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A conversation with Susan Wanklyn – October 2007.



Paintings in a Rooms (presently on exhibit at the A.M. Richard gallery) is a selection of jewel-like paintings by the hand of Susan Wanklyn. Each painting a delicate abstraction with profound ties to several iconic art movements as well as links to the realm of decorative art (pottery, glass, textile). Can you elaborate?

SW: My use of the “look” of modernist painting is a somewhat melancholy reference to its utopian ethos and egalitarian view of art from different cultures. My use of abstraction could never mean now what it meant originally, and I am not sure if there is any such thing as abstraction now. I am also influenced by the scale and color ideas of Rococo painting (even though my work looks nothing like Chardin or Watteau.)

In terms of the decorative arts (or applied arts)—My interest started early. I used to sew as a child, making first animals, then clothes; and I loved fabric. When I was at the Studio School (in the 70's) it was taboo to paint decoratively (which I did anyway). I used to take off Friday mornings to draw from the Persian miniatures in the Islamic wing of the Met. When I was in college, the most interesting and innovative art there was being made by potters, and that had a considerable influence on me. More recently, I've been looking at glass, mostly ancient Roman and Persian, and I'm not sure exactly how that is affecting things so far except that my medium, because of its transparency, has an affinity to colored glass.



I have recognized abstractions of Asian forms and Africa patterns in your work as well as a research in decoupage and layering and then erasing of shapes-what do you consider your primary source of inspiration?


SW: Often I have more than one source. I look at images of textiles and clothing from various books about Indian, African, and Central Asian textiles and am influenced both by the shapes within the patterns as well as, if not more, by the shapes that the flattened clothing makes on the pages. The Dagobert Peche show at the Neue Museum a couple of years ago changed my sense of scale and the unmodern.

I started thinking about collage again because I was inspired by some appliquéd flowers on a friend's amazing grey felt suit. My use of erasing is primarily out of necessity—then it can become a reverse drawing process with its own rhythm. The sequencing of painting activities, or layering, includes the putting down and taking off of paint. It is all about making the surface seem malleable and in flux until I get the form I want.



 *How has having your studio located in Brooklyn affected your work? Was it the light? Do you work primarily indoors?*


SW: I am influenced by the scale of buildings and their relationship to the yards and their wacky silhouettes against the sky, by the mix of plastic stuff and plants, by the light, by the people barbecuing and so on, by signage on small stores, by the river, to name a few things.

 *There's a certain distinctive language that emanates from looking at your paintings. It's almost as if -when looking at them side by side in a horizontal configuration—one is reading a lyrical sentence, each painting radiates a singular article, a verb, a subject, an adjective or a complement.*

SW: I think painting can somehow approximate speech in its fluency, and especially rhythms. When I work I have phrases in my head or sometimes I am just counting a beat while I paint.


 *Has literature had any impact on your work?*

SW: It probably has in ways that I couldn't articulate because it is indirect. I think literature helps me to expand my thinking abilities and that is important to painting too. I am currently reading as much Anne Carson as I can, and I hope it is having such an effect. If nothing else, great writing sometimes makes me feel calm and hopeful (even if its despairing), which in turn, clears my head. My work is probably also influenced by pop song lyrics because I become very attached to the music I listen to in the studio. Jane Siburry has a wonderful song with a repeated lyric: "we call that darkness" that I've not yet managed to match to a painting (or a show), though I haven't given up.

 *Why the use of casein as opposed to other medium of paint? When did you start using it? Also I sense a rejection of the canvas as a paint matrix in favor of board and paper-could you comment on your work process?*

SW: I started using casein about ten or more years ago because of a turpentine allergy. I think I stuck with it because I can make it myself using as much pigment as I want. I like the culinary activity of mixing the paint in bowls, as well as its odd illusory, textural qualities. It shows the history of its application on the paintings. Perhaps a downside (which I try to use to my advantage) is that it's very unmanageable and goofy because it is runny. Acrylic was probably invented as an improvement on casein.



 *The notion of cognizance, how we interpret the memory of objects, shape, light and texture and to a certain extent the "color" of speech or sound, I sense, is a recurring theme in your work. Can you comment?*

SW: About color of speech—I am interested in synesthesia or the overlapping of the senses because usually when I experience it I imagine I am most alert and open to my surroundings. I think this also explains my interest in Tantric art, which is a good to awareness. I think rhythm is a particularly synesthetic stimulus.

Our recognition of visual things is affected by memory—which makes recognizing a powerful thing because emotion attaches to memory somehow. Most generally, I would say my subject is space and what its like to be in it as a thinking being. This connects me to choreography, architecture and some design, as well as to much traditional painting, and to the abstract expressionists.

 *What to expect next? What are you working on now?*

SW: I think I will be stacking stripes and carving shapes out of them for a while.

 *Thank you Ms. Wanklyn.*

