

TWO COATS OF PAINT

Award-winning NYC blogazine, primarily about painting



UNCATEGORIZED

Effects of chance: A conversation with Emily Berger

November 13, 2017 10:19 am



Emily Berger, Snow Day, 2016, oil on wood, 24 x 20 inches

Contributed by Sharon Butler / Brooklyn painter **Emily Berger** is a masterful scumbler, dragging brushes of dry paint across panels to create scratchy horizontal bands of color. The wood grain of the panel peeks through, creating a sense of immediacy and improvisation. In her new work, the paint is thinly applied, and I get the sense that there aren't any second chances. A graduate of Brown University and an alumna of the **Skowhegan School**, Berger earned her MFA from Columbia University and maintains a studio in Sunset Park. On the occasion of her solo show, which is the culmination of a summer residency at the **Norte Maar Adirondacks outpost** in Jay, New York, we had a conversation about her process, her recent print project, and the reductive direction she has embraced in her work.

Sharon Butler: In your paintings from the past five years, you've explored repetitive horizontal brush stroke imagery in which the action of making the stroke, dragging the brush across the panel, becomes the image itself. How did you arrive at this seemingly reductive approach?

Emily Berger: I've always gone back and forth between a so-called reductive approach and a more complicated one, for lack of a better word. I am drawn to minimal work, classical work, clear work, and also to the feel of paint and materials, touch, the evidence of the hand and a kind of convergence of process and viewers' experience of the work. I like that the viewer can partake in the experience of making the work, and yet it still remains mysterious.

From my earliest complete and semi-presentable paintings I've been a grid painter. I like the structure and the flatness, but then I have always messed that up with markmaking, layering, gesture. I approach making a painting like an abstract expressionist in that I don't know exactly what's going to happen and the painting is an arena for action, but it's structured and controlled, restrained by the format of the horizontal strokes. The painting comes from the process. I love accidents and the effects of chance; I work with them, so there's a back and forth between chance and control. My hand is not so steady and I am embracing that, also breaking the linearity with jumps and starts, stuttering across the surface.

As for the horizontals – at a point in my life about seven years ago I felt like I had to simplify, kind of clean everything up in the work, pare down psychologically. I wanted to make work that was barely there. I started working with ink on paper and did a lot of those, brushing on the ink, layering, rubbing it out. There were drips and also areas where the paper resisted the ink if it was primed, and I responded – as if the work talked back. It's a dialogue. I also made a lot of very small square oil-on-wood paintings, and again, the markmaking went from loose grids to the point where I started leaving the verticals out. The works were small and intimate, and I could make them by holding the wood in my lap, but they seemed to demand a larger scale, and gradually I've been getting bigger, getting more of my whole body into the markmaking. I love working on the wood because of the pattern, grain, and color, so I prime it with a clear gesso/medium, and then I can pick up even more variation in the brushing, and some underlying verticals to counteract the horizontals. And the vertical format of the panels also is a counterpoint to the horizontals, so if there is sometimes a reference to landscape because of the horizontal bands, there is also a figurative presence I think.

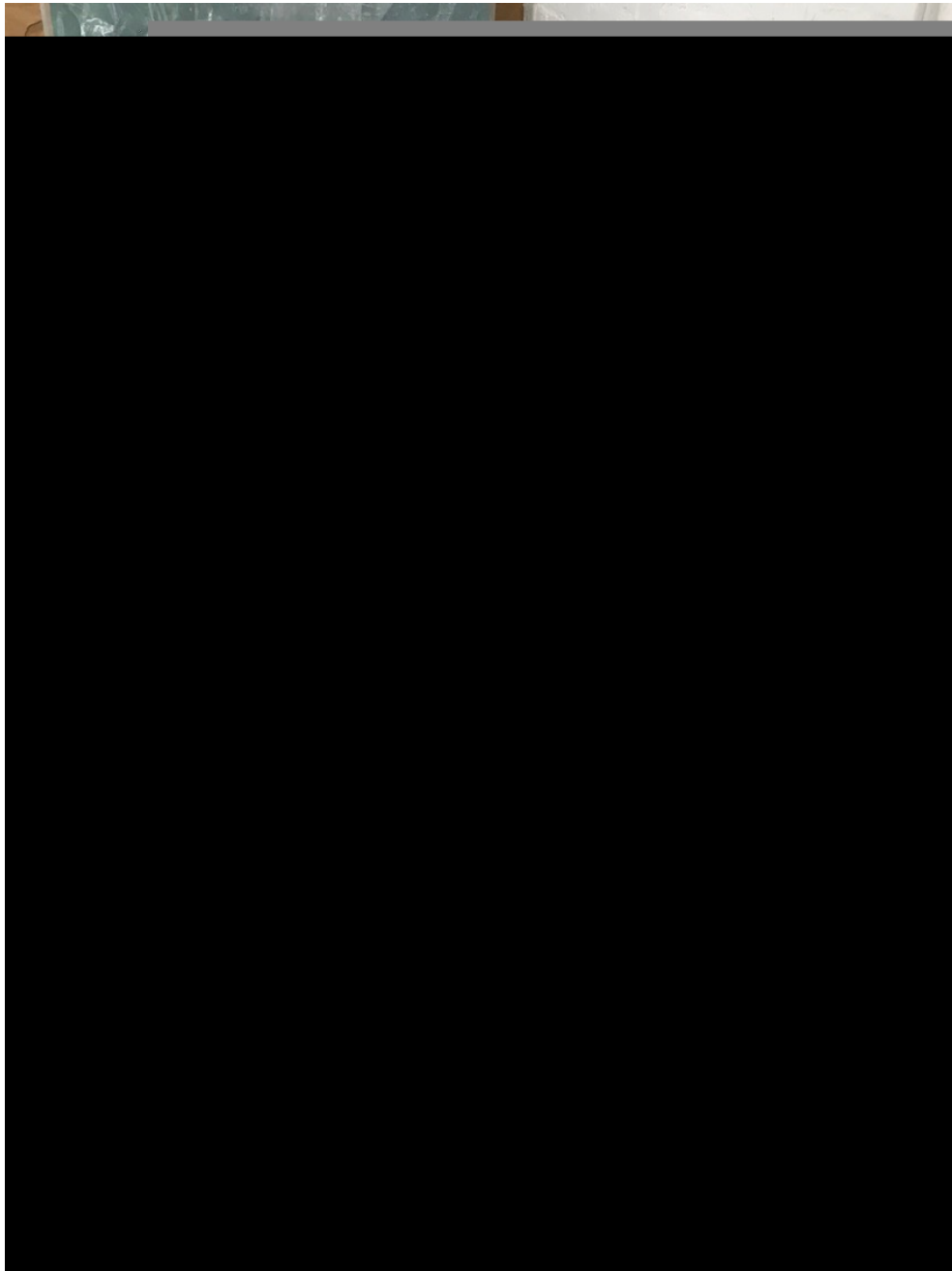


Emily Berger, installation view at Norte Maar.

SB: In your artist's statement you note that the rhythm and variety of the bands of paint suggest movement, broken symmetry, and light. Does one of these effects interest you more than the others or does a painting have to have a balance of all three? How do you decide when the combination is working?

EB: It's a combination . The light arises from the movement as does the broken symmetry.

I am not looking for an effect . I'm hoping something happens that's satisfying and generative for me and the audience as a result of the process of painting . I often feel like I am working something out, solving some problem, but it's romantic; this idea that you can work consciously and unconsciously at once and find the right place to stop eventually. It's a mystery.



Emily Berger signing prints at Vandeb Editions.

SB: If you had a manifesto for your art practice, what would it include?

EB: Work comes from work so keep working.

I've always loved this quotation – I have it as something Guston remembered John Cage saying to him : “When you start working, everybody is in your studio – the past, your friends, enemies, the art world, and above all, your own ideas – all are there. But as you continue, they start leaving one by one, and you are left completely alone. Then, if you are lucky, even you leave.”

Also one from John Ashberry – “Very often people don't listen to you when you speak to them. It's only when you talk to yourself that they prick up their ears”.

SB: Let's talk about the a series of prints you recently made at [Vandeb Editions](#) in Long Island City. Do you approach printmaking differently than painting?

EB: It's great to try something new; new materials, a new medium, because it takes you out of your usual routine and shakes things up. And it's a collaboration, which is an exciting change from the solitude of the studio. What's been great for me about printmaking – I've done three series of prints with Vandeb – is that I can be experimental and explore a new medium but also work in a similar way that I paint. I had no idea what I was doing the first time so I played with the material. [Marjorie Van Dyke](#) is a master printer and an artist and was able to help me with process and also let me do my own thing while making the etching plates. So I used all the materials she had for me, we made three plates and then printed them in various ways to create variations, using one, two, or all three plates, turning them around, using a variety of color. So each print is a surprise. I love not knowing what will come up.

Emily Berger, Breathe In, 2017, oil on wood, 36 inches x 28 inches

SB: You have just completed work for two exhibitions – one at Norte Maar and another at Walter Wickiser in Chelsea. Do you feel like you have gained new insight from the intensive work period and preparation for the shows? What are you working on now?

EB: I lost my studio in Gowanus 2 years ago, and moved to Sunset Park. I've been working steadily, and so I had a body of work. These two shows came up, and the curators were able to choose what they wanted. Seeing the work in a gallery can concentrate the mind – you see it from the outside for a change. But, working afterwards is daunting – I need to get my equilibrium back. I have some new work going, though, including a couple of larger pieces. I'm not sure about any of it, but that's how I always feel. I'll just keep going and see where it goes. As soon as I think I am going in one direction, say, going further with a variety of staccato markmaking, I get the impulse to work more linearly again. Or towards color, and then towards black. If you do enough, it starts to make some kind of sense. I try not to be my own curator. It can be stifling. If I really start feeling stuck, I'll do more work on paper.

SB: Would you say that the outside world – both personal and political – effects your work? Or is your work a refuge from worldly concerns?

EB: The outside world, both personal and political, definitely affects my work, I just can't say how usually. I have some post-election paintings, and titles, but I am not sure they read that way to anyone, unless I point it out. Sometimes I'm consumed by the political or personal and that gets into the work. Everything gets in, but indirectly. I have to work in the studio to maintain my sanity, so in that way the work is a refuge. It's separate...but it's not. I can't pull apart all the threads that go into it.

Emily Berger, Dressmaker, 2016, oil on wood, 48 inches x 36 inches

“[Emily Berger: New Paintings](#),” Norte Maar, Cypress Hills, Brooklyn, NY. Through November 19, 2017.

“[Emily Berger: Rhythm and Light](#),” Walter Wickiser, Chelsea, New York, NY. Through October 25, 2017.

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Sky Pape

November 13, 2017 at 11:43 am

Thanks for sharing this thoughtful and thought-provoking interview. Emily, I was glad I could get to see your work in person at the Wickiser show recently. Congrats!

Alan Crockett

November 13, 2017 at 11:56 am

Yes, a beautiful show and insightful interview.

Kate Brown

November 13, 2017 at 12:19 pm

So appreciate knowing more about your work, Emily, as I have been really looking at it for a few years now. Sharon, thanks for asking all the right and important questions.

Kate Brown

Claire Seidl

November 13, 2017 at 1:06 pm

Great interview. Clear and direct and open.
Thank you, both!

Louisa Waber

November 13, 2017 at 7:24 pm

Stunning, beautiful work. Great interview.

Barbara friedman

November 14, 2017 at 9:19 am

An illuminating, thoughtful interview. Lovely to read, especially since I've been savoring these paintings for quite a while now.

Emily Berger

November 15, 2017 at 11:01 am

Thank you Sky!

Emily Berger

November 15, 2017 at 11:01 am

Thank you Alan!

Emily Berger

November 15, 2017 at 11:02 am

Thank you Kate!

Lisa Sharp

November 15, 2017 at 3:05 pm

A lovely intimate conversation with Berger, open, clear, nuanced (like the paintings).

Emily Berger

November 18, 2017 at 10:22 am

Thank you Claire!

Emily Berger

November 18, 2017 at 10:23 am

Thank you Barbara!

Emily Berger

November 18, 2017 at 10:23 am

Thank you Louisa!

Emily Berger

November 18, 2017 at 10:25 am

Thank you Lisa.

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distinctly encoded, like a unique double helix of molecular structure, in ...

Carl D'Alvia's wry subversion Carl

D'Alvia's show at Hesse Flatow, "Sometimes Sculpture Deserves a Break," is a playful, irony-laden take on the hyper-masculine minimalist sculpture canon.

Invitation to Pause "Pause" is a restful, thoughtful summer group show featuring Bill Albertini, Stephen Bron, Eric Brown, Sharon Butler, Peter Krashes, Sylvia Plimack Mangold, Michelle Vaughan, and Andrew Witkin.

Art and TV: Professor T, an extraordinary burst of mind
Koen de Bouw as Professor Jasper Teerlinck on Professor T Contributed by Laurie Fendrich / Boy did the otherwise on-the-mark Guardian television critic Lucy Mangan get it wrong. In her 2017 ...

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Scott Daniel Ellison: "Every artist is in some way self-taught" Scott Daniel Ellison's images of flora and fauna are

suffused with personhood--
trees wave bony limbs, bats
have human faces, and
animals wear jewelry.

Working at a small scale and focusing ...

**Studio visit: Susanna Heller's
endless strength** Paintings in
Susanna Heller's
Williamsburg studio

Contributed by Medrie MacPhee / Before
Susanna Heller's paintings were wrapped
and shipped to Toronto for her upcoming
solo show at Olga Korper, I brought Sharon
Butler ...

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