

Stephen Friedman Gallery

A Few Disjointed Thoughts on Painting
Anne Rothenstein
2019

A Few Disjointed Thoughts on Painting

It's a funny business, writing about painting. Critics so often complicate matters and painters rarely get to write about painting. I can't write much about my paintings because I don't have a great deal to say about them: they mean something to me simply because I painted them, but I don't paint them in order that they should have meaning. So much is instinct and accident. I can write about how, at 70, I'm discovering a different kind of concentration, focusing on my work in a way I haven't ever done before. It's become an almost entirely different activity and it's a joy.

I can write a bit about my process, my colours and materials, paints and brushes being the most exciting for me but not, I imagine, for anyone else. Though surely it's fascinating to learn that Lucien Freud's painting changed significantly, to the unmistakable style we now recognise, when he swapped his Sable brushes for Hog Hair. This may be apocryphal but it's irresistible, illustrating perfectly how the type of brush you use defines the marks you make and each mark becomes the painting you paint. I use Sable.

I long to know more about how other artists work, their methods, their mediums. Oil or acrylic, I'm a bit snobbish about acrylic, it's a plastic, lacking complexity, too clean. I want to know how other painters begin, whether they use a wooden palette or disposable paper ones (my choice) or straight from big tins. Exactly which colours they choose. Which is the best, blackest, black, hugely important for me. Anish Kapoor has actually bought the very best for himself, the newly produced Vantablack; who knew you could actually own a colour?*

Why we aren't protesting about flake white having been taken off the shelves because of health and safety (show me a painter who ever cared about health and safety) and how on earth we have learnt to paint without it. Standing or sitting. At an easel (my choice) or on the floor or wall?

How other painters know when to stop and if framing, glazed or not (I'm still undecided) I read recently that, for Francis Bacon, the reflection of the viewer in the glass lent an added dimension to the image beneath. Given that he would surely have used museum glass, which is non-reflective, there's reason to doubt this, but he did glaze his work which, for oil painting, is unusual. Glass, however, adds a layer of mystery, keeps the image ever so slightly more contained and distant. I don't think we should try to know too much about paintings, at least, not until we have thoroughly looked. Pierre Bonnard put it perfectly when he said, "The precision of naming takes away from the uniqueness of seeing".

In certain paintings of mine I'm sometimes unsure if a particular figure is a man or a woman; unless there is a reason for them to have a gender it doesn't matter to me, the ambiguity pleases me and I like not knowing. Someone looking at the painting may well make their own assumptions or give it significance and that's fine; there is no right or wrong way to see. I like people coming to their own conclusions, it makes more sense to me that way, other people's thoughts and ideas open out the confines of the rather particular world in which I work.

I wish there were more places to read gossip about painting and painters. We rarely get to read about them in the broadsheets unless they are dead, have won a big prize or are very old and inevitably female as only talented women manage to have been disregarded for so long. In most other areas of the arts we read endlessly about the routines, influences, likes and dislikes of writers and other artists; musicians, performers, singers, they're all called artists now.

When I was young an artist was a painter, around that time we were told that painting was dead so it is extraordinary that there are still so many painters painting, so many people buying so many tickets to queue for hours for little slots of time to look at paintings. And so many people spending such vast, obscene amounts of money on paintings. They seem to have a value beyond measure. You'd think that people might want to know a bit more about painters.

Stephen Friedman Gallery

A Few Disjointed Thoughts on Painting
Anne Rothenstein
2019

When I begin, I have a vague idea of what I hope might eventually emerge. I will start from an existing image, usually a photograph, sometimes another painting, sometimes something in the corner of my mind's eye which catches my imagination and makes me want to want to turn it into a painting.

It is imperative I start with a very precise drawing on the panel of wood on which I work. A drawing which takes time but is eventually disregarded, although I always take a tracing. Then I spend time mixing the colours which I imagine are the colours I will need but again may bear no relation to the end, or even halfway, result. These processes are crucial, ritualistic and slightly strange given that I know they will be discarded. It's like fitting my feet into footprints I have already made while still having no idea where they will lead. And then I start painting. The drawing will slowly disappear, I have been completely absorbed in it while drawing and it becomes completely uninteresting and irrelevant as it is gradually obliterated.

Sometimes, magically, things go right and they go right in a way which cannot be disputed, instinct takes over and the painting happens steadily. This is the exception and undoubtedly the least interesting. Much more exciting, but dreadful and precarious, is when it so nearly goes right. But doesn't. I keep going for ages, days, weeks, yet still it is not quite right. (I wish I could understand this business of something ...being right...) Then there comes a moment, and it's stomach churning and blissful, when I know for sure that it is irretrievable and I take a rag and wipe it all away. If it is dry I take my electric sander to it. From this mess a new image will emerge. An initial thought will shimmy back to remind me of something, revealing itself like the faint outline of a treasure from an archaeological dig. It's an extraordinary moment of rediscovery and freedom. Everything has gone wrong so nothing matters anymore. Things mattering have been holding me back, things mattering have tied me in knots. And then it begins all over again.

* What about Yves Klein? Klein didn't actually own his blue, he invented it and named it but never patented it. I could buy the pigment in Paris if I so chose.