

CAMILLE GUTHRIE INTERVIEWS ANN PIBAL

UNSETTLED AND PERPETUAL

Robert Storr calls you a “latter-day modernist constructivist rather than a post-modernist deconstructionist” in the essay “Dense Pack” in your book from Meulsteen gallery. What do you think of that title?

I don’t know about the labels, but I do understand my inquiry to be inherently geared with a kind of stubborn buoyancy that comes from a mostly headlong driving forward (modern in this way, sure, but I mean this more on the level of personality). Boot-strappy, perhaps not cautious, sometimes argumentative.

My engagement with my work is fully steeped in precedent, but I don’t prioritize backward looking, or a reliance on the past to construct meaning, or try to recast a story that is presupposed to be already “understood.” I’m more interested generally in a proposal that is about forward motion, something unsettled—yes, but also perpetual. Something glowing with the light of transition rather than something smartly dusty.

Your palette is so stunning and simultaneously off-key. How do you decide which colors makes sense in one piece?

Color creates, ultimately, situations that are mostly irrational. As hard as I might try to design color groups or take notes from observations, the color necessarily becomes activated only within the parameters of a given painting. It is an intuitive and emotionally charged activity.

Do you find colors when you look around, or is it just you and the paint in your studio? I ask because we live in a place where color can be so palpable, even flagrant. I remember driving through the mountains with the leaves aflame, wondering, Is this what painters experience all the time?

I am overwhelmed, or significantly distracted at least, by color in the world, and do see my studio life as an excuse to attempt to really engage with it. Color is a force of nature whether it is describing a leaf or a candy wrapper.

I detect rebellion in your work, perhaps having to do with color and scale?

Initially yes, after first arriving in NYC in 1998, I made a deliberate decision to work on a small scale and with the non-hefty object. It was important to me to work on a domestic scale and also with colors that might be more rooted in design precedent than in the history of art. I also made many paintings that were direct intersections with the very heavy patriarchy one deals with in painting—especially in geometric painting. It is also a conscious choice on my part never to repeat a format size or an image, to build what I think of as an index of possible solutions, rather than an iconic “answer.” I have been working on a larger scale recently, and I think now these things are somewhat less important to me, or at least they have shifted. There are only a small number of women who have worked with hard edges in painting, and this is significant to me, as it was then, when I started.

What made you decide to use metal panels instead of canvas? Is it the fluidity of the surface? The way that a metal background skirts that line between fine and commercial arts? Is it a way to wrest a very masculine, minimalist material for your own?

Yes, yes, yes. I like working on these panels for all of these reasons. They are constructed of a honeycomb aluminum sheeting, and the sides are filled with poplar, which I think tempers the potential severity of the metal. Practically, they have the advantage of being very lightweight, so I can travel with them and also make larger ones that are easy to handle. Above all, the honeycomb material is very rigid, which affords me a thin panel, a slight object—to me, this is very important.

I love it that Robert Storr says your work finds the sublime “in zones that are close to the hand, intimate zones where predominantly close-valued hues are lit up by flashes of saturated color as lightning bolts illuminate the desert at dusk.”

I love that too. And I love RS.

Color and light, of course, don’t exist without the other. And I do try to create a sense of naturalistic light in my paintings, in this way hoping to correlate the abstract situation to the personal, to the sensual and bodily. As I already mentioned, the glowy light of transitional times, literally the morning and evening light, for me, these shimmering, dusky conditions are easily

metaphors for the inquiry (or of consciousness) itself—the shifting, evolving, the chasing after seeing and knowing. Compositinally too, I like to invent situations that suggest movement, repetition, or something in the process of being built or, conversely, dismantled. Again, something unsettled and perpetual, something reflecting and checking back in with itself—like thinking.

In terms of lightness, I want to lift things toward physical lightness too—investing the work with as much efficiency of effort and use of material as I am capable. I want the work to look unencumbered and not fussy.

You spend some time painting in Mexico in the winter months. You also split your time between Brooklyn and Vermont, where you teach. Does geography affect your work?

Moving around a lot has definitely become a critical aspect of my studio routine. What affects me most about the different locations isn't so much the physical environment, as in color and light (or at least so I think), but the intensity and speed of a place. I don't work much in the city anymore, but in Brooklyn I feel like one puts up an antennae and simply tunes in the energy of all those working in such close proximity—it's a real high. In Vermont, we go to bed earlier, get up earlier, cook more, tend to a garden. There is a feeling of hiding out, a hermetic, fertile adjacency. In Baja, it is simply a sense of escape. The Internet, other services won't always work, and language doesn't even work as well (at least not for me, my Spanish stinks). The usual daily expectations and obligations are necessarily held at arm's length, and this of course creates new possibilities and challenges all around.

Do you draw your paintings before you begin them? There is frisson between balance and imbalance in your work. Do you let accidents happen?

I always start a painting by laying down one color, or a field of mostly one color. Then I place pieces of tape down, moving them around repeatedly until I feel satisfied with a drawing. After that, I lay down another color and repeat the process. I also make thumbnail drawings and other works on paper, but those only rarely are translated directly into a painting.

The tone of your work is rigorous, intellectual, precise. Robert Storr calls your recent work “concentration incarnate.” It’s also witty. When I look at HMLP, for instance, I’m so delighted by those pinks. Am I right that there is humor in the immaculateness?

One of your paintings, EPTO, you described to me as “brushy.” There’s an exciting confusion between what is the background and the foreground.

I know you are a professor and a mother. How do you find ways to work on paintings when you can’t be in your studio?

Do your other activities—like gardening or teaching—affect your work?

Is there a painter you think about when you work? Someone who spurs you?

Yes, thank you, yes. I hope there is humor in them—I try to put it there and experience it there. A visual pun or sleight of hand makes me very happy when I can find one.

EPTO is a case of trying to balance a direct, almost off-handedly decorative brush mark with a darker mood or subject matter. The conflation of mystery and a banal gesture. I think of the pinks in that painting as somewhat abject, kind of fleshy but without vitality—for me this isn’t one of the more humorous paintings, it represents the opposite end of the project.

It’s pretty simple really, it involves a lot of midnight oil and determination. And a belief in the adage about better service in the busy restaurant, I guess. My amazing husband Colin Brant, who is also an artist, and I try hard to manage things as efficiently as we can.

I do a lot of teaching, and I have ever since I got out of grad school. It has evolved into an enormous asset to my studio life primarily because designing courses gets me deeper into my reading lists than I might otherwise manage. I do love it, but it can be absolutely too much at times. Gardening is meditative and restorative and endlessly frustrating—a continual reminder that you cannot control the big picture no matter how hard you try.

Also related to my initiation into the city, discovering the work of Mary Heilmann and Dan Walsh was entirely liberating to me. I saw in them, especially in Mary, an ability to sidestep the bogging down of narrative and justification.

The ability to lay out just what needed to be and with purpose—not much else. In fact, to make subject of this activity exactly. Both of them make paintings that have a performative quality, but aren't necessarily about gesture.

I also discovered at that time the work of Moira Dryer whom I, sadly, never met. She was able to balance an engagement with the big questions with humor and a practical ease with materials that is unusual. She combined image and object, illusion and surface with apparent effortlessness. I think about her work all of the time.

More recently, Charline von Heyl is someone whom I really admire, same with Jutta Koether. I recently discovered the paintings of Maria Lassnig. All three of them blow me away, so very tough—brutal even, and at the same time containing unconventional virtuosity all around.

After these thoughts, the list goes on and on.

When you were young, was there a moment in which you realized you were an abstract painter? Or what led you away from realism?

I grew up in Minneapolis, going to the Walker. My favorite painting—or at least the one that made the biggest impression on me—in the museum was Chuck Close's giant, photo-realistic *Big Self Portrait*. In it he is all hairy-chested with a cigarette dangling out of his mouth. Funny and imposing, both formally and with regard to narrative all at once. There was a lot of hullabaloo around a Picasso exhibit in 1980, when I was ten. I remember my impression then, considering them both, that it really didn't matter how you made a picture, but I definitely got the message that it was important to push the question around. As it happened, the next week in my after-school art class, I tried out some synthetic Cubism. I was working on a still life of mostly bottles, using dark charcoal and angular facets. When the teacher came around to my place to take a look, she said something to the effect of how “bold”

You studied poetry when you were at Iowa, and I've heard that your students read poems in your courses. Are there poets you go to when you are painting?

and “masculine” my drawing was. I took it as the biggest compliment one could possibly get. I was soaring. Abstraction = bold and masculine; bold and masculine = good. I guess I’ve been thinking about that one for a while now.

At Iowa, Jorie Graham allowed a few of us painters to enroll in the poetry seminars—it was an incredible experience, of course. Listening to her comparisons of Milton and Wordsworth was fundamentally mind-blowing to me at the time; her teaching was an almost operatic performance. She demanded so much intellectually, in her dissections of language, and at the same time she was always imploring everyone to “lay their bodies down” on poems (...) “lay the body down whole,” or something to that effect. In these sessions, analysis and intuition seemed easily forged together.

For me, finding structures in poetry was critical in opening up ways to see form in visual art in more complicated ways, and yes, I try to get my students to realize this too. I’ve always envied poets—so much permission—a system rooted in intense observation but liberated to create meaning through sideways glances and flagrancies of attitude.

You started using these wonderful titles about two years ago like HMLK, TWLN, DRFP, RNKT. When I first read them, I tried to figure out what they might mean. Then I remembered what H.D. says in her long poem The Walls Do Not Fall: “I know, I feel / the meaning that words hide; // they are anagrams, cryptograms, / little boxes, conditioned // to hatch butterflies...” Could you talk about those evocative titles?

Wow, that is beautiful. Amazing.

These titles emerged at a time when, I think, I started to allow for images that were more enigmatic—to engage more directly with the idea of a more open-ended resolution. The titles can be read in more than one way, creating an impression that might shift around, or might ultimately remain opaque or nonsensical. With them I intend to create something that operates parallel to the image—perhaps a miniature poem?



Front Cover: *FLS2* (2011, Acrylic on Aluminum, 14.25" x 17.5"), reproduced in grayscale to show full composition



Back Cover: *FLM* (2011, Acrylic on Aluminum, 16.25" x 12.75"), reproduced in grayscale to show full composition