

Interview with Judith Geichman

Questions compiled by Dana DeGiulio and Molly Zuckerman-Hartung.

Answers recorded and transcribed by Judith.

What good are words? Are you interested in supplying words to elucidate/help explaining your practice?

Eidetic, especially vivid but unreal. Said of image experienced in childhood. German: eidetisch, from Greek eidetikos, relating to images or knowledge, from eidos, form, shape.

Eidolon- A phantom; apparition, an image of an ideal, from eidos, form, shape

Act and re-act, trial, error, messy, liquidity, liquid thought, flow, random, the unexpected, gifts, accident, engineered accident, edit, construct, deconstruct, controlling the uncontrollable, an organic concretion, concoction, a world, a place, Arcadia, utopia, elysian realms, Poussin, intuitive, internal formal. Nature/urban, puddle maker, alchemy, like the witches in Macbeth that are stewing and brewing, cooking, abstraction, the language of abstraction, intuitive, projection, conjure, Rorschach, driven by and open to the imagination.

From childhood I have been gifted or plagued with a vivid sense of being able to see things within things, to see images in what other people think of as random configurations.

You consistently say yes to gravity. Materiality in your work over the last 20 years has occulted between super heavyweight to diaphanous; gravity does it work, you co-operate and fight. Is the gestic performance of making heavy and light things similar? Have the canvasses gotten bigger to accommodate and problematize the ease of movement with lighter substances? Do all your paintings in this show weigh the same?

I say yes to gravity by working on the floor. I work with the natural capacity of liquid material to flow according to gravity. Gravity is something I can dance with, I can counter and cooperate with.

The materiality of the paintings has been very important. Memories of making mud pies as a kid, or staring endlessly at huge waves and foam coming into the shore on the beaches of the Atlantic ocean, petting wooly sheep at the Ohio State Fair, tactile, sensual, touch, has always been important. It makes things more real, more present, sensual pleasure, touch, a way of communication, physical, present, also attraction to the many different visual qualities of materials. Weight of materials has changed, and continues to do so, a dance that goes back and forth. In the past few years the materials have thinned. I wanted to see how light, thin and transparent I could get, testing new boundaries, sheer, atmospheric, delicate, airy, weather related. The paintings in this show may not physically weigh the same, but to each one I attach equal weight and meaning and experience.

Gestic, that word makes sense to my practice. Dancing, movement, and music in the studio, the music of Björk. The large open plane of stretched canvas, a great pool of potential, thrilling to look at, open, blank, scary, jumping in, like a large pool of water, into the unknown. Like a roller coaster ride, fun, open, free, fast, heart is beating fast, risky, a big puzzle to solve. Open expanse, soaking into the material, psychological states.

Am I just a puddle maker? Looking at the things I've done in the past and present, the materials may change, but the imagery is linked some how. Contrast has been an interest of mine all along. Have I been painting the same damn painting all these years? These worlds come to some kind of place, a flow of materials, flow of the unconscious, automatism, an impulsive move that becomes a way into the painting.

Flow, ideas, ideas flow,, this writing feeling like a painting.

Nature becomes the material for my eyes to feast on, puddle maker, alchemy, touch, natural phenomenon, distillation, condensation, evaporation, raw, cooked, over done, potion, floor overflow, spatial field, the pool, and the greater ocean. The urban life, the patinas of cement. Which reminds me of the many hours I would stare at the cement steps at the front door of my house as a child, and see pictures, places, people, all kinds of images embedded in the texture and surface of the cement. I'm still doing that kind of looking when I make a painting.

Are you moving towards nothing? Is there nothing?

Even though I've been moving towards a lighter use of materials, stains, and sheer paint, or working with more of an economy in materials or moves being made, there's still something there. In painting even nothing is something. I approach painting as wanting something to happen, and if that happens to look like nothing it's still something. I also would like to add that like the waves and tide moving back and forth, or thinking about dance, the cha-cha, there's a lot of movement back and forth, and I know from experience that this "thing" I have with materials will continue to ebb and flow in my future painting.

And yet relation appears,
a small relation expanding like the shade
Of a cloud on sand, a shape on the side of a hill
(Wallace Stevens, CONNOISSEUR OF CHAOS)

What do you say no to?

For me no is a place kept largely to myself. We discern the result of the no's after the fact within the choices that are made. No is essential to choice and taste.

The first thing I thought about is I say no to stripes, or a reductive reading, but thinking back to my early work I worked for a couple years with patterns, and stripes, and who knows those stripes may be coming back. I do have a feeling if I do paint stripes they will look different. Usually when I say no to something I start to question my strong reaction, possibly there's something I'm not ready for, or have some dislike, and in time, or in future work, that idea I said no to is very present in my work. I may say no now, but will feel differently in the future. If I get an idea I try to act on it, I do not want to censor my ideas. I say yes more than no. Whatever you say no to now may be a yes in your future. Another idea that in the making of the work you may go too far, the internal making, the process of correction, the editing, the decision making, what stays, and what goes all help build the painting into a YES. There is a no to every creative destructive act. But I like the ending of YES!

Sex or Love? I mean to say, touch or look?

I'll take it all! Sex, love, touch and look, all of those words make me think of the word desire. The desire to make things, that desire to push it, and then the falling in love with this damn piece of canvas, you find yourself thinking about it all the time, who cares, you're in love! You need more time with it, maybe just for a prolonged frozen stare, it becomes a love object, a lover. And then like a drug, it's where the work takes you, like a mysterious magical carpet ride, a visual wonderland that has it's problems, and difficulty, but that comes with the territory, a dialogue, intimacy. The falling in love with what you are making, touch, it's physical, it's emotional, "it" becomes everything for a time. Again the material concerns come up again, the materials can draw you in like attraction, or seduction, different reactions, glistening surfaces, when things are wet, sexy, beauty, mysterious, another idea about this love thing is how much I want something to happen in the making of the work. Something that happens that you are excited about, like similar feelings you have when you are really in love, even with someone you have loved for a long time, a depth of feeling, you have an attraction to the fresh and new, but also the attraction and depth of feeling to what is familiar in your practice, that has developed over time, and the joy of quiet staring at this thing, a reverie, the wonder of staring at something, kind of crazy, crazy in love!

Tell me about those bits of rust in your studio please.

Nice segue from the love question about the rusted metal in my studio. I go on these walks, and pick up all this stuff. The rusted pieces from the expressway, to the sidewalk, to the curb, worn, whittled. I find such beauty in them. They look like pictures to me, trees, figures, a scene of sorts, that almost at times feels as though they have a narrative, a place, a world that brings me back to those puddles of paint. I also have a found collections of tiny figures, a Barbie head, plastic farm animal, a babies teething ring, all this stuff belonged to someone, it had a life, a fragment, I love their form, colors, materials, patinas

from the weathering process that happened over of time. All of the objects when I pick them up feels like a sign, a reading, a message in a bottle, a messy yet beautiful energy of life. All this feeds my painting life.

“...when you look at a wall spotted with stains, or with a mixture of stones, if you have to devise some scene, you may discover a resemblance to various landscapes, beautified with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, plains, wide valleys and hills in varied arrangements; or again you may see battles and figures in action, or strange faces and costumes, and a variety of objects, which you could reduce to complete and well drawn forms. And these appear on such walls confusedly, like the sound of bells in those jangle you may find any name or word you chose to imagine.”

(Leonardo da Vinci, THE PRACTICE OF PAINTING)

Traces of the body moving in space are immediately apparent in your work, but evidence of the hand in occurs intermittently. What does the mark mean to you?

Reading clouds, tea leaves, Rorschach-like configurations, I see things within things that awaken my imagination, morphs and changes, symbolic in early pattern paintings. A certain kind of figuration with abstraction has been present in my work for a long time.

The mark has also been important for a long time, mark-making as a way of building paintings, the mark has gone through changes, tiny to wide brushes, brushes attached to sticks to distance my hand, squeegees, whatever I can find to make a mark, or stamp into the surface, quality of mark, refer back to materials, random acts of kindness, watching paint dry, a hush, nothing should move until it's dry, accidents, hand, no hand, the nature of painting, rock and roll, pouring paint, the mark is lost, and becomes space. Ray Yoshida, a teacher of mine introduced me to “mark making” that opened a whole world of thinking and making in relation to the mark, and it's expansion. Ray Yoshida was very important to me. Yes to the mark as the trace of the body.

“Hokusai tried to paint without the use of his hands. It is said one day having unrolled his scroll in front of the shogun, he poured over it a pot of blue paint ; then, dripping the claws of a rooster in a pot of red paint, he made the bird run across the scroll and leave its tracks on it. Everyone present recognized in them the waters of the stream called Tatsouta carrying along maples leaves reddened by autumn”

(Henri Focillon, THE LIFE OF FORMS IN ART)

“Usually I am on a work for a long stretch, until a moment arrives when the air of the arbitrary vanishes, and the paint falls into position that feel destined.” Phillip Guston, 12 Americans, exhibition catalog (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1956)

“It is a quality of the moment which determines the painters way” Yves Klein

So your scope of references ranges from Fragonard, Boucher to Morris Louis. How can you sleep? Who else?

Over a year ago I made a pilgrimage to the High Museum in Atlanta, GA to see a Morris Louis Retrospective, over 30 of his monumental paintings hanging in one place, I had to see for myself, to see his work in person, and be submerged for the day of just looking. We talked about the “love thing” a few questions ago, and so much of what we talked about comes down to love, desire, to follow your muse, mine was Morris Louis. I feel the same way when I walk into the Frick Museum in New York to see the Fragonard and Boucher paintings. I thrive on pure pleasure of looking . I go through phases, qualities of space, light, air atmosphere, the attraction to different kinds of spaces keeps changing, and gives me new things to think about, continually being nourished by the things in the world and take them as they come. I go through qualities of space, paradigms of picture making, the choices depend on issues of internal and external logic. Who or what else, there are so many, but here's a small short list. Chinese Scholar Rocks, Tiepolo, Baroque, Rococo, Toile, tapestries, Yves Klein , Jackson Pollock, Eva Hesse , Alfred Jensen,

Joan Mitchell, Sigmar Polke, Rudolf Stingel, Lynda Benglis, cooks, Jamie Oliver and Nigella Lawson. I'll stop there. By the way, I sleep very well, and all the above makes for some wonderful dreams!

Some neurologists describe the incident of beauty as a reprieve from "empirical impoverishment", a surprise occurrence of something the world lacks. This is either exactly true for you, or exactly the opposite of true. Which one? Do you think beauty is found or made?

Both. Beauty is made and found. Beauty is individual. Beauty that is not beautiful, accidental, impulse, beauty that is strange, natural beauty, interior beauty, emotional beauty, beauty that is skin deep, tattered pieces of rust are beautiful, dust collected on an object can be beautiful, but not to an obsessive cleaner, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, superficial beauty, imperfection, marred, imperfect, off putting, frightening beauty, attraction, sublime, beautiful inside and out, taste.

"Painting, for me when it really happens is as miraculous as any natural phenomenon" Lee Krasner

When did you start painting? How long did it take you to get excited about your work? I'm excited.

I started to paint and take myself seriously when I quit my full time job to return to school, and then attend grad school a few years later. I started taking myself seriously, and other people did as well, that reinforced my faith that I was in the right place doing the right thing. It took a while for me to get excited about my work. I was rough on myself, and over critical. But once I started to recognize what was good, or what was making sense for me, that was very exciting, and from there I had something to build on. Seeing bodies of work develop, patience is a demanding teacher. I'm excited too...I've reached, and answered the last question!