



In Conversation: Emily Auchincloss Interviews Laura Newman

You started out making large installations. For an installation artist, space is a primary medium, and you have maintained that primacy in your paintings...what caused you to make the switch to working on canvas?

I was painting directly on walls and floors and it made me sad to paint everything out at the end of a project. At that time I was less interested in space than in scale and in the idea of painting as a kind of fiction.

Most of my installations were made up of groups of individual paintings. I wanted the work to do everything at once- to be like stage sets, to read as narratives, to integrate personal experience into the context of abstract painting. Eventually I realized that some paintings can do some things and other paintings can do others.

That reminds me of the specific landscape or figurative elements in your work that inform the paintings' compositions. What aspects of these elements are important for you to bring in for the work to be successful, and what do you leave out?

I often start with an abstract idea like “expansive horizontal forms in coloring book colors that pretend to be unaware of each other but aren’t.” As I work, though, motifs appear and disappear. Sometimes the work becomes too closed in and specific, and I lose a sense of freedom that’s important to me. Other times the painting can start to become too arbitrary. What I am looking for is something that surprises me but that at the same time I recognize. At some point I understand what the painting is going to be about,

I start trying to get rid of everything that is extraneous to that idea. The paintings often end up having more representational ideas in them at the end than they started with.

How does that process jibe with the Japanese concept of space called ma, which defines negative space as active, rather than void? You spent time in Japan studying the concept...what was the impact it had on your work?

I became interested in the idea of *ma* because it resonated with some of the issues about space I was thinking about in my own work. I realized that when I was working, a painting came alive for me when I could feel the space in it.

Early Japanese ideas about space were closely bound up with time, and space was thought of as series of intervals between events. This derived from the belief that spirits, or *kami*, intermittently occupied specific places and they could come back at any moment...

In Japan I also became aware of how much the dislocated geometry of contemporary urban architecture, with its mirrored buildings, overlapping signs, and fragmented views, frames our experience of space.

Do you have a typical studio routine?

First, I stall! Then I get started, but my work rarely catches fire until later in the day. Then eat lunch. Then work like a demon. Sit and look at whatever I'm working on. Paint out everything. Take a walk. Look again and notice something hopeful in the work and get rid of everything else. Then teach for a day and not be in the studio. Come back and be horrified by what I've done. Turn the painting upside down and it looks better. Make some watercolors. The painting is looking even better. Etc.

There is another part of the process you mentioned...which is the support of a community of artist and critic friends. How do you feel the local artistic community shapes your experience as an artist?

I've had times when my work has had a presence in the art world and times when it hasn't at all, and the community of artists gives me a context, the feeling of being in a small town where what I do makes sense. I can walk down a street in New York and run into someone who asks me how my painting is going. I love Joan Didion's description of eating a peach in New

York with the smell of garbage and expensive perfume and the sense that something extraordinary can happen at any moment...

It doesn't have to be New York-it can be Berlin or LA or any of a number of places where artists and intellectuals gather. I would advise younger artists to develop a group of thoughtful and visually astute people from whom they can get useful feedback-and to look at art all the time, to think of art as a conversation.

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