



Elisabeth Condon at Lesley
Heller Workspace
Credits: James Horner

Elisabeth Condon's "Climb the Black Mountain"

[Elisabeth Condon's](#) "Climb the Black Mountain" opened Wednesday, April 13 at [Lesley Heller Workspace](#). Condon's colorful landscape paintings include intuitive pours which start off her creative process.

At first glance, you think you understand what you are seeing, but then at closer inspection, Condon takes you on a journey past images that look familiar, but are unknown. Volcanic lava percolates around a tiny yellow brick road, a Chinese bird house sits high atop a tree, and a forest evaporates into thin air.

JH: How did you come up with the title of your show, "Climb the Black Mountain?"

EC: That's what it felt like to paint "White Lines," the large, black painting (84 x 90 inches) as the blizzards raged outside. As I envisioned and began to paint a far-reaching mountain range from pours of paint, the scale of the painting encompassed me entirely, as if I were inside the space I was creating. This sense of immersion carried into subsequent paintings so I decided to name the show in reference to traveling the imagination.

JH: Can you describe briefly your process in making your paintings?

EC: I mix color in cans, and pour it out on canvas laid out on the floor. Sometimes I squeeze paint through an eyedropper, or pour water on the pours. There is a period of watching the pours to manipulate them; after they dry I look for a time, to internalize their shapes. I often begin with patterning, projecting sketchbook images with opaque and digital projectors, or painting what I see. A logic accrues that is related to landscape, but each painted space operates as unique, a hybrid of memory and making. Mid-way through, the painting crystallizes and then it is a matter of coordinating the elements into a believable, though not literal, spatial situation. It is a playful but challenging process in that I do not work with a given method or structure, so that each painting has a different system of being made.

JH: How did you first get inspired by Chinese culture and Asia? Did you take a trip on a fluke? Or was Asia a place you had learned about and wanted to know more of?

EC: I grew up in LA, where Asia was a part of my landscape via interior decor, such as Hawaiian modern fretwork, Guan Yin figurines, and a landscape that boasted mountains, hills, canyons, ocean, suburban and urban space. As an adult, Florida's subtropical climate reconnected me to these formative visual memories and prompted me to seek a pictorial language in Chinese scrolls. At the same time, I encountered Francois Cheng's pivotal book, "Empty and Full: The Philosophy of Chinese Painting," and before long, I began traveling to Taiwan and mainland China, to encounter the landscape and scrolls directly. The operating principle in scrolls that attracted me was travel through space, first in memories that initiated the scroll, then by unfolding and taking a second journey through the memory.

JH: Are there certain aspects of landscapes that attract you most -- i.e. mountains, trees, rivers, etc?

EC: Trees are the most fun to paint, mountains are crucial for structure, and it's a blast to run rivers and paths through it all. My paintings stylize these elements by adapting the strategies of Chinese idioms to make a shorthand for them. I can be strict about following the rules; a river is never seen in its entirety, and a tree must be painted downward from the left and upward from the right. But I also invent my own pictorial language, in which a mountain has stripes or checks, a scholar's house becomes a construction shed, and form dissolves into color and gesture.

JH: How do you pick the color palettes for your paintings. Are they derived from the landscapes you paint or do you sometimes improvise?

EC: Each painting has its own color logic and the pours determine that. The palettes are highly influenced by location, season and aesthetic variables. I sometimes start with fluorescent or iridescent pours of paint that I'll work to suffuse, or exaggerate. I love to improvise, so the further I get from blue sky/green grass the happier I am. Yet, the color is tied to location in temperature and viscosity. I use airbrush acrylics that are thin like ink, with fake and transparent hues. I offset such hues with mixed neutral tones, slowing things down through opacity, more so in New York than in a sun-drenched, subtropical environment.

JH: Your recent work focuses on landscapes, have you ever painted people or included people in your landscapes?

EC: As a student I drew and painted from the model, and for many years painted dolls in multi-figure and portrait compositions. In the late 1990s, based in upstate New York, I began piling the dolls into mountains. Even now I draw figures constantly, as doodles or quick action drawings at the airport and other public places. But it was liberating to remove figures from the paintings; making room to enter the painting as a private space, or sanctuary. The figure's recognizable form blocked the passage of space; I couldn't find a way to paint the figure that felt as natural as landscape. I think it's the inherent abstract nature of organic elements that compels me in landscape.

JH: What's next for your work, will you continue focusing on landscapes? Will you treat them differently?

EC: Not sure yet, but I'm excited to synthesize the cheap decor in LA nightclubs I frequented back in the day, wallpaper from childhood and sketches made while hiking magnificent landscapes including the Great Wall and the Costa Brava. I want the space in my paintings to expand and contract, like a caterpillar inching



through space, and to paint complex journeys akin to Shen Zhou's scroll at the Met, which unfolds on the scale of a film. I see landscape as a container for diverse and variable elements much like our actual landscape and do not consider it stylistically confining, so there's real freedom in the prospect of continuing with landscape. At this point in history it is as fictional as real, which yields endless opportunities for painting.

"Climb the Black Mountain" is on view at Lesley Heller Workspace until May 15.



James Horner, Manhattan Fine Arts Examiner

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