

Chicago Contemporary Art Seminar

Janna van Hasselt interviews Judy Ledgerwood

Janna van Hasselt: My first experience of your work was at the 2012 EXPO Chicago fair. The punchy color palette and unique treatment of the canvas edges to suggest a fabric drapery drew me into an otherwise muted booth. Last weekend when I walked into the Rhona Hoffman gallery to view your latest exhibition, the paintings physically beckoned to me from the back room. It was an unreal sensation being in one space with those five large pieces surrounding me with their pulsating optical energy – empowering and invigorating. I agree with Ed Schad’s opinion of your work – to me, your painting is certainly exuding ‘power’. I’m interested to hear your thoughts on this review of your show at 1301PE in Los Angeles; is it important for your paintings to engage with the viewer in space in this way?

Judy Ledgerwood: My work does its work in a few ways - through the physical impact or pure sensation of optical color experience and through image. The image references textiles that hang to suggest ‘women’s’ work or those forms where women have traditionally, historically had power such as quilting, textile design, etc... the other image on a more micro level is the pattern itself, a vernacular pattern found everywhere in popular design, as well as ancient motifs. The one shape, flower-like is also-pardon my French, cunt-like and the other shape, the one in the net shape, also feminine, like a labia. These shapes are purposely chosen for feminist reasons. The color palette is designed for optical overload and to provoke a cultural response. I use color and flat shapes that are scaled to the body of the viewer to reach forward into the space in front of the canvas because I want to engage the audience socially.

JvH: Your name has been brought up numerous times in critiques and studio visits for your work’s distinctive ability to suggest content through repetition, hue and form. I share your view that form is absolutely not devoid of content. Can you elaborate on your influences and the concepts you are expressing through the formal elements in your paintings?

JL: Painting and architecture often battle for supremacy as the most important art and architecture usually wins. The shaped painting on the support makes the painting more important than the architectural support that mirrors the architecture surrounding it. The painting becomes the most important thing in the room this way. With the wall painting installations, the color and pattern work to take-over the space, making the painting once again the defining feature of the space, creating a sense of place which is usually the domain of architecture. I am influenced by Matisse, Blinky Palermo, Sol Lewitt. I am interested in Bernard Frieze and Katarina Grosse. The work is close to mine...but of course quite different.

JvH: Another aspect of your work that I find intriguing is the visual weight of the materials you use (encaustic, urethane foams and heavy metallic oils) and the more recent chunky 'tube-squeezed' oil marks that appear like frosting or candy deposits. Gravity seems to be a key player with the drips and draping compositions. Can you talk a little more about these material decisions and if they have meaning for you?

JL: Material is meaning. In my work I use the material to reach forward toward the viewer so that it's not just the color that advances but also the physical material that the object is made of. I show the gesture of application to allow the viewer access to the process such as in the paint right out of the tube. The encaustic paintings are very object-like. These paintings don't look like other kinds of painting and for this alone I will continue the investigation. I also quite like the indirectness of hand in the process which is seen only in the action of the heat gun which melts the layers of molten pigment together.

JvH: It appears you've stayed true to painting since grad school, with the only sculptural work I've seen being your large-scale ceramic vessels. What led to you creating these in Mexico and how did you see them as relating to the immersive wall paintings you exhibited them with?

JL: I made them first in 2003 with Nancy Gardner, my neighbor, as a collaboration when I was going through chemotherapy. I showed some with Rhona Hoffman and more with Tracy Williams LTD in NYC in 2010. The work

that I showed in Los Angeles that I made at Ceramica Suro was an attempt to work with a collector who runs a ceramic factory in Mexico. I really love the materials of ceramics on a metaphysical level and of course the color from glazes is great. Vessels are interesting to me as feminist content- the whole empty vessel thing. In the beginning, I just wanted to make something that people would touch every day so I made coffee cups. The big pots were about sculptural forms in space with patterns in relation to the patterns on the wall.

JvH: Is drawing a part of your practice, or do you solve problems and ‘draw with paint’ so to speak?

JL: I work on paper as part of my daily studio practice. I think of this as my scales and arpeggios so to speak. It’s how I warm up. I use the work on paper to problem solve and build facility.

JvH: I see you were born in Indiana: besides graduate school at SAIC, what drew you to make Chicago home? How did you come to establish ties with galleries in Los Angeles and also Germany? Do you ever feel a sense of isolation from the art centers on the coasts and Europe being based in the midwest?

JL: Chicago has always been a good place to make work. After grad school I assumed I’d move to New York, but I was too poor. So I worked 40hrs in four days at first at A New Leaf and had a great cheap huge studio while friends in New York worked two jobs and made tiny paintings to store under the loft bed. I could make work as big as I liked—there was no compromise in the work. Soon I started showing in New York in 1989, and then I left my job. Chicago has always allowed me to put the work first. I have never had to compromise to support myself or sell out, which I think was my great fear. I started showing in Los Angeles after Brian Butler from 1301 saw the show at The Renaissance Society although he knew the work from Robbin Lockett days. He showed the work at an art fair in Europe, can’t remember now which one, and Christa and Wolfgang Hausler saw it there, and were interested. They made a studio visit (on the way to visit Turrell who they also work with) in 2005. They offered a show in Munich, mostly work on paper, and a few paintings because of the shipping costs. It went well and we’ve worked together since then in both

Zurich and Munich. I feel isolated somewhat from other artists that are mid-career. Many of my peers left Chicago, and young artists if they are smart will as well. But, I don't have much time for a social life, so seeing friends 2-3 times a year in New York or Los Angeles is about all the time I have anyway.

JvH: Your husband is also a very prominent artist; I'm interested to know if you give each other feedback or share and solve work problems together? Is there any kind of competition relating to the progression of your careers?

JL: We have been together so long that we long ago got over the fierce competition that can be so disabling to relationships between artists. I am his greatest fan and vice versa. We are in and out of each other's studio all the time. Every time he has a new idea, I hear it first. I think I am a ruthless critic, but maybe not. We problem share all the time. Lucky for me he is around - I am afraid of power tools. He helps with all installations in the studio. He was the one who first encouraged me to make a huge painting. He is probably the only artist I am never envious of.

JvH: And how about teaching? Does the engagement with students fuel your work or take energy and time from your studio practice?

JL: It is both a drain on my time and a source of re-energizing my practice. Students both take and give back. At this point, it is the administrative work that nearly kills me. I would prefer not to be Dean of Graduate Studies, and I don't care to ever be Chair again, but my department would fall into shambles so I have to share in the administrative chores. Oddly enough, I thought that by hiring 'star' colleagues our troubles would be over but not everyone is as capable of juggling multiple plates on sticks. 2015 we'll search anew, and hopefully things will change. Meanwhile, I love teaching; administrative tasks suck but I wouldn't want someone else to do it for the department either. Maybe what I need is a personal assistant, or someone to help with the mundane tasks of what are we eating for dinner and how is it that there is a whole basket of clean socks but none of them matched up?

JvH: What are you currently working on?

JL: I am working toward a wall painting installation at the Smart Museum that I will start December 14. After that I'll do a wall painting installation at the Graham Foundation opening January 23. And after that I have a commission for a painting that will be a gift from Northwestern University for her highness Sheikha Moza Bint Nasser of Qatar. Over the summer I'll complete a show for Tracy Williams in New York for the following fall.