

Unnatural Life

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Elisabeth Condon's Unnatural Life

by Erica Ando

On the morning of November 9, Elisabeth Condon reacted to the shock of election results by pouring all the liquor in her home down the sink. "It's a new age of clarity and sobriety," she claimed. "Not one piece of fog...."

Building a painting: sabotaging purity

Elisabeth Condon begins each canvas by pouring watery paint across its surface, an act that allows the medium to express its physical freedom. The paint runs and spreads on its own volition, creating areas that are at once ground and shape, airily translucent in places, determinate in others. She rhapsodizes about the pours—"they are so perfect in and of themselves"—and yet, Condon finds their truth to materials insufficient to reflect our complicated world.

Following a 6-month artist residency in Shanghai in 2014, Condon began to insert stylized images of birds and flowers into her abstract landscape compositions. Recognizing the importance of decoration in the city's urbanscape and in classical Chinese painting, she was compelled to revisit the aesthetics of her youth—her mother's interior decorating obsession. She took as her source materials WASP-y Albert van Luit wallpaper and Greeff fabric patterns, emblems of her family's suffocating conservatism.

Condon "hates" the birds and flowers' reference to stifled, feminized, upper class tastes. At the same time, their tasteful ornamentation is her "secret sin."

As both conceptual and visual problems, the images are loaded with implications that sabotage the perfection of the pours. Like Philip Guston's late-1960s break from pure abstraction, however (Guston: "I got sick and tired of all that Purity!"[i]), Condon's attempt to integrate recognizable images with abstraction revels in difficulty, rather than retreating from it.

In *Blue Garden* (2015), one of Condon's earliest works to combine these disparate painting methods, the large blooms are cut off halfway at the painting's edges, as if a whole flower might overwhelm the work. The flowers are painted flatly, in contrast to the sky-blue pour that appears to rise from the background as though to overtake the leaves. The tension in this painting—between abstract/representational, perceptual/recognizable, transparent/opaque, deep/shallow, free/constrained, fluid/dry—exemplifies how Condon tightly calibrates dualities throughout her works. She controls the pours, tilting the canvas by degrees so the paint does not disperse too much. She paints the discernable images so they are not too "tight," or over-painted, to avoid constraining the works to limited interpretations.

Feminist decoration

With their gorgeous colors, over-bloomed flowers, and zones of glitter, Condon's paintings can be judged hastily as pretty, decorative, and not at all serious. Getting lost in their sumptuous painting passages can mask a disdain for references to a specific combination of gender, age, class, and taste. Though decoration symbolizes everything Condon railed against as a young woman, she felt it necessary "to go back in" and reclaim her experience, and to give voice to women whose creative expression has been confined to women's work.

Condon's injection of feminine elements into the predominantly male "grand gesture" of large-scale abstract painting manifests a feminist acknowledgment of individual experiences. Recalling Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's proclamation, "I have chosen to no longer be apologetic for my femininity,"[ii] Condon's paintings permit birds, flowers, and decoration to

sit alongside expressions of angst and tensility, as well as beauty, as part of women's, and human, experience.

Seeing America through Chinese painting

The long, horizontal format of *Return to Sender* (2016) immediately evokes Jackson Pollock's poured and splattered paintings, but it also calls to mind Chinese scrolls from the Yuan dynasty. Chinese landscape paintings were not simply representations of the natural world but were expressions of the artist's inner life. A practitioner of Chinese ink painting, Condon has long found the practices of classical Chinese artists a lens through which to view Western painting and also, American culture.

In *Return to Sender*, a putrid green pour free-flows through the canvas and seeps into a large peony, a symbol of opulence and beauty. Our eye travels, occasionally pausing to take in a rivulet of inky black, or a sweet sparrow, or a swirl of algae-like poured paint, bringing to mind the sense of journey revealed in the unrolling of a Chinese hand scroll. Condon assiduously painted pink and white candy stripes around the pour and remarkably, around all the accidental splashes and drips. As a result, the wallpaper's cloying stripes appear to solidify but also to asphyxiate the atmospheric pour. By merging the expression of abstract painting with decorative motifs, along with the compressed, symbolically expressive spaces of Chinese landscapes, the pour is no longer simply ethereal background but is, at the same time, bodily freedom, suppressed liberty, and heroic gesture.

This painting was completed after Trump's victory, which Condon correlates to Khubilai Kahn's rule of China in the Yuan dynasty. The scholar-painters of that era, Condon relates, refused to participate in the Mongol-controlled government and instead, passed to each other coded landscape paintings, the only form of resistance possible. The kind of subtlety and complexity in those landscapes, she suggests, is what we need to navigate the dangerous insensitivities of the incoming administration. Condon's paintings operate in this tradition, cultivating nuance and multiplicities of acceptance within a

world of extremes.

1. Robert Storr, *Guston* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), 52.
2. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists* (New York: Anchor Books, 2014), 39.

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