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Painting by Ken Kewley

Conversation with Ken Kewley

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When I first wrote about collage on social media I referenced one of my favorite artists, **Ken Kewley**. I tagged him in the post and then I got to talk with him. With his permission I copy and pasted our conversation here:

LV: **Ken Kewley** what would you say is the difference between a shape and a spot?

KK: A spot is an undefined shape. What shape is the spot? I think of a spot as being made by a daub of a brush without much regard to edge. By a painter observing a spot of color and putting down a spot of color, attempting to match a particular color.

One would be better to see a shape and put down a shape. In one go. Why start in the middle? One value, the color being less important, that will stand for several colors/values.

The more definite the shape the easier it can be compared and contrasted to other shapes. Painting without concern with definite edges, without clear decisions, too often results in mussiness.

Your collage is beautifully clear partly because it began with clear shapes that were then carefully placed as if on a stage.

LV: Thanks for your thoughts. I think when I learned about spots of color I was taught (by **Elana Hagler**) to pay close attention to the edges of the spot. That each spot has a very specific shape. So maybe by my definition shapes and spots are the same. What do you think Elana?

What I mean by start in the middle is that I think about the space a spot occupies in its middle. I find that if I concentrate too much on the line going around the shape, then the overall character of the shape can get lost.

I really like what you say about clarity. I remember artist Chris Gallego saying “clarify, clarify” in his blog almost as a mantra. And a painting being a stage. Do you think all paintings are theatrical performances? A sort of podium for visual thoughts?

EH: I think it all depends on how you define your terms. Hawthorne definitely thought of color spots as having a particular shape. It is up to the individual painter whether to then be super fastidious about the edge quality, or to be looser and more painterly, and while still being conscious of the overall shape of the color spot, letting the edges have a more organic, chancy quality. By calling them shapes instead of spots, Ken emphasizes the need to be aware of the particularity of shape. He’s right about the danger of lack of clarity that can result from a more cavalier attitude towards shape. I like “color spot” because it, for me, stresses the primacy of hue/value/saturation relationships between neighboring spots as well as keeping a painting open, moving, and breathing by not locking down harsh edges too early in the process.

KK: A stage is not quite right. It works in the middle but not as well at the edges. A stage depends too much on where one is sitting. Visual thoughts are too poetic for me. A podium too three dimensional. The problem is where three dimensional things hit the painting’s, or the stage’s, two dimensional edge. This is why in painting three dimensional things must be made up of two dimensional shapes. As far as shapes, defining shape is hard to do with words. Though it seems best not to concentrate on edge or middle, and not even on the shape. Instead a side glance of all the shapes within the edges of the work seems sufficient to get a sense of the composition and its strength.

LV: I remember from your notes on color you talked about the place where a picture is torn from the world. Elana talked to me about peripheral vision. So this may be a weird question but from which side do you look? The top bottom left right and diagonals all seem to make for a different image to me. What I end of up doing is some sort of wonky combination of comparisons from some of the sides but I’m curious about what you do.

KK: I was talking about that place where three dimensional things hit the two dimensional edge of the painting. Life has things, painting has shapes. There is a point, while painting things, when perception becomes conceptual. Where looking and thinking must work together. Don’t look too closely or think too much. Life is not art. It must be composed to become art. This is the jump the painter makes. One looks from all directions searching for shapes to connect, to compare, to contrast, to arrange, to compose. To fix your gaze to one side

or another limits the possibilities. Like working from a photograph that does not change no matter how you look at it. When working from life relationships of shapes change with every shift of viewpoint. So one has infinite relationships to play with. But one cannot just accept one of these sets and record that; shapes, lines, values, color, all must be pushed and nudged into a composition. There is no need to put up with peripheral vision; turn your head, look for what the composition needs. Then nudge these shapes into shape. The distortions in Cezanne's work is what happens when one is nudging shapes into a composition.

LV: **Ken Kewley** brilliant! You make so much sense. It looks like you are saying that composing is the thing - more so than the motif or the theories.

KK: **Laura Vahlberg** Exactly, you summed it up perfectly. If you (I'm just writing generally) are out in the landscape painting trees, and the branches and leaves are making dark shapes, and the bits of sky, seen through the leaves, are making light shapes, all you have to do is compose those shapes, the dark shapes and the light shapes. And while you are doing so, you shape the shapes. There is no need to measure, to make anything the right size, in the right proportion, the right color. You can push the values, change colors, move things, change shapes. But you are out there, you want to be faithful, to believe you are going for a likeness. Likely there will be a likeness; it's very hard to lose a landscape, or a still life, or a person. But you are composing not copying. All his long life Picasso was just rearranging shapes no matter what the subject matter. Abstraction is infinite.

LV: Ken Kewley wow no need to measure or to make the right size or the right color. I definitely feel a need to do those things. I'm not sure what it would look like to totally let go of those notions. Are you saying to let the motif influence oneself but not be ruled by it?

KK: If you are composing, it is important that things stay adjustable while doing so. Measuring tends to glue things together. If you are painting a house and against the house there is a small bush, instead of measuring, find a shape for the bush (not a bush shape, but a shape that one could also find elsewhere, possibly in the trees, or in the roof shape, or in a person standing near-by) and a shape for the house and move these two shapes around till they excite. Attempting to mimic the exact color of the bush and the exact color of the house also tends to glue those things together, where as pushing the colors and values of those things one could get closer to the excitement of life. One should not worry about over-exaggerating. Too often going for exactness

results in under-exaggeration. If you want to show someone something you need to do more than show them everything. Some things have to be strengthened (and straightened; as soon as you nudge a wavy line into something straighter it becomes easier to relate, to compare and contrast, to another straightened line). Other things can be weakened or removed. Look at a photograph of a landscape painted by Cezanne and compare it to his painting. Cezanne was quite faithful to the landscape but he greatly strengthened the abstraction by nudging the angles of roads, and roofs, and trees, sometimes into ninety degree angles that he then could relate to similar angles found elsewhere. Something more difficult to do with too much measuring.

LV: It's taken me a while to reply because this is so much to think about! Do you agree with the ideas in Hawthorne on Painting? Would you say that gluing things together is different from a unified picture plane? A lot of what you say goes counter to what I've been trying to do, but is also very exciting to think about. Sometimes I feel obligated to put an element into a picture. Would you say it's better to not include something if you have that feeling?

KK: Not sure about Hawthorne. I would need to reread; it's been close to forty years. Working from life there are inconvenient truths. The one thing to avoid is an element that has not been considered abstractly. Get the abstraction right, and don't worry, if in doing so, you have to alter and rearrange some things. It's not like observational painters are that honest. Don't worry about unifying the picture plane, get rid of anything that a role cannot be found for, and it will be alright.

LV: **Ken Kewley** thank you for your thoughts you have given me a lot to think/paint about.

If you want to read more of Ken Kewley's ideas check out his **Notes on Color** on Larry Groff's blog **Painting Perceptions**. Ken Kewley is also in the process of writing a book based on his **Notes on Color** so stay tuned!

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