

Pauline Eaton: **Creativity and the Artistic Experience: Becoming & Being**

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Work is what goes on in the studio. It is neither romantic nor glamorous. Even though we have gotten over the nineteenth century image of artist in beret and smock, brandishing brush in a north-lit garret, drinking into the night with maverick friends, there is still an aura of unreality in the public's idea of artists and how we work. Julie Williams in the soap, "Days of Our Lives," decides to be a painter, or Rachel Cory of "Another World" turns to sculpture, and within a few episodes, without disturbing a hair or smudging a bit of make-up, is having a New York show. Currently, it seems to be "in" with the media to be an artist; it's an especially safe career for a woman.

In *The Art Spirit* Henri states,

What you have started, this thing of becoming an artist, a real one, almost every man fails at. Few have the courage or stamina to go through the parts one has to go through alone in more ways than one...you are working for your character, and your pay is to last you all your life. (6)

Work and discipline are what it is all about: going to the studio when your head is bursting with ideas, and even more importantly, when your head seems to be full of sawdust; setting aside regular times of work; being willing to give up other activities and "NO" when necessary in order to serve your art.

In the beginning I disciplined myself to keep at the drawing, until I felt ready to move on to painting. Using those library books, I set up my own course of instruction and decided what I, needed to know. Then I began to work with subjects that I knew best—the flowers from my years of gardening.

"Are you suggesting that a person who wants to make art might put herself through an apprenticeship?" asks Gloria Frym in her book, *Second Stories*.

Yes, [answers Bobbie Louise Hawkins] the person to apprentice yourself to is yourself. Normally, when you begin anything, you're like Alice, you're floating in that enormity of ignorance and intent and the action is who or what swims past. You see no landmarks in sight. The beginning and the middle and the end are an enormous melange. You're incapable of discriminating because you're young in it...Artists create themselves out of themselves. There's a cannibalistic aspect to it. (7)

Making my studio time count has been a balance of planning and spontaneity. Several notebooks placed around the studio, on my desk, in my purse, and next to my bed are handy for jotting down ideas as they come, usually in unexpected moments. These ideas are then collected and sorted. Some sit "on the back burner" for quite a while, but some lead to immediate action.

SERIES.

Usually one idea is merely a link in a chain that strings together a series, a direction to my exploration with new ideas to test out or expand. Beside the chain another metaphor for the process might be that of water or a stream. Thomas Wolfe expressed it as a river flooding through him, and Coleridge spoke of "The streamy nature of association, which thinking curbs and rudders." (9)

The SERIES has been key to my growth. One early exploratory technique series had tested my abilities in various watercolor skills. The series gave me the challenge and refreshment of a great number of subjects and techniques. I had so much to learn and teach myself. Flowers of color, the hauntedness of abandoned stores, anthropomorphic animals, and layered landscapes allowed me to learn HOW to paint, but I most wanted to work with ideas. I wished to create from my own conceptual thinking.

One early piece came about because of a wonderful antique pulley and hook, which my husband found in a bargain-bin at the maritime salvage store. It found a home on the family room mantel, where it fascinated me, making me wonder what I could do with it in a painting. The idea came to me of a "sky hook" to symbolize humanity dependent upon God. I did not want to dangle dozens of bodies from it, so mankind became a tangled skein of threads to symbolize our interwoven interdependence as well as our being supported from above. My neighbor, Theo Crabb, was so transported that she commissioned a smaller version for her home. I simply called the paintings, Mankind I and Mankind #II. [When Pauline me frame and send it to a national show, the name became **What Tangled Skein**]

As the Vietnamese War was running down, we began to hear rumors that the U.S. was responsible for bloody bombings in Cambodia. Again and again the administration and Pentagon made denials, but we were seeing it on our TV's. How could they keep lying in the face of the raw evidence? My distress over the continued betrayal of the best that

should be expected of America led me to paint *On the Way to One World*, which showed the damaged banner of the stars-and-bars, scarred with shame, behind the ideal of a united Big Blue Marble in space. This was exhibited in both the Cape Coral Art League's 10th Annual in Fort Myers, Florida, and in the San Bernadino Inland in 1976. The disturbed hanging committee at the latter placed it in a far corner in as hidden a spot as possible. I did not see where it was displayed in Florida.

In commenting about his minimal, almost blank paintings from the '60s, Brice Marden says,

These are not happy paintings. These paintings were done when war was a major issue. It was like the call of death. Your country is making death. There is going to be a reflection of that in the art of the time. It's not that people are going to make paintings about death...You could say that I was showing some of the bleaker aspects. In this sense I was making a political statement. One likes to think that art is on the side of truth. (13)

If anything sets Munch's work apart from that of his contemporaries, it is the insistence on theme. Munch painted themes in the same way that Picasso meant the term when he spoke with Andre' Malraux: What he considered themes were birth, pregnancy, suffering, murder, the couple, death, rebellion and perhaps the kiss.

Peter Gunther. (13)

Intuited Concept

In one of those times that I was just noodling paint, playing with brush strokes on paper, I came up with a small study of cubes cascading forward from an area of darkness into the light. Ideas of creation, the dividing of the darkness and the light, the crystalline elements of matter and life grew from this. For me, this was **Genesis**—genesis also as in the beginning of ideas.

These pieces gave birth to a whole new form of painting that became distinguished as quite my own—focal paintings, as I dubbed them.

When time to enter the St. Mark's Lenten Art Festival came around, I wanted to do a piece that would be specifically religious in concept but not blatant in content. My creation pieces had given me the germ idea, but how could I start with Genesis and show the whole span of Biblical history?

I proposed to cover a lot in one piece. Not long before, I had participated in a seminar with Robert Perine who uses a combination of wet washes and taped areas to create beautifully mysterious compositions with ideas of the elements: earth, air, fire, and water. It had struck me that taping would be an effective way to contrast painting wet into wet, or out of focus, with detailed, fully-worked areas. By taping off sections, I could deal with a multiplicity of ideas in one painting.

To begin **Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus...Revelation**, I wet the whole 30" x 40" illustration board and painted the edges in the loose wet forms of the creation crystals. After drying, the first area, Genesis, was isolated with tape, my own tape made by cutting clear *Contac* shelving plastic with a razor-bladed utility knife. This idea had come from seeing Norman Jacky use the plastic for masking to keep areas of his paper clean.

To express the concept of the beginning of things, I had only a few emergent edges of crystals showing. The Exodus rectangle displayed a great tumble of forms, relating to the "going out"—the exiting—as told of in that book of the Bible. The forms lined up in the Leviticus section in city-like patterns, because as with the law of the Old Testament, the forms of civilization are seen when human and divine order are imposed. Beside each of these sections I wrote the Hebrew name, which in the ancient system of titling happens to be the first word of each book. Now I put in three small squares to symbolize the dot, dot, dot of continuation in the written word and then, finally, Apocalypse, the Greek title of the last book we call Revelation. Here with the introduction of the Christian element, the cross, all forms have come to a new peace and the freedom of individuality.

All these were my concepts which led to the painting and its format. Whether these are evident to the viewer or not, the painting still has to stand on its own visual integrity of design, color, and value. The ideas are the seeds; the painting must stand on its own as a product.

Focals

Focal paintings as a series happened when I made the big switch to the landscape of the American southwest. Year after year we had been crossing the country by car and Amtrak to reach our Michigan retreat. Our main stop-over repeatedly had been Albuquerque where family lives. We not only stayed to visit but went gallery hopping in town, Santa Fe and Taos, not neglecting the pueblos and ruins. Time spent in that big land with trips back and forth through canyons and over mountains meant deep absorption of the whole region. I finally could not resist it any longer. I HAD to find a

way to express how the area impacted me—a way to paint the colors, designs, and the expanse.

With these ideas hatched, the form of the southwestern focals created itself. Again there would be the edges done wet-into-wet, being patterned, peripheral, and out of focus. Arranged in appropriate sequence would be over-lapping focal areas of concentration on horizon, mid-ground, and foreground interest. I had also been thinking about what the camera has taught the modern eye to "see". We now know of things as "in focus". We know that the eye cannot see an entire vista at once. Our eye darts from one point of interest to another, seeing bits and pieces, as our brain melds it into a whole. We might start with the point where earth and sky meet, the horizon of darks and lights, and move on to the striking patterns of the middle distance with its mesas, bluffs, and canyons—and then end up with fascination at the point that humans and nature meet, the pueblos of the native inhabitants. Enveloped in geological drama, these adobe homes are earth itself. We unite with nature in building these structures.

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MEMORY

Usually, no real place was recorded. It was a mix of memory and impressions. I freely mixed mesas and canyons, pueblos and plains for the sake of the painting—whatever compositional problems needed solving. A New Mexico impression of a sprawling pueblo such as San Filipe, which, in reality, is set along the Rio Grande at the base of cliffs, might, in my painting, be moved to the top edge of a canyon, deeply traced in the plain, as does the Arizona canyon of the Little Colorado Gorge.

The use of memory was primary. I found I purposely did not take photos any more. My file, filled with pictures of rocks, rivers, old buildings, and subjects I thought I might like to paint one day, moved to the back of the cabinet, and I stopped using the camera as a recording tool. I found my best camera was my own head. I drank in sights but did not want to be site specific. I did not want to be a recorder of places. Instead, I wanted to gather impressions and be in touch with my emotions. I did not sketch, either. I found I worked best when all the shapes, colors, and places floated freely in my brain and came through my brush upon impulse. It was an exciting and creative way to work.

The focal framework allowed me in addition to delve into my childhood memories of exploring the tidewaters along the Jersey shore of Sandy Hook, the Shrewsbury and Navasink Rivers where marsh, sandbar and tide water remained relatively untouched, where winding, mysterious inlets and waterways led to discoveries of new natural gardens. Hence a series of focal marshes. Somehow these pieces "worked" even for people who had not known such territory.