

STUDIO CRITICALA behind the scenes approach to contemporary painting
Thursday, October 13, 2011

PAM CARDWELL *Geo 12, oil on canvas, 24 x 24", 2010* What are you working on in your studio right now? Right now I am transitioning from working on a large set of drawings/paintings that I have just installed at Long Island University in Brooklyn to working for a show of oil paintings next year at the John Davis Gallery. The restless period between projects when I pace and read a lot would be what Martha Graham has spoken of as queer divine dissatisfaction. The installation at LIU consists of 6, 5' x 30' and 5' x 20' pieces. The gallery wall is curved and these pieces were done specifically for this wall. They are made with parachute cloth, a traditional muralist's media, and enamel paint from the hardware store. This was my attempt to integrate drawing and painting. Four of them literally wrap around the curved wall. You can't look at the whole thing at once. The other two are flat on the wall. They hark back to the sense of space and color that I found in the early Christian frescos that I was lucky enough to see in Turkey and the Republic of Georgia. In these the sense of color is very intense, simple blocks integrated with drawing in most cases. Every time you move your head or body you see something new. Can you describe your working routine? I do not have a set routine but I am disciplined about being in the studio and working a certain amount of hours every week. My living space is separate from my workspace so there is the matter of navigating trains in New York to get to my studio. Generally, I work at six hour stretches four days a week. Doing this kind of work takes mental as well as a specific kind of physical focus that is hard to articulate with words. I generally try to swim a mile on the days I'm painting. It's a matter of keeping things simple and eliminating obstacles in life to get to the studio. I don't work to music and I don't have a lot of visitors when I'm working.

Can you describe your studio space and how, if at all, that affects your work? My studio is small it is almost like an office cubicle and I have lousy light except for very early in the morning. But I don't let that stop me! I just think that it is all in my mind, in my mind I can do anything, in my mind the space is huge. For this project with the parachute cloth it was 5' high so I literally cut the widths of it into 30' or 20' pieces and wrapped it around the three walls of my studio, going inside of the two corners of the room. When I am working on oil paintings it is very different. I start them, put them aside sometimes for months and go back into them, it is a bit of a teaser, back and forth, back and forth for months before they can stand on their own. I once read somewhere that Titian did this, started something worked it very quickly and put it aside for months before stopping. My paintings each read as a whole even though I work parts of them for months. With this installation work on parachute cloth I did it and left it, no reworking, it was a discipline to let it go. There was almost no reworking it either worked or it didn't and I think in part this was a reaction to my studio situation but it was also the nature of the materials. I worked with water based enamel paint. The texture of the parachute cloth was a bit like rice paper and the enamel paint stained it in unusual and unexpected ways.

I did work in sections on these, right to left or left to right, sometimes starting in the middle, which might make them read in a more narrative way. This could be a result of the shape of my studio but it is probably the way I would have worked in any space. *Installation at Long Island University, Brooklyn*

Tell me about your process, where things begin, how they evolve, etc. I have stones and other natural objects in my studio. Some I collected along the Black Sea in Turkey and their border with the Republic of Georgia. Others I've found in the mountains in Georgia and these are very rough and geometric. The ones on the beach are smooth and worn down. In the Republic of Georgia you can pick up a rock and look up and there is a medieval church made of rock the same color, beautiful oranges and greens. You go inside the church and the frescos are the same orange and green colors. It is a strange very visceral very moving experience to see this connection between earth, paint and image. Back to your questions, I start in a very general way, drawing the shapes and markings on natural objects. My paintings and drawings are built and constructed. I like to think that I work like a novelist. They are imaginative constructs. They exist in my mind. The space that they make has light and air. Awareness of the material, its limitations, the differences in the colors, the actual stuff of the paint is a big part of them. Psychologically I begin each one anew and this depends on experiences outside of myself. I sit and look a lot. I tend to make very slow deliberate decisions. The process from start to end is different for each piece. Cognition is a messy business. It brings in many contradictions that are ultimately unable to be resolved or articulated with words. I can say that as I get older the work becomes more clear. What are you having the most trouble resolving? My problem is learning how to get in trouble. Learning how to get into trouble seems like a valuable thing and I don't think it is possible to try and resolve things troubling or problematic in the work. Letting go in the moment, being present in the moment and letting go is probably the hardest thing to do for me and I don't think that is about resolution. It is about allowing. Trouble is an odd word because what is the most trouble or problematic in the work could be the thing in the work that is the most valuable. Trusting intuition is hard. Trusting what can't be said is hard. And get into trouble in the first place is hard. I want to learn to possess my trouble. Do you experiment with different materials a lot or do you prefer to work within certain parameters? Working with parachute cloth and enamel paint has been an experiment with different materials. Working very large within a specific architectural space has been different. Functioning within different parameters pushes me to a different place, a place where I can look and think differently. I think in opposites, small can be large, large can be small. It is all a matter of scale. I tend to work smaller with oil paintings. That being said I love oil paint, the smell of it, it is very earthy stuff to me and I am looking forward to getting back to it. What does the future hold for this work? I hope to do more of these sorts of pieces in architectural settings. I am looking for opportunities to write proposals for specific architectural spaces. But for now I am looking forward to going back to oil paint and working for my show in Hudson at the John Davis Gallery next year. The difference between large and small work could be the difference between manuscripts and frescos and I will be happy to look and think in manuscript form for bit. Is there anything else you would like to add? Thanks

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2 comments: [Liz Mares](#)[October 13, 2011 at 8:51 AM](#) Fantastic interview with Pamela. How especially refreshing to read about her view of trouble. To want to possess it. I think that says a lot about a persons strength as well as how they translate it into cohesive artwork.

Reply [julia schwartzOctober 16, 2011 at 9:18 PM](#) I like that idea about wanting to learn how to get in trouble! I also need to live on the edge more with my work. I enjoyed the interview and the images as well.
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