

Derived interview

From the book Cecily Brown, 2008, by Dore Ashton

Original interview of Cecily Brown by Lari Pittman, with Mr. Pittman's questions and my own responses

Lari: Much has been said about the provocative imagery in your work. My questions are less about the imagery and more about the phenomenological experience of viewing the work. I want to take this time to discuss your imagery within the framework of a conceptual practice.

One of the things that has struck me is the role that art history plays in how you construct your work. Do you think that relationship with history is natural to you simply because you're European?

Dave: Well, I doubt that my European heritage plays much of a role, and in fact my American citizenship is probably more critical to the development of my work. The painters that are really my progenitors are mostly Americans: Philip Guston, Joan Mitchell, and Jean Michel Basquiat. But to answer your question, my relationship with art's history is very important, and is at the heart of my work. I think it's a painter's responsibility to create work that is of his time, and not just mimicry of the past, and you can't achieve that unless you understand the past.

Let's talk about this idea of the historical and the contemporary in making and viewing work. How do those impulses of contemporaneity and historicism reside in your work?

I'll tackle the relationship to making the work first. I had an epiphany one day when I was looking through a book of late Monet paintings. I looked at these marvelous abstractions of nature and thought to myself "I am doing the same thing, only not as well!". It bothered me that there was nothing differentiating my methods, my philosophy, and even my practices from his, other than the particular unique qualities of our personalities and of course the skill and mastery of our hands and eyes (his skill, my naiveté). There was absolutely no reason my paintings could not have been made a hundred years ago, and I felt this was tragic. Therefore, even though our motives may be similar, I now use tools and materials that were not around a hundred years ago.

Painting is incredibly limited. Do you think that newness can actually come out of limits?

Absolutely. I welcome the limits of painting in fact. Unlimited possibilities are frightening, like eternity. The trick for painters today is to use the means available to attack at the limits. How do you make the surface fresh and relevant? Newness has been achieved in every period of painting so far, within the very limited arena of making marks on rectilinear, flat surfaces; there is no reason for that to suddenly end.

Another thing that has struck me in looking at your work is that I don't wholly see you as a figurative painter. The articulation of the figurative and that of the architecture of nature and fictive space seem parallel and equal but at the same time combative armatures in your work. The viewer negotiates the interchangeability of their roles.

Yes, exactly. I could not create these paintings without considering the architecture of nature, as you say. The messy organic compositions, and space, texture, and color relationships in nature are the building blocks of the paintings, but from that I do create something fictive. People don't typically understand my paintings as being nature, and I'm okay with that. At the end of the day it has to stand on its own as an object. The viewer needs to accept it as a painting ultimately, and whether they can navigate it spatially, understand up from down, recognize horizon lines, or interpret land, sea, and sky, doesn't matter to me.

Since you're saying that physically there's no fixed meaning, wouldn't that suggest that assigned meaning is constantly mutable?

Absolutely. The only meaning I have as I'm creating them, and as they leave my studio and go out into the world, is that they are nature. That's a pretty ambiguous meaning, and frankly, I don't care if the viewer assigns that meaning at all. That is the beauty of painting, and especially the realm of abstract painting: arriving at meaning is a collaborative process that requires engagement from the viewer.

There are still recognizable passages in your work. It's clear that you still want the viewer to have moments of recognition – of figurative elements or of landscape. It seems, in looking at your work, that there are these two armatures that you build upon, and periodically you let the viewer recognize them more completely, experience them specifically, and then put them together as a whole in a painting. Increasingly, these are becoming harder to detect, though; it seems that you're not providing that service to the viewer as much as you used to.

I do go back and forth in the "level of service" I provide the viewer in recognizing specific elements of nature in my painting, but you are right, in general, I am veering away from specificity. I like to give the viewer something to hang their hat on; something that gives them a clue as to what I was looking at without being fully representational. As I've said, ultimately the painting needs to be successful as an independent object first and foremost. I am not just making graphic designs however. These are paintings that are translations of nature, and that is a critical point. The marks have to 1) succeed in their relationship to, and interpretation of whatever I was looking at, and 2) succeed on the canvas next to each other. They are both critical to the overall success, and one without the other is either simple landscape painting or just graphic design.

So do you think that's how the work has actually changed – that you're not as willing to enable the viewer in this act of forensic reconstruction?

It has nothing to do with me guiding the viewer by providing recognizable elements, per se. The work has not evolved with the viewer in mind, however egocentric that may sound. The work is the result of a deeper relationship between nature and me. As you get to know someone more deeply, your relationship becomes less literal. You begin to know what your partner is feeling or thinking, without them saying it. In fact they might not even be able to articulate it with words, yet you *know*. Your relationship is therefore somewhat abstract. You exchange ideas without even speaking. Painting is like that.

It could be that you've internalized spectatorship on a more profound level than when you were working ten years ago.

Could you define the difference between “sexy” and “sexual” in your work? What does that look like to you?

I suppose that is true. Ten years ago I was still honing the craft of painting, and within that frame of mind the paintings were more representational, because I was still in that honeymoon phase of being awed by the fact that I *could* perform such an act. Then the spectators were my teachers and my friends, but now I am the spectator.

The difference between sexy and sexual, whether either exists in my work, is that sexy is visual and sexual is physical. If my work exists in either realm, I hope that it's sexy. My paintings are about the joy of seeing. They are pure joy.

Painters have desires and intentions for their work, but they are making physical objects. I want to look at your intentions and then the formal structures you use to convey those intentions in your paintings.

My intention is to provide a translation of nature. I think about someone who is translating a poem from one language into another. Their job is not only to translate the words, but the rhythm and cadence. I think the translator must take some liberties in the words they choose to remain true to the original spirit, and not be bound by exactitude. Those are my intentions.

The formal structures I use are things that allow me to work very quickly. Paints and tools that achieve rapid results, because the moments in which I understand what nature means, and how it should be translated, are fleeting and fast!

I'm baffled when people want to assign meaning so specifically. Especially because there is a big difference between what informs a work and what the work actually means. I think a lot of artists believe that they should be one and the same thing.

But my work doesn't *mean* anything. What informs it is nature. What they mean is nature but that really isn't anything. It's just an idea. I am not a storyteller.

I would like to investigate the idea of concealment a bit more. I feel that a large part of the experience of your work is exuberant sublimation.

That is very close to the truth. They are largely about working through frustration until I can find a place of joyful escape. I have to work long enough for me to get out of the way of the painting, to quit inflicting my own agenda on it which might be contrary to the natural development of it, in order to find that harmony between what nature is saying and how I can translate it best.

You are alone in your studio, standing in front of several completed works. You're no longer the author, but a critical and clinical spectator. What is it that you see and what is it that you would like to see? Two different things.

What is it that I see? I see a painter struggling! Guston said that in painting, frustration is everything. While I do find great joy in seeing and painting, it is incredibly hard to succeed at my intentions. The best paintings were struggled with and eventually I arrive at a point where I get out of the way enough that it I allow it to succeed. It's like petting a cat. Cats will tell you how they want to be pet; all you have to do is stick out your hand. If you try to control the petting, they get irritated and walk off. Painting is like that.

What do I *want* to see? I want to see nature.