

Territories and Worlds Within Worlds
A Conversation About Non-verbal Ideas With Clytie Alexander
By Jim Long

Seeing is a learned activity. Ideally it should be receptive to re-learning each time that activity is challenged, and the art of painting, since Impressionism, continually renews that challenge. It is more exciting to look at painting than to reflect on what one has seen, yet while words are no longer a mandatory accessory to painting, they can be useful in understanding the artist's point of view. If there is such a person as an 'ideal viewer' it is most often the artist herself who has lived with the work long enough to recognize it in a new way, often in a surprising moment. A conversation with the artist is valuable even when the artist, feeling more and more framed by each obstructive question, replies with open-ended interpretations. As Clytie Alexander describes her work: "It's the taking of a number of complex ideas and experiences and turning them into some kind of mark...and I hope I can infuse it with my history or that I can set up a situation where others infuse it with their own history." This subjective generosity speaks of her lifelong interest in architecture, and I'm immediately reminded of her brilliant adaptation of the (Indo-Islamic) jali form to her concern with support and surface in painting. Much of her recent work originates in exploration of events generated by that series of works to which she gave the name "Diaphans"; works informed by a history that includes growing up in Quebec, subsequently living in Bangladesh, Ohio (Antioch College), Los Angeles in the "Light and Space Movement" milieu, and New York City.

We began this conversation in New York and finished it long distance between NYC and Santa Fe, where she is building a studio.

Clytie Alexander: Let's start with lines and how making lines describes space---any kind of line, any kind of mark.

Jim Long: Are you continuing to discover lines and shapes that emerge in the patterned space generated by the 'Diaphans'?

CA: Well, by now they've become self-generating. The Diaphans were a bridge into mark making. That process was more thinking about boundaries and mark making: how the mark (pause) it's about describing space that is suggestive (pause) in which language and drawing seem to be inter-related.

JL: Do you mean as in calligraphy, divination or different systems of communication?

CA: My point is, it's not exactly about calligraphy. It's about territories and worlds within worlds suggested by thin marks on a piece of paper. The looking at abstraction, for a lot of people, is they can't find a word for what it is--or words--so therefore it must mean that there's nothing there or the unknowablewhich is uncomfortable.

JL: But are you consciously trying to create a language, in the way that, for instance, Michaux was?

CA: No, I'm not. At some point, though, I am using lines to set up a situation. And I do stop thinking about it. If a line looks good, it looks good and I leave it. Some are more interesting to look at than others. Also, in the 'Loop' series color plays a big part—the color orange signifies caution.

JL: It also holds space pretty well.

CA: For a long time I didn't like the color orange. (it so I thought I'd take a close look and find out what was irritating me. In our present day culture orange signifies 'Don't go here, it's dangerous.'interesting to me because I like to explore surfaces, edges and boundaries. For similar reasons I'm also fascinated by the color red, earth red, reddish brown, the color of dried blood....

JL: I'm thinking about the many distinctions that combine in your work, and often feel a sensation of pulling together pieces and fragments. You've studied classical dance and music in Bangladesh (with Ajit Sanyal). Music and dance are learned in pieces, combined into sections, then performed as a whole event.

JL: Part of your mark making is informed by time spent on the desert in a studio your friend the photographer Ruth Schaffner had in the Owens Valley. The wind in this place was so fierce that everything in the area was literally blown to bits. You mention all the billboards being shredded, and pieces of bullet-hole ridden targets floating around with other desert trash.

Your 'Incunabula' series of 1989 came out of this period. Just as the word indicates, I regard this series as a generative source of many of the ideas

you're still exploring: pieces, fragments, construction and destruction. Graphic tracks of dry riverbeds are all over that landscape. These types of marks seem to recur in your work.

CA: That seems pretty accurate. That's how physically, (pause)... there are fragments of drawing on a piece of paper that I've torn up. Throwing the pieces into the air, they land where they land. Lee Mullican used to do this with students at UCLA-- they'd throw torn up drawings backwards over their shoulders into a circle.

JL: Sophie Tauber and Jean Arp did that. Arp also purposely scribbled many of his poems. When he brought them to his printer the printer's interpretations became a collaboration.

CA: Well, that was a collaboration. And that's how the holes in the Diaphans were made.

JL: I didn't realize the situation was that open.

CA: The basic idea can be described by a set of rules, one of which is each hole is a quarter inch and can be no closer than one eighth inch to the next hole. No matter how hard anybody tries to follow this, it's impossible, so you get this variation in the distribution of the holes. You've got this machine moving up and down operated by a person hanging onto a piece of metal and moving the metal around---so it's just what happens.

JL: The 'bridge' then, the contemplation of linear patterns made by someone not following strict reproduction instructions, led to a number of explorations of color and line.

CA: Somebody had to make the lines according to my prescription; and then I added my own game to the line which was to make a complete drawing without picking the brush up, a sponge brush in this case, based on my memory of the terrain by looking at the wall where the colored shadow was cast. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't---those are the ones that get torn up, then reassembled.

JL: And overlay comes into the work. Do you leave them as overlay?

CA: What I'm fascinated by in the drawings are the different papers---sometimes I've thought there must be an easier way to get this. I study the torn paper drawing and I pull out of it what I think is essentially the fundamental idea. The drawing is translated onto glassine. Does this make sense?

JL: Yes. Do you discourage making a connection between these to the kinds of drawings that John Cage made? I'm thinking of the river rocks and brush drawings.

CA: Yeah, because I think that the motivation behind them is totally different, and I'm not particularly, (pause)---The quality of line, so to speak, is not particularly what fascinates me.

One of the things I've always done is work in series. There's a consistent thread. It's all about the spaces behind the surface of the work, so each group is another way to get to what may or may not be behind the surface. Underneath the Diaphans is another surface, and I can work on that surface and explore it in a way that's as interesting as the Diaphans.

JL: Is our conversation getting metaphysical here, or are we anchored in the material world? You've mentioned Avrum Stroll, a philosopher at University of California, and your interest in his book 'Surfaces.'

CA: Probably a little of both: I remember being in a painting class and being asked to push something into the middle of the surface---and I didn't know how to do it---and still not sure if I know how to do it.

JL: Generous of you to remember a problem of fairly fugitive value.

CA: Depends on your point of view and that's the point. It was an exercise in points of view., an exploration what's "in the middle". That's something I saw in Bangladesh when I was moved there. It began with the 'jali', the perforated marble screens. You could look down a corridor and in the distance see more and more. Behind each screen was another reality. With the 'Loop' paintings, when they're arranged a different way they have very different meanings. And, getting back to the Diaphans, the punch press operator was George....a boxer. I once asked him how he managed the tedium of punching the holes and he replied, "I'm in training".

JL: There's something within us that's willing to release our grip on the natural world and respond to abstract imagery.

CA: Signs, symbols and colors. Those do resonate with human experience. What ever you draw you're delineating space. If I draw a line between you and me I'm delineating your space and my space.

JL: And demonstrating the communicative force of an essentially abstract gesture.

JL: Do you pay attention to Chinese calligraphy?

CA: Yes, and I look at other writing systems; Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Arabic script I like to look at it. It looks like it represents ideas, but I don't know which ideas? So, I just look at it for what it looks like, just for the pleasure---but I don't look at it because I aspire to do it.

JL: Your work leaves similar room for the viewer.

CA: It's the taking of a number of complex ideas and turning them into some kind of mark, ---and I hope I can infuse it with my history or that I can set up a situation where others infuse it with their own history. What I'm trying to do is leave room for a viewer to experience the work in a way that doesn't tell you everything. In other words, whatever experience you bring to the work then becomes part of the work.

JL: The 'Diaphans' transformed physical area, manipulating density, size, color and weight. Installed, they re-figured the architecture. With the 'Loop' drawings you manipulate weight, density and figuration of a different space: a linear band of fluid color traverses a standard 35X24 inch sheet of translucent glassine paper. The choice of glassine suggests tracing. The width of the line is constant, non-hierarchical, describing only itself, but it has a semi-spontaneous presence. It's an activity of tracking rather than delineating. This line is a container of luminous color, a substantial body in a specific configuration. The boldness of the flat line leads the eye in every direction without suggesting meaning, until the eye finally realizes it is experiencing an event; an event as you have said "with a beginning and an end". My sense is of a story without 'literary' content.

Jim Long/ Clytie Alexander
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