

An Conversation With The Artist by Fred Holmes
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FH:

Your career as an artist has been identified with your ceramic figurative work, which has been extremely successful and earned you accolades and critical praise. What precipitated the return to your first discipline, painting? How long have you been considering this development and was there a process of experimentation before you felt you were ready to show these?

JB:

I love working three dimensionally, especially in clay. In the initial stages, clay allows me the movement and freedom to work intuitively; to layer, distort, write in, add on, cut out... it's a dance and a relationship.

And yet, it is restrictive in so many other ways, size, form, and especially adding color/glazes that are one of my favorite parts of the process, yet what you see, is not what you get. I layer many glazes and oxides on top of each other, cross my fingers and fire. The green oxides turn brown and black, the white opaque glazes turn bright blue or green or yellow, different clay bodies produce different colors. If it doesn't turn out to my liking I re-glaze and fire again.

My first love was painting. Not sure why I left it. After getting my BFA, I did graduate work in Graphic Design, worked in the corporate world, and was consumed for many years with the visual communication of color, composition and type.

I've had the yearning to return to painting on a professional level for some years now. The catalyst that got me started was a six-week structured residency three years ago at the Banff Art Centre in Alberta. I went to work in clay, but found myself without the time and deadline constraints of home, and with the freedom to experiment.

I worked in plaster, fabric, nylons, rocks... and I painted. I painted big! Came home, converted half my studio into a painting studio, and have been painting ever since.

Storage has been an issue. I've waited over two years to show the work to anyone. I wanted to re-find my voice without outside input. You were the first one I showed it to, remember? Last June.

I'm ready to show. I feel strong in my direction and my resolve to continue the experimentation, vary my work and materials... keep it fresh.

FH:

You studied painting at UC Davis under the renowned artist, Wayne Thiebaud, whose paintings have been generally described as early contributions to the canon of American Pop and are in numerous public collections. Your work is now abstract. What do you feel you learned from Thiebaud and where is that prevalent in your work, if at all? Are there any similarities in style or philosophy you share? Are there other artist influences you'd cite as influential?

JB:

Thiebaud was an amazing, artist, teacher, and human being. What I take from Wayne is that no matter what subject, whether he was painting city streets, landscapes, the figure, or cakes, his emphasis was on the language and physicality of the paint, the line, the brushstroke, the light and color.

Richard Diebenkorn, who was a mentor of Thiebaud, is one of my all time favorites, his planes of muted complementary colors, his sense of balance and line work intrigues me.

Funk artists Roy De Forest and Robert Arneson were also professors of mine. I don't have their quick sense of humor, but their use of color, texture and pattern is influential in my work as well. There are many artists that I melt over... Willem deKooning, Joan Mitchell, Helen Frankenthaler, Wassily Kandinsky. I have an affinity for that era, be it funk, pop, figurative or abstract.

FH:

As a figurative sculptor whose work explores and expresses the various facets of Woman - the Mythology, the Goddess, Wife, Mother, Daughter, Sister, Artist, etc., - one would assume your painting would be figurative as well. Is there a connection between these themes and these new abstract paintings? Is your sculpture influencing your exploration of abstraction and/or are the paintings in any way influencing your sculpture?

JB:

Although I've chosen not to show them, my recent explorations in painting actually started out figuratively, and I may at some point go back to that. For now, however, I wanted a departure from my sculptural work; I wanted to go beyond the familiar.

The subject has changed, the emphasis on layers, color, line, time, and conceptually issues of labeling, control, power, and perception has not. The emotional impact remains the same... for me at least.

My sculptures and my paintings will always influence each other... it's all my art. I once had a professor, Andrée Thompson, that would tell me that each piece is pregnant with the next. That's how I feel about the two mediums. The process is different, the outcomes vary, but the birth comes from me.

FH:

Many painters, particularly those working in abstract, describe it as "process-driven" as opposed to the pursuit of a definable outcome. How would you describe your process or motivation?

JB:

This is a tough one for me. As I understand the process-oriented artist, the emphasis is on the performance and not on the final outcome.

I like to describe myself as a process artist more than a conceptual artist because my best work (sculptural or painting) comes to me when I get out of my way, when I get out of my head, when I'm fully immersed in my right brain. That doesn't mean that I don't spend a lot of time before

I start painting working out the concept, the colors, the composition and structure. But when I start working, I need to work intuitively, to music, as if it's a dance.

FH:

In most of your sculpture, you'll write in the wet clay, in a "stream of consciousness" kind of way, your thoughts and/or feelings while in that creative moment. Although usually illegible, the writing lends the sculpture the sense of some kind of communication. Is there a similar process at work in your paintings? What would you hope the viewer to feel when seeing your paintings for the first time?

JB:

Almost unconsciously at first, I found the marking appearing in my paintings, sometimes outlining or circling forms, sometimes as writing. Incorporating graphite, soluble crayon, paint markers, and oil pastels allows for a direct touch and an intimate quality of the line. In my sculptures there is also an emphasis on showing the layers in the clay and in the glazing process; layers that evoke the passing of time, and the natural rhythm of life. I find this is important to me in the abstract work as well.

You asked what I hope the viewer to feel when they first come upon one of my paintings. The layering and marking are such a part of that emotion. Each individual piece will evoke it's own emotion, but overall, I'd hope the initial impact would be one of discovery, fascination, empowerment, and revelation. But it's the time after the initial impact that interests me the most. The subtle shift in light, in color, the quality of the line. The fingerprints. The discovery in the layers of underlining bits of color... marks from stories from the past that have been covered up and long forgotten.

FH:

You have several gallery dealers who've been extremely successful with your sculpture. Why did you select your Seattle gallery to publicly premiere these abstract paintings for the first time?

JB:

I've been very selective about whom I've shown my work to. I'm trying hard to be protective of my early direction and not necessarily have it swayed by public opinion. I needed a discerning eye, one that I trust.

FH&Co has the experience, the deep knowledge of past and current art, an amazing breadth of intriguing painters that the gallery represents, the ability to articulate and educate the collector, and, most importantly, the integrity and passion that is so prevalent. I feel privileged to have FH&Co's knowledge and passion behind my work.

FH:

Thank you, Jane. Please believe me when I say the privilege is mine.