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Ethereal Body, mixed media on canvas, 2014

Paintings courtesy Lesley Heller Workspace, NY and Emerson Dorsch, Miami
by Ashli Sisk

Looking at Elisabeth Condon's work is akin to breathing in good soup vapors, while you feel the first drops of a rainstorm on your bare skin, while gazing into the universe, while putting on the most gorgeous thing you can find. Head, heart, and body pulled in all directions. Large pours of paint, next to little and big gestures and renderings, paint mingling and sauntering around each other's forms, material reacting to material guided by the hand. Meandering forms in the confines of a surface. Talking with Elisabeth is similar – you discuss everything, go everywhere, all within the confines of the conversation, and you feel better for it.

Sisk: You are everywhere...

Condon: Last month I flew back to New York from Shanghai, then to Florida for the holidays, and go to the Everglades in February.

The AIRIE residency? Any idea or premonition as to what you will make there?

Yes AIRIE. I'll probably work in my sketchbook at first, and this will inspire the direction. I'm thinking to paint on paper. It will be such a difference from China: swamps, huge skies, Cypress trees, life in wilderness.

Right now I'm relaxing after six months in Shanghai at the Swatch Art Peace Hotel artist residency. This was an amazing experience, in terms of urban landscape. Swatch has the old Palace Hotel (across the street from the Peace Hotel) on the Huangpu River in Shanghai, otherwise known as the Bund. It's beyond a five-star fancy hotel; I can't even explain it to you. It's a completely designed environment. Swatch flies you there and puts you up for six months. They have special events for the artists—George Clooney visited our studios my first week there, and Swatch's survey exhibition for the residency's third year anniversary, *Faces & Traces*, opened with a global press conference where we interviewed with press from all over the world. There is a large number of Chinese staff in the hotel, though the management company (Swatch) is Swiss, so there is also this amazing cultural overlay.

So global, so appropriate for your work.

Yes! And the residents themselves, 18 artists—I really got to know incredible artists from everywhere, and I made a ton of work. I had many pleasurable discussions with Sook Jin Jo, Lianhong Feng and Paolo Cavinato, all rigorous artists and thinkers. And so many others: everyone is really interesting.. I also met Christina Schmigel, who relocated to Shanghai from St. Louis ten years ago. I'd met her on my first trip to Shanghai in 2005 and we reconnected this trip.



Orange Striated Landscape, ink, poster paint on xuan paper, 27 x 54 inches, 2014
Paintings courtesy Lesley Heller Workspace, NY and Emerson Dorsch, Miami

So how did your work come together in Shanghai?

First I drew in my sketchbook from the hotel window, to get a sense of the layout, what was happening, and from there began ink paintings on paper. The ink paintings could be anything; sometimes gestural, sometimes working toward impressions of what I saw those first few weeks. It took me some time sampling the art supply stores on Fuxing Lu to find rice paper of sufficient quality to receive ink in an interesting way. In the painting (*Orange Striated Landscape*), I began applying ink in a loose way, adding orange poster paint to ink to moderate the color. The poster paint rose to the top and marbled, like stacked rocks or something; it has so much textural variety. Textural variety is valued in Chinese painting and a quality I also look for in painting. The painting enters the mood of Shanghai as a night city.

After making the orange arc shape I started composing around that. Though the arc was not the first mark, it felt like a compositional center. The painting became both a landscape and topography. The space is stacked, flipped, and inverted but is also a meander through a shallow, layered depth.



Chinese Landscape Study I, ink, poster paint on Xuan paper, 39 x 20 inches, 2014
Paintings courtesy Lesley Heller Workspace, NY and Emerson Dorsch, Miami

That negative space is killer, so much restraint.

Thank you. It's interesting, but I am more and more yearning for emptiness, going forward. The painting/collages were the first canvases I made. They helped me realize I could simply cut up my drawings and

I began making a series of collages on paper. My studio then became a collage factory, with painting, paper tearing, and glue and collage stations demarcated by towels on the studio floor. I was looking for dynamic visual structures to encompass the sense of Shanghai and moved through many collages, which were physical and demanding to make. I found a good structure in *Black Barge Passing I*, where two globe shapes concretize the feeling of straddling both sides of the world.

You've done a lot of residencies recently. How do you strike a balance or how do you feel grounded? Or do you just go with the wind?

I have been doing a lot of residencies in the last few years. It's been insane pace-wise, but I also really love it. I can do it because painting grounds me, which, paradoxically, enables me to go with the wind. There are times when it's important to gather information, and times when it's important to digest it. These last few years have been a time to gather, so that I can integrate landscape with cultural references more meaningfully in future work.

I had the insight in Asia that every body of work I have made on residency represents an arc of development, from inception to completion, of each location's unique visual logic. Uncovering this logic takes many works that in the end form a coherent group revealing the visual discovery. While I conceive of each painting separately, they work together as well as individually. Time is their mutual measure.

Residencies, with their built-in time cycles of beginning, middle and end of time spent in a location, are obvious generators for developing arcs of work. And these conditions present the subject of the work that is made. What does the landscape look and feel like at first and then later on, when a relationship is established? What other places, time periods or people does it remind me of? What gestures, materials, applications make the most sense with it? These questions are answered through working. Residencies represent the gathering phase of new information to digest later on in the studio.

In spring, before leaving for China, I was beginning to digest the 2013 Grand Canyon South Rim residency in paintings worked up from watercolor studies and brush pen drawings made in situ. I've made two large paintings with the feeling of that place so far.

And there's another residency after this: The Morris Graves Foundation in Loleta, California, essentially a silent retreat with three people on the whole property, myself and the two full-time residents there, for two weeks in spring 2014.

So it was the exact opposite of Shanghai.

Yes. I felt utterly cleansed and calm. Then I arrived in Shanghai, where the Bund presents an amazing conflation between ancient barges, architectural landmarks and Pudong's glittery skyline, blinged out on a level I couldn't even imagine before seeing it for myself. Before China, when I thought of over-the-top neon, the digital billboards on Canal St. came to mind. In Shanghai, those digital billboards can be found in the tunnels of Shanghai's subways or plunked on the exterior of office buildings. Lights imbedded in sidewalks, neon edges on buildings, and black, old boats...Shanghai is a city of intense visual information.



Electric Lotusland, mixed media on canvas, 79 x 98 inches, 2014
Paintings courtesy Lesley Heller Workspace, NY and Emerson Dorsch, Miami

It's like time and tradition and nature and spectacle and, and, and...

Exactly. Both destabilizing and inspiring. The Morris Graves residency was much shorter. It was two weeks: you go in, give yourself over to it and go out. In China the process was longer. Leaving the hotel was a big adventure. I drew in my sketchbook a lot, grounding eye and hand to paper, experiencing the slow dawning of understanding that happens with really looking, despite the pace of Chinese life.

So immediate...

Yes, it's the most direct way of cogitating, absorbing and orienting to a new environment, although paradoxically drawing slows time down. Drawing also focuses what matters, the shape of a building, or topographical structure—motifs I can use later, which change from place to place.

Thinking back, the Grand Canyon was nothing but horizon, below which lay 70 million years of history in stacked color bars and shapes. I drew it in black and white to make my way through the structure, which took at least two hours, if not four, each time. I couldn't see color and the structure together at first—or make sense of it—so made watercolor studies at sunrise and sunset, which helped me adjust to the palette.

At the Morris Graves Foundation, I worked from a redwood landscape designed by Graves after Chinese scrolls. There, reflections on the lake became the main focus, because the lake became a mirror of the sky.

In Shanghai, I began to notice the city is designed with plant and flower motifs as I drew the landscape day after day. I remembered a book of my mother's, Irving Penn's flower photographs from 1968-72 or so—close ups of

peonies, roses and the like. Shanghai became, in my pours, a lotus blossom, or a magnolia, emanating neon and glitter. These visual insights become talismans from each residency that I take to the studio and further explore.

What else struck you about your experience in China?

Learning Chinese in the country supported my confidence in daily conversation. I also got a bicycle to get around. I worked on a project with Chinese artists where I interviewed them. It was great to get to know Chinese artists because the complex choreography between Chinese and Westerners makes it possible to be in China a long time and not connect with Chinese people in a deep or profound way. For example, there are places where Chinese go and where foreigners go. The linguistic difference can be formidable. Talking with Chinese artists, I was able to understand their thinking and art works and really connect. This is easier as Chinese artists born after 1980 have often studied abroad for graduate school.

You have stated that you have always been strongly influenced by Chinese painting in your own work, but I wondered what other influences you have had.

I feel the desire to go deeper in my own direction now. Music, literature, film and social media are big influences as is HyperCard, a virtual Rolodex first produced by Apple in the early 1990s, the first structure that fit my thinking about space. Place is hugely influential. Every place has its own character, palette, light, and space. Place isn't only landscape though. There is also the "place" in cartoons, most especially the Flintstones. Materials generate another place. Glitter, enamel, gemstones, wallpapers access adolescent forays into the LA club scene.

I painted Seven Seas, a show in 2012 at the Hollywood Art & Culture Center about my first visit to Rodney Bingenheimer's English Disco, an LA nightclub extant 1972 – 1974. I was 14 and it was a real eye opener to see the full glam rock scene—Bernie Taupin drinking beer around local Hollywood stars and famous groupies. The Seven Seas show was inspired by the painting White Lines, first shown in "Climb The Black Mountain" at Lesley Heller Workspace in spring 2011. I found out my ex-husband had died, flooding me with memories from years I'd closed off as too dissolute. The painting, and the black, came from allowing myself full access to those dormant memories. Back then at the time I wasn't painting, I was just a kid, but in 2011 painting turned out to be the most constructive way to work with those memories. Adding sand to black paint to resemble cheap drywall on club stages can be totally satisfying. Making visual decisions from these memories, I sprayed glitter, put gemstones in the paintings and cut Mylar like dress patterns. This foretold the material vocabulary I would use in Shanghai. On Jianxu Lu, a street close to the hotel, were stores where you can get big bags of glitter in any color. I found paint binder at the art store and made my own glitter paint, troweling it onto the paintings as surface texture and color.



White-hot, glistening shadowy flows, mixed media and mylar on linen, 65 x 54 inches, 2012
Paintings courtesy Lesley Heller Workspace, NY and Emerson Dorsch, Miami

Do you think about glitter as a gendered material? Because while you are talking about glam rock, which is more gender fluid, glitter has a vocabulary of girly-ness too.

I think about glitter in terms of kitsch and taste, initially. But kitsch is also transgressive, so ultimately, yes, I see glitter as historically gendered. When I think of male artists who used it in the past, such as Thomas Lanagan-Schmidt or Lucas Samaras, they are working the reference. Glitter is a girl thing and the paintings have a girl sensibility. Glitter and absorbency are all about fantasy and visual satiation. For the adolescent state of mind that aspires to a fantasy future, glitter is a short cut. Like you feel glamorous because it shines. It's a shortcut to what you want. Like sex is a shortcut to intimacy. Or an outfit is a shortcut to glamour.



Sugar Plum Fairy, mixed media on linen, 30 x 40 inches, 2012
Paintings courtesy Lesley Heller Workspace, NY and Emerson Dorsch, Miami

It does really speak to that idealism or vision, those juvenile goggles you put on in those glamorous settings, glittery compared to what was actually happening...

And that's the first experience of being an artist, seeing beyond what's here into the world of imagination. Entering the nightclub space suspending daily life for the unknown, what clubbing is about? I didn't know that until just recently.

But you were in it doing it.

I compartmentalized. I thought clubbing was about music. After the early 80s, when I stopped making art and all I did was go to nightclubs and that was my creative outlet, I asked myself, "Why am I not going to nightclubs anymore, I thought I loved music!" When I went back to painting I shut the door on clubs. Glitter was a shortcut at fourteen, but now I use it again much later to invoke the sense of magic, possibility, and openness I felt then and still continue to feel. The glitter has those properties enfolded in its layers. Do I use it explicitly as a commentary on women in general? Only in that I acknowledge the girly-ness in myself. It's crucial to communicate a girl's point of view, not just a woman's, but a girl's, to represent it as accurately as possible, so others can see and relate to it.

Within glitter and landscapes, memory and place, the paintings are about people as well, so does the landscape operate as a figure?

My first response is that the paintings operate as spaces through which figures move. Forms are appearing then dissolving, echoing time, change, subjective experience, and shifts in consciousness. One of the last paintings I did in Shanghai appears to me as boats beneath a horizon line, because I know the view that inspired it. But you

aren't really sure if those are buildings behind the forms or what. The technical discovery driving the painting is a luminescent white pigment with a glittery shine, which literally raises parts of the painting and doubles the surface. But coming back to your question in a very literal way, the boats could be figures because in reality the barges do carry people. Other things become figures too, like all of it practically...so as I continue to respond, I am seeing your question in a less literal way.



White Swan, mixed media on linen, 59 x 59 inches, 2014

Paintings courtesy Lesley Heller Workspace, NY and Emerson Dorsch, Miami

You are allowing your perspective and experience to shift how you engage the materials and what kind of image comes out of that... you allow yourself to shift constantly, you are as fluid as the work is.

Yes, which brings back your question about grounding. And the grounding happens in the studio.

Studio is the anchor...

...and the act of painting is the anchor. I made a lot of movies in Shanghai with my iPhone and got pretty interested in how the quick format emphasizes the ephemeral, moving landscape. But four corners and a surface is literally my ground. Visually and metaphorically speaking painting is the repository for what's happening in

the moment, a screen I record and re-record on until it coalesces and feels right. All of the history is in there as part of its being. I just started this big red pour. The pour itself is so amazing, as a pour and associatively as well. So the pour is a way to ground the painting.

Doesn't the act of the pour for you dictate what will happen next? Even if there is a random-ness to it, it's still your hand married to the material, and it lands where it lands. But from there, what happens next is determined by it?

Yes, what happens next is my response to the information from the pour. The pour feels so right. It is fun to work with the paint on such a fundamental level. Plus, pouring follows the spontaneous philosophies of Chinese painting, which is very much about going with the moment, bending, like supple bamboo. With painting, flow keeps the process fresh, un-formulaic. There is not a sense of grasping, whether we are talking about the way forms are painted, the merits of geometry or rotation, or jumping tracks, American consumerism.

Entitlement?

Yes, entitlement. Going back to China as metaphor, you can't feel that as a foreigner. There is a linguistic difference. Mandarin sentence structure is completely different. You have to be in the mindset to flow through communications receptively. Navigating life in China is similar to how I feel about painting, in that it's a process: I want to see what painting does and can do. I want to explore painting, experience what life looks like. I don't look at my life as fixed every day. Travel changes everything. Weather has an impact. Politics. Personal life. Time and space are ephemeral, now more than ever, culturally, scientifically—as is painting space.

You are interacting with your paintings not just making them.

Yes. They are part of a greater confluence, interweaving with all of the other aspects of life. Sometimes there is the desire to load them up until I have to empty them out. There's no single way; my desires for painting change with the influence of location. I have asked myself if I need images at all with the big, flowing pours because the pours can stand alone, like watching fire—the movement is captivating. But in the end images are important as well as a legitimate part of the web of experience that also includes the pour. Speaking painter to painter, can unlike elements to co-exist in harmony? I'm committed to all things in painting, not just one thing. But again priorities change with time and space. I'm committed to everything that goes on in the making of the painting to be in there. Editing comes from one painting to the next. I take what means most from what I've gathered and I paint.

Elisabeth Condon grew up in Los Angeles and lives and works in Brooklyn, New York and Tampa, Florida. Condon's work has been included in exhibitions at the National Art Museum of China, Beijing; SongZhuang Museum, Beijing; Shenghua Art Centre, Nanjing; 1285 Avenue of the Americas Art Gallery, New York; Hollywood Art & Culture Center, Hollywood, FL; Weatherspoon Art Museum, Greensboro, NC; Tampa Museum of Art, FL; Ft. Lauderdale Museum, FL and the Housatonic Museum of Art, Bridgeport, CT. In 2009, Condon's work was featured in a survey exhibition at the Albany Museum of Art, Albany, GA, for which a catalog was published. It is held in the collections of the US Embassy, Beijing, the Swatch Art Peace Hotel Traces Collection, Shanghai, the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, FL, and many private collections around the world.

The recipient of a Pollock Krasner Foundation Grant, a Florida Individual Artist Fellowship and numerous university research grants, Condon was selected for artist residencies at the Swatch Peace Hotel, Shanghai, Grand Canyon National Park, Wupatki National Monument, Florida Everglades, Corporation of Yaddo, Fountainhead Residency, Red Gate International Artist Residency, Beijing and Loft Nota Bene, Cadaques. In 2013, she joined the Artist Pension Trust.

In February 2015, Elisabeth Condon will be participating in the AIRIE Residency (Artists in Residence in Everglades), which brings artists, writers, composers and choreographers to Everglades National Park for month-long residencies in the subtropical wilderness. Her upcoming exhibitions include a solo exhibition at Lesley Heller Workspace in New York City in October 2015 and an exhibition at the Sweeney Print Collection at the Museum of Fine Art in St. Petersburg, FL. Interviews with Chinese Artists Elisabeth interviewed will be in upcoming issue of Artspy, Beijing + [Daily Serving](#).

Her work is represented by Emerson Dorsch, Miami, and Lesley Heller Workspace, New York. See more of Elisabeth's work at elisabethcondon.com.