

Follow Up Questions

June 2014

Lauren Britton interviews Andrea Belag

Lauren: Congrats again on having this show at DCKT Andrea! How has it been to have this show on view? Have you had a lot of feedback about the show?

Andrea: This is my “happy show”. I didn’t have much notice, but I had enough paintings in the studio that I felt were strong so I agreed to do the show w/3 weeks notice. And this is the first show I have had where I participated in social media. There has been a great response and it is terrific.

Lauren: In our previous interview you discussed your interest in consuming artists and paintings online, mainly on Tumblr. Have you been looking at any artists as of late that have influenced your current works?

Andrea: Tumblr isn’t doing it for me lately, I’ll start up again with that in the fall though. I was knocked out by the Polke retrospective at MOMA. I love how he makes painting look like its not a static object or activity.

Lauren: Looking about the show at DCKT I am stuck by the specific mood and light behind the color decisions in many of the paintings. Can you talk about the color sense that you are developing in the works? What is the role of the color in the recent paintings, like *Lightening?* And *Witches Brew?*

Andrea: I realize that earlier, in our last discussion, I said I was not a colorist but in the past year color has become more of a priority for me. Now, I am looking for new sources of color relationships, and I am taking ideas from non-painting sources.

**Lauren Britton interviews Andrea Belag
September 2013**

Andrea Belag I've been teaching at SVA for 15 years.

Lauren Britton What do you teach at SVA?

A Foundation drawing, and a more advanced painting class, "The Abstract Image".

L Where did you go to school?

A New York Studio School, primarily. I moved to Hoboken afterwards, because it was cheap. We had 4,000 sq. ft. in Hoboken, 32 windows, each 4x8ft, windows on four sides – pigeons were living there when we moved in! We had a big gas blower and we couldn't afford to heat over 55 degrees. Now, every time the heat goes on, wherever I am, I really appreciate it!

L How long have you been in this studio?

A I've been in this studio since '99, previously I lived and worked in one room, it was 1,000 sq. ft. exactly, and I lived and painted there on a fairly large scale. And after twenty years I just thought I gotta' get out of here. It was so unhealthy. And someone said, "you're so brilliant cause you got this place." I wasn't brilliant. It was the one thing I wanted more than anything else. I lived there and worked here, I've been in this area since 1980.

L So you've seen it change, I'm sure, a lot.

A I try not to think about it too much. I want it nice and calm so I can paint.

L What is your studio practice like, far as coming into the studio and working?

A I need to be here frequently; I even come on days that I'm teaching.

L Are you here looking or making, or both?

A Mostly looking and taking notes. I do a lot of the work wet-on-wet, so it's a big working day and it's physically intense. So I can't do that much unless I have a block of time. I don't paint for long stretches though, I can't anymore. If you've been doing the same thing for many years... you develop stress-related injuries. But, I come in every day, and I paint probably five days a week. I have no distractions here, I don't listen to music, I don't have the Internet - I have my iPhone, so I'm cheating but I can't get lost for hours, I have that at home. When I walk in, I just go to work.

I also only work in daylight, that's very important to me. I've only had three studios in my life, because I need sufficient natural light.

L Do you ever paint outside?

A No. That's too much light. When I've tried that, the paintings get very dark, you have to compensate for the abundance of light. So low-level natural light even on a dark day is good. I turn on the lights at the end of the day, especially deep winter, but I don't make any color choices. I can't really see color spatially in electric light.

L How do you make color decisions? Do you go into your paintings with a palette, or is it intuitive...?

A It's a combination. I usually have an idea about the color, or a chord, and it often changes gear. This past year I've been very interested in dark colors. I hardly use black, I prefer indigo and phthalos, but sometimes I go to black. I was very interested in the contrast between the full color palette and the more aggressive nature of black paint. It really starts with Matisse and it's fresh to me. I'm very involved in color, but I'm more involved in making space and a kind of interior world, in the paintings. That's more subject matter than the color though. I can't work without color. But I wouldn't say that I'm a colorist, or say that color is my subject matter. It's

more about what happens in space. Gesture isn't my subject either though a lot of people talk about it.

L How do you arrive at the compositions?

A I do watercolors. And I'll use those for the composition. I'm usually looking at something, maybe a photograph I've taken; or a part of a painting of mine that I want to redevelop.

L Who do you look at?

A I look at the work of many abstract painters. But most recently Hans Hartung & Bernard Frieze.

L Can we talk more about the space of the paintings? So you're looking at other paintings that you've done, photographs that you've taken...

A Sometimes there's a new idea. Something that I'm trying to get at that I haven't quite gotten yet, I keep going painting after painting until I get it. Images will crop up again until I feel like I've thoroughly explored it. I'm interested in imagery, but abstract imagery. What it is, it doesn't necessarily refer to something outside of itself. It doesn't reference the real world, it is subjective. This is my world.

L The works seem emotional, do you find that?

A People say that. I use emotions, but more as a source of energy than as a description. It is the fuel. And they are personal.

I can't separate my intellect from my emotions. It's what I'm attracted to. Why do you fall in love with someone, you don't know, you could give me a list. It's also like the feeling that I didn't quite get it, so I have to keep going.

L So the forms are in series?

A Yes, but I won't necessarily do them consecutively, because I'll get tired of it and then I'll come back and see and say, "mm, More.", if there's something in it for me.

L Are you pouring? Or always with a brush?

A Brush, knives, and rags I work on this table. A lot of these paintings came about because for some reason I was looking at an older painting and then I thought I could really push it further. You wouldn't necessarily recognize this as coming from the altered painting, but there was something I could extract and redevelop.

L Who would you say is in your artist family?

A I went to the Studio School at the same time as Joyce Pensato, Robert Bordo, and Christopher Wool. And we're all going to be celebrating his retrospective. And there is something about gesture, abstraction and image that we all share, but differently. Color is probably more important to me than it is to any of them. Christopher brings up many other issues, like reproduction and printing. Richter, Polke, Ohlen & Joyce uses references in her imagery. But I look at a lot of German painters; Ohlen, Richter + Katarina Gross. How old are you?

L I'm 21.

A At your age I loved Helen Frankenthaler, Lately I've been seeing her work, and it is still very powerful. I think it was just the circumstance where I was in, at the Studio School she was not well-received, not that many women were, maybe Joan Mitchell and Lee Krasner. But Helen Frankenthaler just from looking at them recently –Wow! And I think actually she was not embraced because there is a feminine quality to her work, and she's not a feminist.

L No, definitely not! Do you think there's a feminine quality to your work?

A I want the work to reflect who I am. I was more political outside my studio, and I wanted my work to be more about me. But there is a certain point where there is a dividing line. Feminists have a hard time with my work, and still do, because it isn't about gender.

L What is your opinion on feminism?

A We're talking human rights here. The fact that it gets complicated in the art world, that is only a small microcosm, and not everyone is right about their opinions. There is this sense that it's my way or no way. Not that the boys were happy that I was an abstract painter either. They weren't. So I felt that my path was much more individual, and my own.

L Did you ever feel it to be a hindrance to be a woman?

A Oh yeah, still do. Absolutely. (To be a woman?) Yeah. It's much harder to... I don't have a gallery right now. I haven't had a show in 7 years. Yeah. Well, ageism, sexism, and maybe it is my work, but I don't think so.

L Do you have a group of artists you do studio visits with?

A I'm not relying on that so much now. I try to get newer people to see my work. I was in several group shows, and I met different artists. That's interesting for me and a good reason to show.

When I was with Bill Maynes Gallery, and Holtmann Gallery in Germany, I don't know if it's good for the work, to be pumping it out like that, but I had a show every year between the two of them, sometimes at the same time. I like a little pressure... it's fun. And if I don't have the pressure, I'll invent it but I don't always do great work, I have to throw out a lot of my paintings.

L How long does it take you to make a painting?

A I have no idea, because it varies. But generally, not that long. Each painting has to be completed in a single session, but it may get erased at the end of the day.

L Do you ever encounter the feeling that you've forgotten how to paint while you're making something?

A I definitely do! Painting amnesia can be very constructive! I've had that. And sometimes to force your paintings to come together too quickly is very bad, especially if your work is in transition.

Somebody told me that my work could change a lot, after my galleries closed. I thought, okay I can use this time to regroup and develop something new; because I was going in a particular direction, and I wanted to change. There were times when the work was changing that I was very lost, very scared, very frustrated and it took a long time, and Heide Fasnacht told me, "the longer you can keep it in this unknown territory, the better the work will become, the bigger the change."

L How do you view the shifts?

A Well, the older work is much more plainer, although I never considered them a grid, they reference it. I felt there was so much more of that being done at the time: Stephen Westfall, Stanley Whitney, Sean Scully, I felt that I had to move because it was crowded. So I took what was best in my work and kind of opened it up, turned it on its side. It's funny because I work with natural light, I am always near windows, and the reference to windows was there, but then I made it more overt. And for a long time they were window paintings. I also started looking at different sources for my work. I had been raised as a young artist in New York, going to the Museum of Modern Art, falling in love with Matisse, and then I realized there was this whole other tradition in Germany & Austria, the expressionists, that was not as known here and that seemed really fruitful for me to be looking at. I was also very involved with film noir which came right out of German Expressionism, my father came here with his parents as a refugee in 1939 from Vienna, Austria, so I thought let me look there. I actually took a sabbatical; I went to Vienna, stayed a couple months, and hated every minute of it! But it changed my work.

L Do you feel like you learned about the criteria for your paintings while you were there?

A Well, I've let go of a lot of that. You don't look at this and see it as film noir, there are other things that I'm looking at now, but that was important then. It was a gateway to other issues in my work. You ask if my work is feminist. It's also not culturally apparent that I'm a Jew, or the daughter of a refugee, but that became part of the mix at that point. It's not something that's preeminent or on the surface of the paintings. It's something that I was working with then. When I was showing in Germany even before that, I think this was the early 90s, when I showed at Richard Anderson Gallery, I had been traveling in Germany, I went to the Sachsenhausen camp, some of the work that I had done afterwards referenced that. It's hard not to have an emotional response to that experience. The whole experience of showing in Germany, making friendships there, brought up a lot of issues. There is a reproduction of a painting from that time in there. This one. That was pretty overt. I studied a little bit with Philip Guston at the Studio School, he's the reason I went there really, except he didn't talk to the girls. This was a very small school, there were maybe 75 students in the whole school, we just followed him around and heard what he had to say. You knew the guy was an immortal and you just soaked it up. I was young, at 20, 21, 22, this was in the early 70s, just coming into feminism. People still don't know that it's not the girls he's not talking to, first of all it's just you that he's not talking to, until you talk to your other female friends and (you realize).

L Would only the women professors talk to you?

A You know the early 70s was a funny time for women, it (feminism) was just coming into being. So a lot of your relationships were sexualized with an older person and there weren't that many women that were present, Joan Mitchell she made her presence felt at the Studio school, and she mentored many people. But you know I also had to have a summer job, I couldn't just fly off. And I was uncomfortable with the idea of working for another artist.

L So what did you do to make money?

A I did everything. I was a cocktail waitress, I was a museum curator, I was a photographer's assistant, whatever it was... And now I teach. I never work more than two maybe three days a week.

L Yeah, I would love to teach. I think it's the best job as an artist.

A It is. Joan Semmel told me, to me stay in my community and it's true. I mean I have a lot of complaints about the teaching, but I love the faculty! Once or twice a year when we all have to get together, I walk in the room I think these are people that have dedicated their lives to making art, they're not superstars, they're all respectable artists, they're all people I admire. They choose to do this teaching with the same passion as they go to their studio every day. And they do till the day they die. It's good. It enhances me in ways that are unexpected. I grew up thinking I had to do everything myself, and here I am attached to an institution, SVA's not very glamorous, but it's our community.