

Jenny Eden

On responding to a painting

Amanda Ravetz (AR): So in the last session before the final session of discussion, which Tim's going to lead, we have two speakers, one of them again is a video, Andrew Irving, who couldn't be here, but before that, we have Jenny Eden, who is a painter, who did an MA in Art Psychotherapy Practice and is now doing a PhD at Manchester School of Art.

Jenny Eden (JE): Thank you for inviting me today, Amanda and Tilo. So, I'm a painter. I am currently at the very beginning of a By Practice PhD. All of this is work in progress so I'd be really interested to discuss some of these things afterwards as well. I've just finished an MFA in Fine Art, and I did an MA in Art Psychotherapy Practice. My work is driven by process and, what I call, *Relational Dynamics* involved in the painter-painting relationship.

I'm going to read some texts and speak about the slides [on the screen]. This presentation is an opportunity for me to discuss what I think of as the very varied space of a painting activity, an activity I am committed to. Reverie, for me, is about these things [points to the slide]; time-space, physical-space and mental-space. I have four points which I am going to use to talk about my painting activity, to think about my practice in terms of an outer space and an inner space, from beginning to end.

[Referring to the four points] We've got [1] setting up the practice, [2] the conditions for painting (which is a term that I use for the conditions I need in order to do this activity), [3] maintaining and sustaining a togetherness with the painting (and the information that moves around within the space of painting) and [4] managing this information - the existing and incoming information.

I owe a lot to this lady who, thank you Katie for mentioning her earlier ... I owe a lot to Agnes Martin in terms of thinking about what I call my *Conditions for Painting*. Agnes was an American Abstract Expressionist, whom I think of as a quiet expressionist, working from the mid to late 20th Century, in a very linear and monochromatic way. Agnes talks a lot about the kind of zone that we've talked about today, a zone that she needs to get into in order to do the painting.

She gives very practical ways of getting to the inner space of her work, to gaining a pursuit of the truth to the activity of painting. She wants to find the most honest and true work that she can, and she talks about receiving information from the painting. This is quite central to what I think about too. I am going to read a piece from her book; (sorry, I'm quite nervous, this is the first time I've done a symposium, hopefully I'll get better!)

[Cheers from the audience]

We call this "Inspiration". For an artist, this is the only way. There is no help anywhere. He must listen to his own mind. The way of an artist is an entirely different way. It is a way of surrender. He must surrender to his own mind. When you look in your mind you find it covered with a lot of rubbishy thoughts. You have to penetrate these and hear what your mind is telling you to do.

(Martin, A, Liesbrock, H. & Growe, U. (2004) *The Islands*. Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag.)

So that's Agnes. Thank you, Agnes.

I looked at Agnes Martin at the beginning of my Fine Art degree in '97. She was one of the first artists I engaged with and to some extent, I admit, I tried to replicate her aesthetic at that time. Thinking, now, about what I'm doing in a more theoretical way,

I realise that her words and the way she sets up the activity is quite fundamental to what I do too.

In terms of my “Conditions for Painting” [point 1], I do these things [referring to the slide] like a ritual. (I think my presentation is possibly bringing together lots of things that other people have talked about today.) So, like a ritual, I slow down the body, the mind, the thinking and I empty the mind of unnecessary thoughts, a bit like a meditation. In relation to running, because a few people have mentioned running today, I feel like following these rituals at the beginning of the activity of painting is like stretching before going for a run and then benefitting from that stretch throughout the run. This is like moving from an outer, an outer reverie to an inner reverie.

I access this kind of state, essentially, by writing what I call process notes. I have books and books of these lovely moleskin notebooks [picks up notebook from table]. I like to use the moleskins that have very thin pages, I love them. I write and write to access, to get inside the place where I can do this thing called painting.

I usually wear earphones, with no music to start with, as a sign, an indicator to myself (and to others who might come into the space) that I am painting now. As I enter into the work, I may move to electronic music which filters my mind and allows me to get to the space of doing this honest thing that I need to do. I also listen to zen music. Essentially I need time, and no other commitment for the rest of the day. I need absolute isolation. If people come in and speak to me then it's gone and I have to get back in.

It's like you said Tim [looking to Tim Brennan, who talked about the way we each have a crutch], this routine could be a crutch within my practice. But I'm aware that what happens currently for me at the beginning of my activity may change as I move through my practice and career. It's not necessarily something that is always going to be this way exactly.

The next item on my four points [point 2] is this thing I call “Sustained Togetherness” which is something I want to achieve in order to make certain kinds of painting. Not all paintings need this but very often they do. So once I've set up the activity, I need to sustain the activity. I need prolonged time together with the painting to do this thing, I need to access the inner space and the honest work.

So this togetherness [looking at the image on the slide which shows Jenny's studio], is based on the painting having agency; it is a living thing capable of having an important role in its own development. So it's a sort of non-human, human thing. In this sense I'm thinking about agency from a New Materialist position, and the work of Jane Bennett in “Vibrant Matter”. I will be looking at these kinds of things in more depth as I move through the PhD.

This space [the ‘Sustained Togetherness’] is contained. Having trained as an Art Psychotherapist I am aware of the psychotherapeutic understanding of containment which is somehow connected to the way I need to function in this place where I do the painting. I am surrendering myself to this situation but I am also provoking responses from the painting and from myself. We've got a dialogue going on which involves putting down information / laying down paint to receive information from the painting. Fundamentally this is all to do with colour, but that's another talk!

[Looking at the painting “Instrument” (2018) on the screen] This is one of my more recent paintings, and an example of ‘Sustained Togetherness’ and the hours and hours spent working with this thing that's got agency, that's giving me some information, that I need to (maybe in a psychotherapeutic way) work out, think about what [information] is mine and what is the painting's information. I know that I don't want to muddy the direction of the information, but separate it and then act on it.

I am going to read you, although it's rather embarrassing, a piece of text from my process notes about this painting [referring to ‘Instrument’]. I wrote this piece a couple of weeks after making the painting, which is something I tend to do with the notes, write before, during and after making a painting.

The figure, thing in the middle (and generally the painting itself) was wholly instigated because I wanted to paint a painting like Ivan Seal. He is a painter who I have admired for some time, seen in Frieze two years running and have looked at and thought—'well, I think I can do that too". So wanted to give it a go. And another big reason was because I'd been starting to think about the form building itself on and in the surface - therefore the form and the surface would be noticeably one and the same. One existing on and in the other. In thinking about Seal and in the light of my history in moving paint around, I wanted to move it around on and in the surface. So that it is at once in the surface and also on it. So I had intentions and these were fairly met, I suppose.

Sorry, excuse the repetition and the slightly bad grammar in places here.

Copying Ivan's placement of the form, I moved a piece of pink paint down the centre of the painting. I added marks, more colour. Needed to move to greys for some undertone, *coaliness* and then to some browns for some animal-ness. The pinks popped out the sides becoming slithers or glowing base colours. The form began to bellow and push in different directions. After a while I thought I'd lost it—bellowed too much. But the furry top settled everything down and capped the push and pull taking place below it.

The colours blend really nicely. It's sensitive and sophisticated. Emerging and intertwined within the field it is in. It's got furry bits and smooth bits. It's a thingness non-thing. It has no obvious connection to a thing in the world but it is one. One that I can't put my finger on and explain away.

I've just read something from the orange book [referring to picture of orange moleskin notebook on screen]. I like to use lots of different coloured books. Each time I buy a new book it's a different colour. The process notes really allow this kind of engagement and extraction of information from the painting.

Patrick Heron talks about extracting information from a painting in an conscious way. I'm positioning myself against people like Patrick Heron, another painter from the mid to late 20th century, a British painter, who began [painting] more figuratively, and moved to abstraction. I am going to read a piece from his wonderful book [referring Painter as Critic, Patrick Heron: Selected Writings] on writing about painting, about painting history and the state of painting in the mid to late 20th century.

If the entire surface is Chinese vermilion—then one's eyes soon become so saturated by the vibration of vermilion that the conscious sensation of redness rapidly ceases to be felt! One must then allow a tiny slither of dull green to swim into the arrangement somewhere. This instantly restores the original intensity of the redness of the vermilion expanses. But one thing leads to another: and the slither of green cries out to be matched, or balanced, by a second and even a third little area that is not Chinese vermilion! (But a fifth, seventh or tenth little addition but must be resisted.)

(Heron, P. (1998) Painter as Critic. London: Tate Gallery Publishing Limited.)

Moving to my third point [point 3] and something I am calling at the moment (which may change over the course of the PhD) "Relational Dynamics". I am calling this stuff, the stuff that's going on once I'm in the middle of the painting. In a way I'm thinking of it being in the middle of the reverie as well. We've got messages flying around in this space, we've got conscious and unconscious information and I'm possibly bringing unconscious information to the surface in some way.

Because I am very interested in psychoanalysis, I think a lot about Transference and Counter-transference even in human to human relationships. I realise that it is a big part of the way I think about being a human being, and I see that this relates to my relationship with the painting. Information is transferred from the painting to me, something happens within me and then I act.

I am also interested in Winnicott's theory of Transitional Phenomena and the idea of potentiality, when something in the painting or even in my own mind can become something greater and it has some potential to be taken further. I'm also interested in Christopher's Bollas's theories, one being the Unthought Known, where both myself and the painting have something that is felt, but is not yet known, which can be

brought to the surface of consciousness and then known.

[Referring to the slide] There is a lot of “ploughing on” going on in these hours and hours of painting activity along with the directing and unfolding of things. What’s coming from me? What’s not me? [But] Isn’t this all me? Me and the painting. I’m talking about this other thing, which is obviously not a human. It’s all about me. I’m doing this thing.

Something that comes up quite a lot [in the practice] which my supervisors think could be chapters in my thesis, are the kinds of relationships that develop [with the paintings]. Without sounding like I categorise everything, which I don’t think I do, I do find that these relationships pop up quite a bit in the work.

[Referring to slide] Some paintings are really needy and they’re the ones, like “Instrument”, which I think of as “A Needy Painting”, that lock me into being with them. I cannot leave for hours and because it’s not done, you know, it keeps speaking to me saying “I’m not finished, you’ve not resolved me yet”, so I need to stay with it to find the resolution in some way.

Then there’s “The Difficult Painting” or “The Difficult Relationship”. I’m not necessarily saying that the difficult painting turns into a bad painting, they can sometimes be the best paintings because you’ve stayed with this difficulty and you’ve found a route to some sort of agreement in the end.

And then “The Independent Painting” which often occurs when two paintings are happening simultaneously. I don’t mean I am painting at the same time but I am moving between the two and where a difficult painting is taking all my energy, there’s turmoil, sometimes to the point of almost wanting to cry because it’s so difficult, this other painting can just be born of itself, it just happens. I think, Katie, you mentioned something about that too, so the independent painting just sort of appears quite organically and naturally.

And then there’s “The Failed Painting”. Howard Hodgkin always said that he never let a painting fail. He would always find some sort of resolution. But for me, sometimes they [the paintings] just have to be taken off the stretcher and put in the bin. Sorry about that. Then there are two other paintings [listed] here; “When the Painter Wins”, which is when the difficult relationship is too difficult and I find that I am resolving [the painting] but I’m doing it inauthentically. This is when the painting has not got a true essence of itself, and I just needed to win this argument. And the other one, “When the Painting Wins”. These are the paintings where you keep thinking there’s more to be done to it, and you come back to it day after day or week after week but actually it’s been finished for quite a long time. It just needed you to realise... or for me to realise that.

This is “A Difficult Painting” [referring to “Underbelly” (2017) on screen] and an example of “A Difficult Relationship”. Making this painting was a long process, and the painting embodies this difficulty. It’s deep down, it’s underground, it’s called “Underbelly”. I stood my ground and we came to an arrangement here, so the painting has a voice but I did have to hold my own with it.

This is another another painting, which is actually printed quite dark in the catalogue you’ve got. This is one that I think of as “An Independent Painting”. It fell out, it was birthed, it was born. Whilst energy was being used in a different piece of work, and a painting language was being embedded in that painting, this one just happened quite naturally.

Onto the last slide [point 4]. [Managing Information] This is quite a transcendental state, potentially, but it’s a very busy one. A quiet one but lots in there. I’m really interested in how I manage information; managing my knowledge of painting, my knowledge of what I intended to do against what the painting is asking for, and what the painting needs. Agnes Martin talked about the inspiration she gets from the painting, the messages she gets. But there’s an ambiguity. Lots of possibilities. It’s very complicated but I’m interested in how so many options can only result in one

action. I can only make one action at one point and painting is a series of actions.

[Final slide] As we've discussed, I think it's difficult this reverie thing. It is quite difficult ... but I keep coming back to painting, obviously, all the time. I just think it's possibly one of the reasons why I do this thing because when you make those paintings that are successful and embody a realness and a trueness, you just bask in it for some time afterwards, until then you need to make the next one. That's it, thank you.

AR: We'll go straight onto Andrew's and then we'll have some time to talk to you all.