gallery only one is by a woman, and that only a small percentage of these

¹⁸ The artist Chuck Close, who is disabled, and in a wheelchair, has been accused of sexually harassing some of his female models and studio assistants. (Pogrebin)

¹⁹ "The Guerrilla Girls Are Helping Museums Contend With #MeToo: Read Their Proposed Chuck Close Wall Labels Here." *Artnet*, 26 September 2018, news.artnet.com/art-world/the-guerrilla-girls-help-museums-contend-with-metoo-chuck-close-1356403

are by women painters, and an even smaller proportion of those are by women who paint in what could be called an abstract manner, for a woman to be painting in a nonrepresentational, vaguely gestural mode right now is, consciously or not, a political act. If that woman is over 35 it could be called revolutionary. Some would say it's suicidal. (Saltz)

While I agree that being a woman abstract painter today may indeed constitute a political act because it is in direct defiance to the macho ethos of the original AbEx movement, I could also argue that, the allusion has become a rather “lazy cliché.” (Godfrey 297) Or as Amy Sillman put it, some critics would have you thinking that “the whole kit and caboodle is nothing but bad politics steel-welded around a chassis of machismo—that the paint stroke, the very use of the arm, is equivalent to a phallic spurt.” (Sillman 2011, 321) In reality there is *so much more* going on in both my and other contemporary women abstract painter's practices. Further, I think that “suicidal” might be a rather strong word to use in this case, but I do get the point.²⁰

Either way, like the five women abstract painters in *Ninth Street Women*, or contemporary women abstract painters such as Jacqueline Humphries, Julie Mehretu, Amy Sillman, and Charline von Heyl, as well as women abstract painters such as Pat Steir who are still at it after 50 years, I will keep on painting regardless of the obstacles. Because, as Humphries suggests, even if we are involved in a “kind of rogue practice,” (Godfrey 296) there is a new critical language being invented to discuss our work. One

²⁰ This brings me full circle and back to part of the title of my thesis, *Three Strikes*, which is a veiled yet humorous (to me at least) reference to something I tell people when they are curious as to, “Why in the world you would go back to school to get an MFA in Visual Arts (of all things!) at this point in your life?” When posed with this question, in one form or another, I usually respond that “I am aware that I have at the very least “three strikes” against me, but I really don't care.” Strike 1—I'm a woman. Strike 2—I'm in my 50s. Strike 3—Well, I guess that all depends on who I am talking to at the moment.

that is no longer associated with these gendered macho heroics, and I prefer to think of this new language in terms of its cultural overtones, one that not only shifts away from this ethos of machismo, but that is seen in a new light that is colored with a more positive “feminine” *pink* tinge. And while I see my own practice aligned with and influenced by all the women abstract painters mentioned in this thesis, I think of my work as pushing this new “language of abstraction” even further by inserting myself—by way of collected ephemera—directly into the picture plane. If there is such a thing as “object-driven” abstraction, my paintings would be it.

Finally, channeling Joan Mitchell’s comment from sixty-seven years ago (although in a more sanitized way), I will continue to be an abstract painter because it really does not matter what our society or the art world feels about it. I am an artist, and I need to create.

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