

INTERVIEW WITH ARTISTS

Megan Voeller

The format of this interview reflects the interplay of independent voices that Making Sense hopes to effect by bringing together works by Rochelle Feinstein, Deborah Grant, Iva Gueorguieva and Dona Nelson. Following a suggestion by Gueorguieva, each artist was presented with a list of questions and invited to respond without knowing what anyone else had replied. The candid, conversational answers below offer insights into their studio practices, artistic and philosophical convictions and personal fascinations.

Is there a set of techniques that you think of as being distinctively yours? How did you find or develop them?

Rochelle Feinstein: Nope. I just do , or learn to do, what seems necessary for the individual works that have accumulated in the studio. I can say that limits imposed by studio size, funds, travel, and time have each led to thinking through work in distinct ways. And have led to unexpected solutions.

Deborah Grant: During the summer of 1996, I was attending the Skowhegan Residency Program. I wanted to challenge the notion of what makes for distinctive and uniquely good painting, so I came up with a concept called Random Select. In this ongoing idea, I deconstruct and then reassemble visual, historic and literary material from unrelated sources to create my own non-linear retelling of the tale. In today's social media-bombarded society, I use the chaotic "noise" of the mediated world as my source matter, morphing truths and lies into a forged belief system that pays homage to conspiracy theory and consumer culture. RANDOM defines the random nature of my imagery, which may contain social, political, religious and humorous content. SELECT is choice of subject matter; "hand-picked," usually by a point-and-click Internet interface, and then depicted in my own unique style. I compare this to the sampling techniques of rap DJs of the late 1970s and Wikipedia encyclopedists of today, who expand messages by embedding them with references. Topics such as history, identity politics and art historical canons are used in the invention of my own visual vocabulary that I call Random Select.

Iva Gueorguieva: When I first encountered the cartoons of George Herriman, I was struck by the myriad ways in which he uses black. Even though the collage aspect of my paintings is the most obvious technical idiosyncrasy, it's the thin black line that ultimately produces and articulates the space. This line evolved over the years and is my way of inhabiting and traversing the paintings. I also approximate printmaking techniques in my drawing. For example, I might paint on plastic and then lift the image by pressing a piece of muslin into it in order to get the mirror image of my drawing. This type of reversal creates barely perceptible glitches. My body and my hand have certain habits, and therefore the motions recorded on the surface of the canvas as marks have a certain consistency, which these techniques disrupt.

Dona Nelson: Maybe I can claim to have invented cheesecloth mixed with gel medium, a kind of soft clay that allows me to spontaneously make little images and abstract forms. Also, I work one side of the canvas so vigorously that another image shows up on the other side of the canvas, but other painters have probably done that also.

What kinds of relationship do your paintings propose to viewers? What do your paintings want or invite?

RF: Artists are also viewers. That role is frequently in play when creating an object, as well as when artists look at work made by others. In the viewer role I ask exactly what you ask: What is being proposed for me to think about? Am I learning or re-thinking, reflecting upon, and enjoying the exchange? What I am seeing, the visual conditions as presented, are the prompts to thinking.

My role as an artist is not very different. My resources are varying kinds of cultural artifacts—a sentence, a snapshot, travel or a familiar material (even paint)—nothing unique there. The “viewer” is metaphorically speaking, present from the beginning of each work. The problem I need, then, to resolve is how do I engage the formal and visual conventions common to the practice of painting with all this “stuff”?

Both the artifactual “stuff” and the painting conventions I draw from are each a residue: both known and still active and wanting translation. My work is rooted in culture/culture and in painting/culture. The most I can ask is for a viewer to be alert. And not to hold it against the object that it is a painting.

DG: Today, inviting the viewer to look at painting carefully and thoughtfully seems to have fallen by the wayside. With the new trillion-dollar unregulated industry called the “Art World,” the viewer is taken on a rollercoaster ride with so-called “Art Consultants” with no background in art history or practice. They communicate about and speculate on art in a “Buy-to-Sell” terminology. My relationship to the viewer is to ignore them. I have no time to think about them while working in my studio. But once the finished work goes out into the world, I want the viewer to share in the composition’s development and interest in good art making. Pulling the viewer’s eye to important parts of the body of the work. To see the balance and stability in the work that can give harmony to the viewer. A natural human rhythm that works like we are on a tandem bicycle. The quality of wholeness or oneness that is achieved through the effective use of the elements and principles of art making. Giving us both the arrangement of elements and principles to create a feeling of completeness.

IG: The paintings invite looking, and those who surrender to looking end up spending time. They require time. They demand time. The viewer is invited to experience the paintings as they unfold and perform themselves. Since there are so many different layers, so many details, multiple vanishing points and motions images come into cohesion and dissolve in turn. I am not making images that one can behold and, in a certain way, “read.” The paintings offer a visual journey that changes depending on the viewer.

DN: I am interested when pure materiality on one side of the canvas becomes an image on the other side of the canvas, as in the painting Division Street. I call such abstract images phigors because the word is a sound that suggests other words.

Part of what’s happening over the process of making a painting is a certain thinking through things—discovering questions, discovering answers to questions. Would you talk about how such thinking unfolds in one of your works or projects (in the exhibition)?

RF: The work in the exhibition *Q: How Was Africa?* (2013) is a good way to talk this through. The piece exists in four parts, and was occasioned after I returned from a five-week stay in Ghana. I did not intend to make anything. The purpose of my trip was to work with other people, without thought of building any work as a result. After I returned home, dozens of people asked me the same question, "How was Africa?" Startled at first, I soon began replying, "Africa is a continent, I was in Ghana," followed by embarrassed looks. Africa is a continent comprised of 54 to 56 countries, depending whose authority you prefer. Shocked by the persistent, unconscious and colonialist thinking that was behind this question, I decided to think this through via my work. Beginning with the only Ghanaian object I took home with me, an April 30, 2012, copy of *The Daily Graphic*, the most widely read newspaper in Ghana, I began to draw. I used the tabloid newspaper format, collaged clippings excerpted from Richard Wright's book *Black Power*, and introduced statistics, noted parallels between Wright's visit in 1964 and my own, added information about corporate partnerships, stakeholders and the general state of the state. The drawings became a self-published newspaper, which then became the foundation for the painting. I thank my brother for one additional element: He forwarded to me an article appearing in *The New York Times* travel section about the "best undiscovered travel destinations in the world." Accra was #4. That clipping became the digital print now annexed to the painting: a perfect ending to a perfect journey.

DG: I study my work and look for marginal aspects that can be reordered to tell another story. Taking on a narrative aspect when viewed in sequence, my multi-panel series become frames relevant to a time and place not fixed to a singular moment in history. In my shaped works, I juxtapose small, cryptic images atop a vaguely familiar form, creating works that have one meaning when viewed from a distance and another when viewed up close. I envision these random ideas as metaphors for the human condition. The interweaving of semantics and pictorials allows me to invent a language that can act as a puzzle, but also be seen as a great joke that reveals flaws of human nature.

IG: I'm always looking for synchronicity. It has to happen, or the painting dies. As the paintings evolve, meanings, events, narratives get layered and juxtaposed until everything in the paintings is simply necessary, and in relation with all the other parts. For example, in the case of *Ghost of Water*, which is a diptych, I wanted to think through the seam, to work with that junction, which is also a separation and which both connects and distinguishes the two panels. When you push two panels together, their edges take on radically different roles. With this painting, questions mounted about boundaries, borders and the inevitable confrontation between two distinct forces. Diabolical dichotomies emerged everywhere as I proceeded. At the same time, I was aware of and thinking about the space immediately outside my studio, a park that is being bulldozed prior to reconstruction. Fully-grown trees were destroyed in seconds amidst maddening noise from the heavy machines and eye-stinging clouds of dust. The noise, maddening, gurgling, rippling, ochre and steel pushed against the inside of my skull until I couldn't see my paintings through my tears. *Ghost of Water* is a record of this experience coming as well as a record of the stories coming through the radio about mutilated birds, school shootings and another war underway. It's also a record of hearing the magical rhythms of some Latin American drummer, Braque's still life paintings, my friend Trenton's recent self-portrait paintings, Lait Yossifor's gestures in thick grey oil, my son's painting in orange and black sitting in the corner. All these elements are in a kind of tactile dialogue with the formal puzzle I started with.

DN: Paintings are something different than questions or answers.

What role does story play in your painting? Do you think of your paintings as having or telling stories?

DG: I love to tell stories in my work. I like morphing truths and lies into a forged belief system. Making up stories from history is the key to great art making for me. In my recent series called *Christ You Know it Ain't Easy!!*, I interweave historical accounts and personal experiences with references to contemporary political and social issues. I cull material from a variety of sources, including magazine photographs, comic books and published texts, which I then assemble together on birch panels via a signature drawing method involving silhouetted figures and calligraphic marks and lines. In this recent series, I produced a large four-panel painting called *Crowning The Lion and The Lamb*. The subject of the painting is a fictional meeting between African-American folk artist Mary A. Bell (1873-1941) and renowned modernist painter Henri Matisse (1869-1954). In my telling of the story of Bell and Matisse, Mary A. Bell has a dream after falling asleep while working late one night on her drawings. The modern master Matisse appears at the foot of her bed discoursing on his famous large-scale paper collages, which he calls "painting with scissors." After a brief discussion about abstract art and her own personal history, Bell wakes up only to realize that she is in the Boston State Hospital. In the central four-panel piece, I evoke this scene with imagery from Bell's bedroom. The side panels of *Crowning The Lion and The Lamb* focus on the guiding theme of Bell's life, religious faith, while simultaneously incorporating references to her own work and Matisse's art. Through a series of vignettes, the panels re-imagine this subject across space and time.

IG: Of course. The storytelling is often the most tangible reason to paint. But my stories fall apart and change in the process. I paint more about characters and settings than about plots. I just watched the first season of [television series] *True Detective* and loved the characters and the setting. But whenever the plot needed to move along it fell flat and I stopped caring. In its best moments the show made me think about painting. I feel like painting exists in that great place of the figure/ground relationship. When Marty and Rust are hanging out next to their car their silhouettes framed by the chemical factories in the swamp-those breathing. metal dragons-their verbal exchanges don't serve the needs of linear narrative. Their words hang in the air like laundry framing the surrounding landscape. Film tends to insist on how things happen in time, but in this scene I felt the space alone breathing and pulsating on the screen.

DN: The thing about stories and language, in general, is that stories have a beginning, a middle and an end, while paintings, when they are really good, keep producing themselves while you look at them. It's not very good news for higher art education, but, in fact, paintings are profoundly different than what can be said about them.

Where time makes an appearance as something communicated in your work, how do you paint it?

RF: Painting is spatially oriented. Not limited, just oriented, by nature. Time in painting is static, encoded by a fixed framing. However time is measured, whether by dimensions of scale, repetition, density, proportionality, chromatic and value progressions-just for starters-it is, after all, framed. The time occurs through the act of projection across and/or into a plane. That's how I paint it. As I frequently paint a number of individual paintings, each reflects on a particular subject but using varied painting grammars. I'm aware that these take "time" to parse. This is very different than time-in-real-time, a durational moving image. I've made moving images for about ten years. With rare exception, each of these is part of a group of paintings that are in looped time.

DG: Time in all its forms mocks the past, present and future. I choose to go with the flow when I am painting, ignoring all so-called rules of time. Art exists in time as well as space; it

implies change and movement and the passing of time. Time, whether actual or an illusion, can be a crucial element in art making. Time also looks at the meaning of mark making, which is completely unpredictable, and the element of joy that happens when we are surprised by our artwork in its finished results.

IG: It took me seven months to make *Ghost of Water*. Time is in there in the way that in Bulgaria the old master of bridges and forts placed a young woman inside his structures, and enclosed her alive in a tomb of rock and mud. It was believed that her strength would hold the structure over time. Time is simply part—it is captured inside the layers of the painting.

DN: An image, even an abstract image, has a different quality of time than a splash of paint. Again, I refer to the front and back of *Division Street*. Often, I couple a fast process, such as staining with paint, with a slow process, such as pushing painted string through the canvas from one side to another. The string slows and changes the reading of the painting's composition. Most of my paintings are not graphic images. Color that is inseparable from the canvas and the texture of the paint also slows the read of the painting.

Who are your touchstones in the history of painting, or art in general? Imagined rivals? Friends? How do they show up in your work?

RF: The first question, "Who are your touchstones in the history of painting, or art in general?" is the one I can best respond to. If we had a real-time conversation, it might begin with me asking: "Why are you asking this? What is your interest in a touchstone for an artist? Would that come from 'art', or can it be, for example, the sciences?" And you, in turn, would tell me your thoughts. And I would say, "OK. I completely understand, and ... " and we would have a fantastic conversation. In lieu of developing that conversation, I don't think about my art in relation to a 'touchstone,' i.e. criteria or level, you mean? I've found, as a painter, some model (why not say Picasso!) is often expected or offered. Having a huge appetite for looking at and understanding really interesting work is a process that enriches everything. Whatever era or generation belongs to, each produces within a vastly different set of conditions. Those conditions lend shape to what is made, but do not account entirely for even the smallest distinction between works made in the same time-frame and location. Just as I am working through varying sets of material conditions as well as the visible and invisible social, political, economic ones that bear on the outcome of my work, so have all artists. Most of what I do is circumstantial, not related to specific people per se but definitely attached to experiences.

DG: I used to dive deep into the vast ocean of my favorite painters past and present. I would try to touch the bottom of these oceans, never giving a moment's notice that I would have to swim back to the top of the ocean to breathe. What I have realized over the past 18 years is to truly kill off my art heroes. There is no way to reinvent the wheel. I want to add a new spoke to the wheel while it continuously turns. In art history. I want to be a true borrower and thief in art. I would blatantly betray everything I learned in my educated art practice. Forget the "pure"—I am only looking for the continuous mark, created by all my predecessors, both in low and highbrow art making.

IG: I tend to paint for particular people in my life. I talk to them through the paintings. There are also painters who I go to when I feel afraid. You cannot look at Guston or Paula Rego and stay afraid. It helps.

DN: Miro, Pollock, Fontana and many, many other painters have informed my practice. I have great admiration for some of the American so-called "outsider" artists who are so inventive with materials and images. Right now, other than my own work, I have hanging a painting and a drawing by the American painter Harriet Korman, a shaped Thornton Dial painting, a print by Deborah Grant. a great painting on plywood by the "outsider" artist

Freddie Brice, a big Judith Linhare painting of a personable squirrel, a figurative painting by the late Sidney Tillim that is inspired by an old movie, and one of Gordon Moore's complex works on photographic paper. Then, I have quite a bit of framed work on paper-paintings, pastels, drawings-that I have picked up from all over the place: senior citizen art sales, art shows in cafes, libraries, etc. The most humble artists are capable of extremely sophisticated visual production. Often, this "uncategorized" artwork is more surprising than what one sees in New York galleries. I certainly don't call uncategorized artwork "primitive," or "uneducated," or "thrift store art," or any thing of the sort. We are living in a repressive time that prizes conventional "success" above everything else, so, yes, I am interested in almost any artwork where I see the urgency and intelligence of an individual.

How has being a woman informed the positions you have taken up with regard to your studio practice and to painting as an institution?

RF: Mine is an old story by now. So let's pretend I am a 28-year-old white woman:

Dear Megan,

My peers in graduate school were predominantly women. The faculty and visiting artists at my institution was fairly well balanced between men and women. No issues there. I am very comfortable being a young woman who paints and am

getting a little attention for my work. I do wonder, though, about what seems like a feeding frenzy in the art media over the work of 15-20 young, mostly-white men some younger than myself, who also are making mostly abstract paintings. Their work is selling in the five-to-six figure range in primary and secondary markets and the discussion about their sales value is much bigger than the discussion of their work, whatever that is. I don't deny them their good fortune. Or wish the art world ill. But I can't help noticing that there are NO women amongst them. Is this weird or what?

I mean, that is still the status quo?

Best,

YWW

Young White Woman

DG: You are an artist first! At this point in the game there are too many great artists worldwide who are making strides with their work and have no identity, no gender or sex. Twenty-first century artists are making art that challenges all of the perceived notions that good art is done by white men. On January 25, 2013, German artist Georg Baselitz said: "Women, ladies, girls, however you identify-if you've got two X chromosomes, I'm talking to you, and I have an unfortunate announcement: You can't paint. At least not well. So if you're thinking about becoming a painter, don't do it; you'll never be any good. If you already are one, I'm sorry; you should probably take up knitting instead." This is rich considering that Baselitz's paintings look like he is cleaning his brushes on his canvases and calling it painting. The art of the 21st century is a wide field of research, practice and application of study that artists are doing on an everyday basis. The isms used in 20th century art went out of their way to exclude many people from participating in the canon of art history. But that will not fly now! Artists' influences have shifted with changes in communications and technology. Every location around the world has artists who respond to worldwide geographies and a wide range of human histories that are the new global visual culture and currency.

IG: I grew up in a communist country where women were truly emancipated professionally. Both my grandmother's and my mother's generations had access to education and the professions equal to that of men. Women never had to choose between family and a career because the system allowed for motherhood without the danger of losing your professional status. So as I grew up, I knew that I could do whatever I wanted.

My experience living in the States has challenged this conviction at many points of my life. Lacking these social services, it's harder to be both a woman and a professional. Only a mixture of anger, pride, belligerence and will helps me continue. The unequal position of women here became clearer as I grew older and especially when I had my son. I really felt people's doubt in my commitment and seriousness, just because I was having a child. There was often cynicism in their "congratulations" regarding my pregnancy. I have had a few conversations with other women artists who asked me not only how to do it but if it is okay to do it—to be an artist and become a mother. This is absurd, of course, but real.

DN: Painting is not a gendered form. These days, when I hear myself referred to as a "woman painter," or a "female artist," I have to laugh—such an old fashioned designation! The first big show that I was in was Lucy Lippard's show in 1970 at the Aldrich Museum, 26 Contemporary Women Artists. There was a review in The New York Times titled "The Ladies Flex Their Brushes." Many people who write about painting can't think about the form in a complex way, so they resort to simple-minded categories like "woman painter," as if that describes anything! However, that said, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the many women who have been so generous to me: other artists, critics and curators. Almost my entire professional support system has been women, but a few men have also been very supportive of me.

Of course, I try to be supportive of my students, but it's interesting to see who continues to paint after school is over. Many stop painting, although they may stay in art-related professions. Years ago, I happened to be in Chicago and I visited a woman who had been a student at Tyler some years before. She was a single mother, and she was painting in her living room. I really liked her paintings, and her ongoing art practice, unsupported by an academic job or an exhibition history, was very moving and inspiring to me. I always say that painting is a gift that you give yourself for your whole life. You give it to yourself. Don't look to other people to give you permission to be an artist.