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In New Paintings, Elisabeth Condon Pours on Color and Unexpected Forms

by [Edward M. Gómez](#) on September 10, 2016



Elisabeth Condon, "American Pastorage" (2016), ink, acrylic, glitter and pumice on linen, 59 x 59 inches (photo by Phillip Reed, all images courtesy Lesley Heller Workspace)

It isn't easy to make a good abstract painting.

Joan Mitchell (1925–1992), one of the most innovative contributors ever to the language of abstraction, memorably [told](#) the art historian Irving Sandler in 1957 that "there is no

one way to paint; there is no single answer.” When it comes to abstract painting, the proof of that observation lies in the many different modes of expression the artists who helped create the genre developed, from Jackson Pollock’s frenetic, paint-flinging confections to Ellsworth Kelly’s irregularly shaped, solid-color canvases. In terms of how it looks, what it has to say and how it says it, with its intended or implied meanings ranging from the ambiguous to the sublime, abstract painting has long been and still can be almost anything an artist wants it to be.

Or maybe not. Despite the rash of scraped-surface, color-field, process-oriented, minimalist, post-minimalist, and paint-slopping gestural abstractions that have turned up at art fairs and in galleries in recent years, most of which have quoted familiar sources with a wink of postmodernist irony, the joke actually has been on the makers of such lackluster art product. That’s because, when it comes to whipping up ersatz abstraction, the ante was upped a long time ago. That is to say, it’s one thing to be aware of the richness of abstract painting’s history, but it’s something else to seriously engage with its legacy and lessons, and to try to make art in dialog with its implicit demands. At the very least, attempting to create an abstract painting still evokes modernism’s abiding search for something fresh, for the what-has-not-been-done-before. So, in order to make a “good” abstract painting, is some element of originality *de rigueur*, or, because the subject of many an abstract painting appears to have become abstract painting itself, is mere style-copying enough?



Elisabeth Condon in her studio in New York (photo by Brenda Zlamany) (click to enlarge)

In [Bird and Flower](#), a just-opened exhibition of her newest works (on view through October 16 at Lesley Heller Workspace on the Lower East Side), with a paint bucket and a stack of floral-patterned wallpaper samples at her side, the New York-based artist [Elisabeth Condon](#) addresses some of these aesthetic and technical concerns. For many years, pouring watery washes of color onto the surface of a canvas has been one of the principal image-making methods in her art-making kit; she has also worked with Mylar sheets, metallic paints, rhinestones, and other materials.

To produce her latest canvases, Condon has experimented with some new approaches that, in effect, have made the production of her variety of abstraction as much the subject of these new works as the birds, flowers and other recognizable, if stylized, images that pop up in them. If an air of works-in-progress collectively wafts through them, it is not because these paintings are unfinished — not at all — but because among their main themes are abstraction's enduring vitality and malleable expressiveness. As finished works, they feel at once tightly controlled and open-ended.

“Since images are such a large part of our world, and our world itself is an abstraction, I think about painting not as ‘non-objective’ or ‘abstract’ but rather as structural and material,” Condon told me during a recent interview at Lesley Heller as her show was being installed.



Elisabeth Condon, “Broken Links” (2016), ink, acrylic, glitter and latex on linen, 59 x 59 inches (photo by Phillip Reed)

It was in 2004 that Condon, who until recently taught painting and drawing at the University of South Florida, in Tampa, began experimenting with a paint-pouring technique on canvas, combining its results with brush-rendered, random patterns or ribbons of color, and depictions of such recognizable subjects as rock formations, trees, mountains, Buddhist temples or little huts. She recalled, “I started pouring to get a certain light and humidity. The relationship between pouring with images of explosions that began with 9/11 onward resonated profoundly, as pouring’s impact creates a

moment from which all before and after is changed. Its immediacy suits my instincts, and I recognized it right away as my natural way to paint.” She became aware of paint-pouring’s use in the past, from a splashed-ink method that can be found in some Chinese painting of the Later Tang Dynasty era of the early 10th century to its appearance in post-World War II abstraction. Today she counts herself among a group of artists — [Jackie Saccoccio](#), [Carrie Moyer](#), [David Reed](#), [Carrie Yamaoka](#), [Carolanna Parlato](#) and others — for whom paint-pouring is a mainstay.



Elisabeth Condon, “Homeland Welcome” (2016), acrylic on linen, 42 x 26 inches (photo by Phillip Reed) (click to enlarge)

During her teenage years in Los Angeles, Condon was a fan of 1970s glam rock; she went on to study art at U.C.L.A. and Otis College of Art and Design. Later, having

soaked up her hometown's dynamic vibe and southern California's light, she headed east. She also became deeply interested in classical Chinese ink-brush painting as well as the Daoist and other philosophical-aesthetic ideas that had informed it. She worked to assimilate into her own art-making some of that disciplined genre's common features — its peculiar, push-me-pull-you perspectives, its layering of pictorial space and its economical but dramatic and expressive line, which can conjure up full-bodied volumes or capture fine details with a minimum of knowing, well-placed strokes.

A few years ago, Condon told me, "I want to work with direct experience as much as possible; it feels more real to me." So it is that her pouring technique brings her physically into a painting's pictorial space as she gives it form, with her well-packed compositions seeming to emerge organically (a wobbly gray peak here, an explosive, green volcano there) from the pour's unpredictable results. Similarly, out-of-town stints in recent years have transported the artist deep into such wildly different environments as the Grand Canyon, the Everglades of southern Florida and the colonial-era, waterfront Bund district of Shanghai, China. In each place, she paid close attention to the feeling and appearance of untouched nature or densely packed urban space, and later sought to bring her appreciation of such atmospheres into her increasingly multi-layered compositions.

In 2013, for example, thanks to an artist-in-residence program sponsored by Grand Canyon National Park (which, sadly, is now being phased out), Condon was able to spend three weeks living and working near that majestic valley's southern rim. "I was alone in a building, just steps away from the canyon, as though it were my front yard," she recalled. "I surveyed the panorama — including lots of elk — from the rooftop porch, making daily sunrise and sunset studies in watercolor. During the day I sat at the rim of the canyon and drew as eagles, hawks and falcons swooped overhead, and the world became increasingly still."



Elisabeth Condon, "White Bird" (2016), acrylic and glitter on linen, 48 x 48 inches (photo by Jason Corbett Hogue)

“Working in nature changed my approach and attitude about composition,” Condon added. “My earlier work had borrowed from classical Chinese art, but actual immersion in a landscape led to nature replacing Chinese composition, so that my motifs now derived from nature.” What she discovered, she explained, is that “the rotations and rhythms” that can be discerned in the compositions of classical Chinese paintings “appear naturally in nature,” after all. By contrast, Condon said, navigating the bustling urban space of modern, coastal Shanghai while thinking about the ancient Chinese art that had long inspired her proved “that ink-black water is a beautiful receptacle for reflected neon light,” and that “Chinese ink and dispersion-based inks” are useful materials for capturing such a luminous phenomenon in art.

In a group of pictures produced just a few years ago — Condon refers to them as her “nightclub series” — her bold, Pop palette and broad splashes of color, with swatches of velvety black serving as backgrounds come together to create an air of cool elegance tinged with a long-past-midnight frisson of world-weariness. (One of these otherwise abstract images recognizably depicts spotlights sweeping over a stage.) Since then, her compositions have become even more complex, transformed into repositories for a range of elements and materials that includes, the artist has noted, “Chinese ink; white, powdery glitter; translucent color; opaque surfaces set against expansive, watery pours; and patterns set against imagery.”



Elisabeth Condon, “Bird of Paradise” (2016), ink, acrylic and glitter on canvas, 59 x 59 inches (photo by Jason Corbett Hogue)

The works in Condon's new "Bird and Flower" series (their collective name comes from that of a 10th-century stylistic school of Chinese painting whose nature subjects were depicted with color-filled outlines) prominently feature birds, voluptuous flowers copied from wallpaper patterns, ferns and leaves, splotches of acidic dark magenta or lemon yellow, and drippy-bright patches of poured color that anchor their backgrounds or push forward like expanding, dissipating mists. The dynamism of Condon's all-over compositions feels self-propelled, and it's easy to imagine them stretching far beyond their borders into an endless, gyrating flow of birds, plants and streams of luscious, electric, energized color.

Despite the recognizable imagery that appears in her new works, Condon said, "I do consider myself an abstract painter." However, if there is no tug of war between purely abstract and so-called representational elements in these harmonious new pictures, that's because, in a way, her recognizable subjects serve as "abstract" pieces in her broader compositions.



The artist Elisabeth Condon at work in her New York studio on a painting from her new "Bird and Flower" series (photos by Phillip Reed) (click to enlarge)

“For me, a balance between transparency and opacity is vital to painting,” Condon also noted. “I often consider the dualities in ink painting — light/dark, wet/dry, saturated/diluted — with regard to painting with paint.” Considering her “material and structural” approach, she observed that a painting may be seen as “one body speaking to another through gesture and movement that is automatically perceived and opens the heart, mind and eye to new ways of thinking and possibilities in life.” As much as she savors the different ways in which “light, color, touch and scale contribute to it,” none of those factors alone “can express the excitement of painting.”

Joan Mitchell, who spoke about her own work and painting in general with mumbo-jumbo-obliterating clarity, once [expressed](#) a similar thought in a different way. She said, “What excites me when I’m painting is what one color does to another, and what they do to each other in terms of space and interaction.”

At the gallery, Condon showed me photos of her works of recent years, and I traced their evolution through to her current “Bird and Flower” series. Sounding a bit like the ancient Chinese sages whose thinking influenced the artists whose mostly monochromatic pictures inspired her, Condon observed, “A painting always reveals itself in time.” She seemed to be referring both to a work-in-progress and a finished painting a viewer encounters, adding that, together, a work’s “energy and openness” inevitably affect such an experience. That abstract paintings can — and should — boast such characteristics, she hinted, is a notion that goes without saying — and a factor that contributes unmistakably, if inexplicably, to that combination of sometimes unnamable qualities that makes such works of art “good.”

[Bird and Flower](#) continues at Lesley Heller Workspace (54 Orchard Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through October 16.

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