

8th August 2014

The Visual Element of the Pour, Elisabeth Condon, Artist Interview

Dog days of summer series reviewing the top blog posts (via web traffic) this year.

#7 most popular post from May 17, 2014

Interview with Elisabeth Condon, April and May 2014



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Elisabeth Condon,

White Cloud, 2014, mixed media on linen, 24 x 24 inches

What is a typical day like in your studio? When do you arrive? Do you have a plan or do you dive right in?

Each day begins and ends by looking at my work, thinking, and assessing through my eyes. The viewing sessions generate plans that are primarily based on the instinct to pour color, layer, sketch the composition to determine a more dynamic value structure, and other actions to move the work forward. The morning and nightly viewing sessions focus my thinking and prepares me for the day's and the following day's work.

If I don't have any instincts, or if I am at the beginning of a body of work, I experiment. I am a big believer in lots of tables for dedicated use—one for watercolor, ink painting, one for small oil and acrylic paintings, one for drawing. I work on the floor for larger paintings and prop the paintings against the wall. The tables, and floor, invite roaming throughout the studio, working on what needs to be developed, segueing from one medium to another.

There is also online research, which for the [Seven Seas show](http://artandculturecenter.org/elisabeth-condon-the-seven-seas) [http://artandculturecenter.org/elisabeth-condon-the-seven-seas] was quite extensive—finding information about [Rodney Bingenheimer's English Disco](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodney_Bingenheimer's_English_Disco) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodney_Bingenheimer's_English_Disco], which, as an LA nightclub extant from 1973-4, was a challenge. Online research produces a by now voluminous image file of printed, clipped images culled from an even larger file of online pictures. These images provide color notes and references, plus I trace them in vellum drawings.

While working I drink Oolong tea. When physical energy flags I pour tea, and rest by sketching my paintings while savoring tea. This is surprisingly clarifying and always re-engages me with the work. I also move paintings around, to view them from different angles. And, I play a favorite song for a hit of energy, or listen to podcasts.

My favorite work hours are between one to ten PM., give or take a few hours to warm up and wind down. As I move deeply into a body of work, these hours increase, but the actual amount of work distills. When finishing a cycle of work I am in the studio almost all of the time, and all else falls away. But it takes time to build to that point, so my studio schedule moves in a cycle of time related to building a body of work.

I have two studios, both live/work, in Tampa and Brooklyn. In Florida the studio is five steps from the house and in New York, just past the bedroom door. It's vital that I can get to the studio in a minute, so that the connection to my work is always maintained. Just knowing it's nearby and accessible is important, but also necessary to maximize the amount of time I can spend on it.

Can you talk a little about your creative process? How does your work unfold? Do you start with sketches or have a clear idea of what you want to achieve with each work?

In the beginning stages, I pour color to dictate compositional decisions and set the palette for the painting. Over time I view, and consider how the pour is directing the painting. The visual element of the pour overlaps with what I am thinking about at the time, for example nightclubs, or recent and upcoming travels and the characteristics of place, or structures that imply space without describing it.

To warm up, I pick a medium and way of working where the outcome is open and variable—watercolors, Literati flower idioms (ink brush painting), sketchbook observations, or tracings. The technical allure and discovery in these processes opens me up and kickstarts painting ideas. The watercolors' translucent and molten nature has been a major influence on my work, as has the stroke order of Chinese idioms and the hybrid spaces of the tracing. Lately, I've been pouring and working with more materiality by adding enamels and glitter. As the studio starts to fill I move between table and floor. When the direction of a painting comes clear I omit the warm up and go deeper into painting, working loosely or precisely as the situation warrants. By that time my focus is engaged and acute, I know exactly what the painting wants, and do what I can to realize it. This is a state of grace, and at the time it feels effortless.

So, I don't work from a set procedure, rather in groups of work that evolve themes or processes. I maintain visual and methodic coherence in the balance opacity and transparency, or liquid and dryness—relationships inherent to Chinese painting. I also project images for a different kind of line or mark, a 'found' quality that liberates the burden of invention, introduces a technological note that has become foundational to the increasingly flattened spaces we negotiate. Yet the projected marks need counterpoint, via clear, free color, or a sense of material. Throughout a painting, structure remains open, with an emphasis on balance and vitality.

It can be agonizing when paintings are in the middle stage, but there comes a time when they start to resolve, one by one, quickly, and the suspension is worth it for the new logic that forms in the duration of their making.



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Elisabeth Condon in her studio

Who were your earliest influences? Did you know you wanted to be an artist? Did you begin in painting?

Artists, ideas, places, music, décor, film—all comprise formative influences, starting with Los Angeles itself, a former orange grove that became an image industry. What a landscape—it held anything one could want, mountains, flatlands, ocean. As a kid in LA I visited the Pasadena Museum of Art when Walter Hopps was Director, where a Frank Stella Protractor blew my mind and I climbed a Mark di Suvero sculpture, or an open framework structure quite like one. As a kid I viscerally and immediately responded to art's invitation to freedom. At ten I took an art class at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where a Monet poplar painting and Matisse's Tea in the Garden of 1919 impressed themselves on visual memory. My parents had a reproduction of Inness on their walls, which too has a place in my visual lexicon, perhaps the movement through space that foretold my later interest in Chinese scrolls. More and more, my parents' Hawaiian modern-influenced décor, a gold-leafed wallpaper with a plum blossom on it, fretwork on the living room wall, and the intensely patterned wallpaper in my bedroom are increasingly important as I face the role of the decorative in my aesthetic.

All of these influences took me to a place where imagination, feeling, and presence were prioritized, where a full life could be lived within art. Yet on a practical level, I was slow in putting it together. There was a lot to figure out when I started university at UCSD, whose conceptual focus introduced exquisite tension between my formative, mostly decorative influences and a more distant social critique. I transferred to UCLA where I studied performance and took a grad seminar with Chris Burden in his first year of teaching. After taking a few years to work in window display as a visual merchandiser and absorb LA's amazing music scene at the time, I returned to Otis/Parsons to study painting, video and sculpture with Mike Kelley, Lita Albuquerque, Carol Caroompas and Scott Greiger. In different ways, these artists showed me how life as an artist could be lived. In 1985 I was quite serious about video, spending every weekend

for six months shooting footage with an old camera, battery pack, and editing the footage reel to reel, but ultimately perceived the darkness of editing rooms as isolating and returned to painting as the primary means of communication—painting releases something in me that nothing else can touch, free from the traffic of words.

Have your influences changed much over time? Do you look at the same artists you started with or has that list changed over time?

Environment remains the primary visual influence. Location impacts the way I work, whether pearly, northern light and the sounds of construction to raking, hot-white light and the musical musings of birds. By necessity this influence changed: I moved to Chicago in 1986, to New York in 1992, adding Florida in 2003. Florida brought me full-circle to the LA of childhood, summoning the innocence of that time. But since then, my influences have broadened considerably. I worked as a student and/or colleague with Mike Kelly, Susanna Coffey, Leslie Lerner and Mernet Larsen, who all had enormous impact on the immediate level, and I bow to all of these teachers now. Charles Burchfield, Philip Guston, Agnes Martin and Yuan Dynasty painter Huang Gongwang reign large in the pantheon, but my greatest debt is to Chinese painters. I know artists everywhere, see a lot of shows and pay attention to what's going on in multiple communities, both nationally and abroad. But lately, I find myself turning deeper toward my own work, from a desire to distill experience more fully and find the emptiness amidst the dynamic framework of travel and information overload.

Do you ever find yourself in a creative dry spell? If so, what do you do to find your way through and create new work?

Last fall, for the first time in perhaps a decade, I read novels, and organized my studio. It was wonderful, but I missed working at maximum capacity, which is when I am most truly free and alive. When stuck I start things, and wait for my thinking to catch up. I trace drawings, because they are fun. I look at images, shows and read about painting very slowly, to digest the ideas and consider them. I do my best to trust and accept myself, to run with what I'm doing rather than rejecting it out of hand. Stuck times are good for writing proposals, cleaning the studio, and organizing work, but it's important to keep your hand in, to maintain the connection to making.



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Elisabeth Condon,

Valuable Thing, 2014, mixed media on linen, 42 x 26 inches

I know this is a perennial question, but how do you know a painting is finished?

It is a feeling inside, a click, a sense of completion. There are times, too, when the energy to work on the painting just runs out. One ends with a bang, the other a whimper, but they are both reliable indicators.

Thank you Elisabeth for the time and care you put in to answering the questions, you've provided great insight in to your process. I'm pleasantly surprised to find our paths (NY-CHICAGO-LA) were similar! I was born in Chicago, my family moved to NY, then LA, then back to Chicago and eventually I landed in Florida. I've always been aware of how fashion and trends spread from coast to coast because of those moves.

Dances, fashion and music that were in 'style' when we were in LA didn't hit Chicago until a couple of years later, it was a pretty empowering experience to recognize that culture existed in a separate sphere when I was in fifth grade.

If I can circle back for a minute you mention your pouring process; I was wondering if you've always used this process or how you discovered its role in your work?

I'd started grad school, and finished undergrad, as an abstract painter. It was Chicago that got me so interested in images--the collection at the Art Institute (as you know) and working with Susanna Coffey.

Anyway, when I first came to Florida, I was making doll portraits, both group and individual, and pretty soon in the light and space that so resembled LA childhood, this way of working (after 14 years) became obsolete. I needed new language to express the Florida landscape, which turned me to Chinese painting. In 2002-4, this new language featured gestural underpinnings in marks and patterns, into which I inserted roadside machinery like tractors, painted from toys, while transitioning from dolls to invention. In 2004, working on oversize sheets of watercolor paper (40 x 60), I began to pour florescent color to start the composition, and think those were the first pours. I also tried some pours in oil. I append those images to show you.

My first year of teaching, working alone after four faculty retirements my immune system shut down. Nobody could find out what was wrong and I started to think I didn't have long to paint. During this time Paul Jenkins' work was of great solace--the technical solution of the pour, plus an expat status that spoke to the moves you know firsthand. I began combining oil and acrylic to adapt watercolor techniques to canvas. My 2005 Starlight shows this process in tandem with Chinese imagery. Teaching in Paris in 2006, when Le Petit Senat featured the L'Envolee Lyrique exhibition about the French Informel, introduced the political ramifications of the pour that I had sensed from distress over 9/11 and the BP oil spill. One cannot underestimate the flood of media imagery in New York, Afghanistan and Iraq between 2001 and 2004. As an avid New York Times reader, I paid close attention to the images over the fold that spoke to a world exploding.

The pouring came out of, in addition to the other factors, ink drawings (1997-2003) and the notion of spontaneity--of an accident that could be repaired, or create further disaster. It felt so right.



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If you could recommend a reading or a book for artists what would it be?

Anything by David Reed, especially *Liquid Rubens* and *Soul Beating*. Phillip Guston's 1972 lecture in Minnesota is a gold standard for an honest appraisal of the painter's experience. The book on Milton Resnick (*Out of the Picture*) by Geoffrey Dorfman that came out last year is amazing, though readers would want to be very committed to painting as the material is granular. Agnes Martin, *Writings*, is a must. Artist compilations are always good, from Artforum's 2012 summer issue on painting, to the Whitechapel/MIT series of books and Mira Schor and Susan Bee's excellent *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* books—I think there are two. I've also been interested in David Joselit's ideas about search engines dictating aesthetics, which opens up discussion about abstraction in a new and meaningful way. And also, Julie Heffernan started the blog, [Painters on Painting.wordpress.com](http://Painters.on.Painting.wordpress.com), which offers, as this blog does, insightful views on painting, and making.


What are you working on right now?

I just returned from the [Morris Graves Foundation](http://www.woodsidebrasethgallery.com/artists/morris-graves-foundation/Morris_Graves%20Foundation) [http://www.woodsidebrasethgallery.com/artists/morris-graves-foundation/Morris_Graves%20Foundation], where I made, in addition to drawings on elongated paper (8.5 x 24) and watercolors, a series of rice paper paintings with ink and watercolor. I'm heading to Shanghai for six months in May, and am very excited about layering and building rice paper landscapes. I have no idea what this means visually, but in Shanghai, I will dedicate my time to finding out. Right now, I have six or seven paintings going, acrylic and mixed media on linen, which are primarily white, with fluorescent color and glitter. I'm

working on square formats and vertical formats where form moves in and out of heavily poured space, heavy enough where the surfaces are ripped apart and are “mended” by additional pours. While more material, these paintings feel emptier than other work. I haven’t figured them out yet, but anticipate a greater need for emptiness than in the past, which can be explored one way on rice paper and another in paint.

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