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Elisabeth Condon: Near and Distant Views

catalogue essay for an exhibition at Miami

International Airport, November 22, 2018

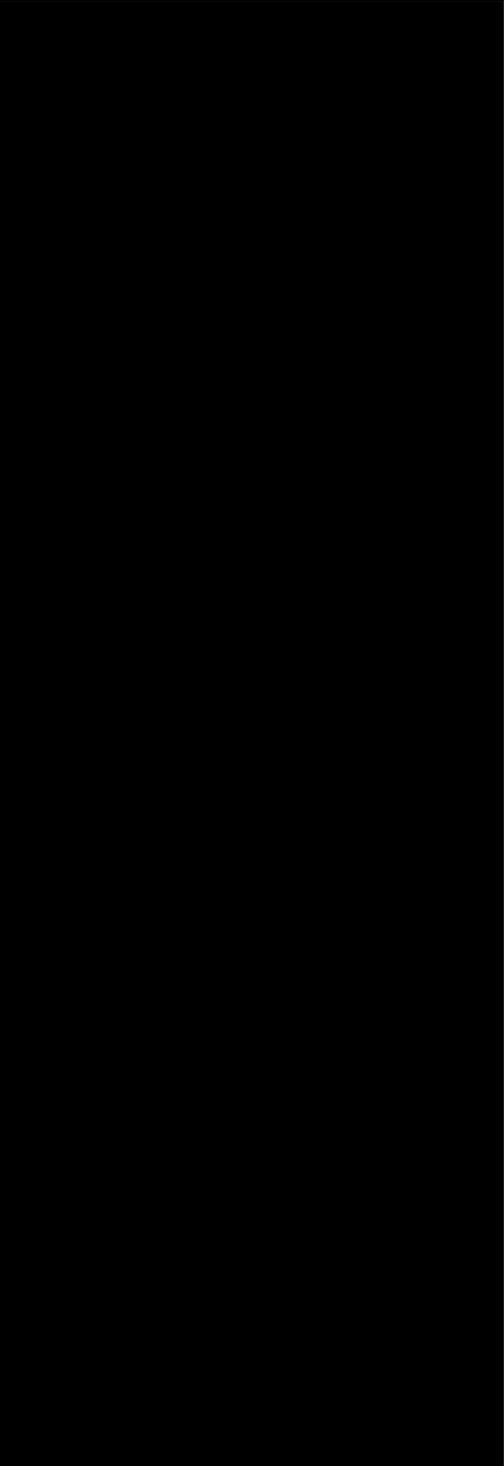
To know Elisabeth Condon is to understand the magnitude of the art that she holds in her head. I write head wishing that English had an equivalent of 心, the amalgam of heart, spirit, mind, cognition, learning, and experience that the Chinese pronounce *xin*.

The paintings on view in her exhibition at Miami International Airport are the product of eight years of productive studio labor. Included in that time is a residency schedule that would crush a lesser artist. She painted from Loleta, California to Saratoga Springs, New York, and from Sheridan, Wyoming to the Florida Everglades. There were forays to Cadaqués and Shanghai as well. All the while she took in visual

experience like a whale takes in plankton from the ocean.

This has always been her way. As the rebellious teenage daughter of a conservative Angeleno family, she wallowed in chemically-enhanced fascination with the wallpaper with which her mother bedecked the house. The making of pattern and the making of meaning thus became permanently linked in her psyche. Those impulses are filtered through a sensitivity to material that we associate with high modernism – an enjoyment of paint as paint. That is to say, a completely contradictory impulse that does not readily support either pattern or image, and certainly doesn't support them both at the same time.

This has all the makings of a kind of internal religious war. Indeed, Condon spent years alternating between straightforward abstraction and painterly figuration before acting on a hunch that a resolution lay within the Asian tradition. Travels to Beijing and Taichung in the mid-2000s allowed her to explore a mode of making that was familiar enough to offer a way in, but distant enough to initiate a creative reset. Figurative elements of Chinese art come out of a practice of



copying, not unlike the method by which one makes patterns. Abstract elements of Chinese art, its concern with effective use of empty space, its regard of the density and handling of ink as a topic of contemplation in itself, closely track with the challenges of mid-20th century American abstraction.

This last item brings us to a point of great import in Condon's work, the pour. It may sound strange to claim that some people pour paint better than others, but it is the case that Condon owns the pour these days and everyone else is borrowing it. Pours are structural necessities in her work. They provide the primal soup from which her pictures emerge. Condon's pours are at the intersection of crossed axes, one between image and shape, the other between pattern and gesture, offering the potential in subsequent layers to transform into any of them. This structure can support an enormous amount of input, which is how she keeps changing her physical location, laying her eyes on new source material, absorbing it, and putting it into her work.

This exhibition contains four examples of her work on canvas, giving viewers a sense of the aplomb with

which she handles a typical painting. But *Wallpaper Dragon* from 2018, at thirty feet wide, dominates the room. Luscious splashes of fluid paint form a spine upon which hang plant forms, abstract and figurative decorations, spatters and brushed lines. It seems to hail from every part of the world, and from every corner of the artist's being. Condon would never make such a boast, but one recalls a claim by the Qing painter Shitao: "I have been taught by Heaven itself; how could I return to the Ancients without transforming them?"

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