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“The Solitariness of the Pursuit”: A Studio Visit with Elena Sisto

by Leslie Wayne

LESLIE WAYNE: Your new paintings are terribly funny! How refreshing to bring humor into a canon so historically laden with gravitas. Particularly since the underlying themes of your work have always been deeply psychological (not that the human mind isn't fodder for constant hilarity).

As I understand it, there are many members of your extended family who were in the mind trade. When I look at your work of the last 15 years, I can't help but think about the impact of that personal history, subliminal or not, on the ideas that have consistently engaged you over time, the female personae, personhood, and identity as an individual artist within the wider membership of a tribe of artists and the art world.

You've said that you love Freud. But the Jungian concept of the collective unconscious immediately comes to mind when I think about how your paintings, from the three-quarter female figures of 2005 to the young women artists in their studios, which you made between 2010 and 2012, have represented the idea of a collective identity within this tribe. In your current show, you have shifted from the female personae/artist as an archetype, to the self-portrait. You, the individual, an individuated artist, in her own studio. What prompted you to make that shift?

ELENA SISTO: My father is an aeronautical engineer, which has influenced me very much. My mother is a social worker and I had an aunt and uncle who were therapists and a cousin who is a psychiatrist. The conversation in my family was oddly “psychoanalytical” – not sure how accurate that term actually is for what went on – and intellectualized. Freudian concepts were thrown around rather recklessly, I'd say, in retrospect. Consequently I had to look up Uncle (because his name was invoked so often) Sigmund for myself in order to get an idea of what he was really about.

That family experience sent me and my work on a path progressing very purposefully away from the psychoanalytic towards emotionality and the pleasure of paint, a shift from above the neck to below the neck, so to speak. I really liked Freud's writings, especially what he wrote about humor, loss and the uncanny. He was a warm human being, I think. I was interested in Jung's ideas as well, especially the collective unconscious, but I he wasn't so nice.

In the long-term view, the “Girl” or “Daughter” paintings and my last show of young women artists were the anomaly. I have mostly always painted autobiographically. Those two shows were about my daughter, Clara, and the insight that observing the process of her life gave me on my own experience of adolescence and young adulthood. I wanted to go back over that period and set some things straight for myself. I was comparing her experience to mine. But I also knew that the issues were ones many young women are involved with, balancing between the public and the private, self-consciousness and the need to be seen. The bottom line is that I always



Elena Sisto, *Busby II*, 2013-2015. Oil on linen, 60 x 40 inches. Courtesy of Lori Bookstein Fine Art

seem to work from what's right under my nose. Humor is a way of disrupting the current order of things, touching the emotional depths and coming back up to new possibilities. My father, the engineer, has a great, dry, sense of humor. It takes a minute to realize he's made a joke and then you can't believe how silly it is. He was able to slip in and break up the tyranny of the psychological, thankfully.

I'm glad you found them funny, by the way.

Yes, and they're actually funny to me in the way that you describe your father being funny. They're kind of sly. They sneak up on you and then they continue to tickle. The extreme close-ups feel like you're saying, "Can you believe how great that is?" But I wonder also about your father's being an engineer and how that's influenced the way you think about your pictures as constructions.

I'm glad you asked that.

There are three ways. First of all, an engineer is a designer. I can remember seeing my father sit in his chair at his desk thinking for hours and hours. Just thinking. And then swiftly writing down pages of numbers and formulas on a yellow pad, a completely foreign language, with sketches. The solitariness of the pursuit. The drawing. And the

experimental approach to structures.

Second, his field was flutter, of airfoils and jet engines mostly, anticipating and dealing with turbulent airflow. To me the ideas of fluid mechanics have always seemed analogous to the movement of form and paint in the space of a picture: the effects of compression, expansion and temperature on flow, what happens when a passage of paint is squeezed by the forms on either side of it, or when those forms let up and allow expansion, rhythm, speed and momentum. Those things all relate to ideas of plasticity in painting and drawing. He doesn't necessarily agree by the way. But that's ok.

Finally, the far out weirdness of some of his inventions, the willingness to really go out on a limb is like an artist.

Hmm. Cubism would be the most obvious analogy to an experimental approach to structures, and your work certainly takes many cues from that period of Modernism. Whereas your interest in the fluid mechanics of material feels completely Post-modern – a passion for the inherent thingness of paint and how it behaves as separate from the image. Using oil and water based paint together seems like a way for you to achieve a sensuality that is both mechanically challenging and delicious to behold, but never at the expense of the picture. In other words, your technique does not hold the image hostage to its materiality, which is hard to do.

But let's get back to the space in your paintings. Unlike standard Cubism, or say, reverse perspective in the works of Mernet Larson and Scott Godesky (both recently the subject of discussion over Facebook by two spaceshifters in their own work, David Brody and Alexi Worth) your space seems to come out of the flat world of cartoons. Your space is very shallow and in some cases feels like it's pressed right up against the surface. In "Couch" it's almost as if the space in the painting and all the objects in it, were painted originally in the round – literally bent around a tube – and then splayed out flat on a table. SPLAT! In "Splurt" the hand holding the paint tube (which itself has a picture of a hand holding a paint tube or some sort of jar on the front) and the paint that's being squeezed out of it, have nowhere to go but right up against the camera lens. IN YOUR FACE! But in spite of the lack of room to



Elena Sisto, *Splurt*, 2013-2015. Oil on canvas, 48 x 40 inches. Courtesy of Lori Bookstein Fine Art

move, your pictures feel neither aggressive nor claustrophobic. On the contrary, they are filled with light and air and joy, which I believe has a lot to do with your palette. Can you talk about that?

Cubism has been quite important to me. I see it as the last great innovation in pictorial structure. The concepts of Cubism are extremely provocative. They open up a huge amount of freedom to paint what, where, how and when you want, not to mention painting what is otherwise unseen. I don't think we've played this out yet by any means. Alexi is a great example of someone taking advantage of those freedoms, as are Carroll Dunham, Judith Linhares, Katherine Bradford, Tom Burckhardt, Elliot Green. Dana Schutz's work has become very Cubist recently. I would say all these people are working in a classical Cubist painting space. It's the imagery, the content and the authors that are different. They may disagree.

I don't exactly think of my work as coming out of cartoon space or as flat, unless you are calling "compressed" "flat". Because there's flat "flat" too. I think of the space as compressed and the imagery influenced by cartoons. The Post Modern element is in the imagery.

And I think one of the best examples of the compression and expansion I was referring to would be Morandi. The rest you describe better than I probably could. But if you think of Morandi, Matisse, Picabia, Picasso, Guston, they all were involved with these issues.

I do want my painting to move forward from the canvas and I feel like I am only beginning to understand color. It's so powerful all on it's own and there's a great deal of emotion in it.

Getting away from the city makes all the difference. Where the air is cleaner, color is pure energy. In the city it seems to be more of an attribute of something else.

Everyone's sense of color is so intuitive, even if they've studied color theory. I have a friend who has the weirdest palette and I finally asked him one day what he based his color choices on, and he told me that he was color blind to red. He saw all reds as grays. That's an extreme case. But beyond the technical optics of color and light, there's no denying the intense emotional power of color. I think color can function as a reflection of one's internal make up and history as well. What's bred in the bone. I never studied color, and so my color sensibility is completely informed by having grown up on the West Coast. The Pacific Ocean to me just seems to fill the sky with more lumens! So I understand how environment can deeply affect your work. So do you generally prefer to work upstate, or is this something specific to these new paintings? How does being in the country influence your process?

I love being upstate because I can forget about everything and just work. I feel like I am in love with where I am and I am working all the time up there even when I am not painting. People are more casual. There's more elbowroom. I have great neighbors. Everything is good to look at. We're surrounded by animals. The animals are intense! I can see things more clearly. I do need to bring the paintings down here for a little reality check. I can begin to believe they will make themselves up there or that everything is good. But most of the paintings in the show were painted up there at least in part.

Surprisingly, my dog and studio mate, Busby, prefers the NYC studio. Mostly because he has the perfect place to bask in the sun here and get rainbows scattered all over him, my little sybarite. I keep prisms in the windows everywhere.

Prominent in this group of new paintings are your hands – swatting flies, cradling Busby, clutching a bowl of salad while painting, squeezing out a tube of color, and of course, forever holding your brushes. Was that an intentional theme or did you just find yourself subliminally coming back to the one tool that forever connects your heart and mind to the muscle memory of making pictures?

I decided to crop in on the figure and lose the head for a while because the head implies consciousness and then suddenly the viewer is thinking about what the painting is thinking. The face can suck up all the meaning out of the rest of the picture and make it too specific. I want the painting to be about what I feel so I concentrate on other parts of the (my) body that are more available for identification. In fact, the plane is often completely identified with my body.

The hands function very much like the head without that extra degree of specificity, which can send the entire picture off in a narrative direction or turn the figure into an object. I don't paint narrative. I'm much more interested in the emotionality, the abstract level of the work, the paint and light. That said, I am always trying to bring the head back in but in a more dynamic way. Or maybe I should say less dynamic.

They are amazingly successful at attaining a perfect tension between emotionality, conceptual rigor and technical light-footedness. Then there is the subject of the artist in her studio, which has been a subject of fascination for generations. How do you see your work in the context of that history? Or does it even matter to you?

Thank you! I totally see my work in that context and I keep it around me in the form of reproductions. I've thought long and hard about what I want to put into other peoples lives and what I have to offer. Since the studio is what I know best at this point, that is what I am painting. I think people are very interested in artists and artists are interested in each other. The different states of being in the studio, the sense of suspension and potential, making your own rules, the cooperation between forms, the ability to be your own best judge, the sensuality of it – how can you go wrong?

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