



[www.moscowcontemporary.org](http://www.moscowcontemporary.org)

## **Ellen Vieth & Jean Arnold: A Written Conversation**

**In conjunction with their exhibit:  
Ellen Vieth & Jean Arnold: A Written Conversation  
February 11 – May 14, 2021**

Jean: Ellen, we have both noted that our work is grounded in appreciation of numerous 20th century painting masters. My influences include Richard Diebenkorn, Paul Cezanne, David Hockney, Wayne Thiebaud, Giorgio Morandi, Philip Guston, Elizabeth Murray, and the early Modernists like Paul Klee and Marsden Hartley. Among many other artists. And we both look at many contemporary painters, as well.

But what about the influence of important teachers? Was it their work itself that was influential for you, or rather, was it those teachers' philosophies / approaches that were most influential?

I was fortunate to have quite a number of great instructors – it was more their approach and philosophies that affected me, rather than their work itself. I deliberately sought teachers who had studied under Hans Hoffman, a 20th century abstract painter who emphasized the tension between the picture plane and illusion of depth in a picture, as a way to create a dynamic visual experience.

As part of my MFA program, I attended month-long sessions at the Vermont Studio Center, and I had so many visiting artists come through my studio giving comments – that after a while all the voices canceled each other out, as the various opinions sometimes contradicted one another. Ultimately, in the studio each artist has to trust one's own instincts, shedding all those other voices.

Ellen: Wow – Jean, how lucky for you to have such a talented repertoire of painting teachers. Personally, I have had some great teachers that have influenced me too. In my case, coming back late to the game of painting, it proved to be more of an exchange of ideas and I was so hungry for discussion and learning of new artists' works that I might have missed. Also very influenced by the Abstract Expressionist painters, particularly Wolf Kahn, Diebenkorn, Thiebaud, Joan Mitchell, as well as Guston – and of course the great impressionists / post-impressionists – Claude Monet and Vincent Van Gogh.

-----

Jean: Ellen, how do you proceed with a work's development? To what extent is your work based on preconception (that is, bringing a central idea to the piece and carrying it through), versus allowing

unanticipated content to emerge from the subconscious (such as in automatic painting)? The question suggests a spectrum of possibilities. Few artists are either totally in one camp or the other; many of us use some combination of approaches.

In my own work, surprise and discovery in the process are crucial, but I typically proceed with some notion of what I want to achieve. I like to work with a photo or a basic sketch as a starting point. But at the same time, retaining a fixed notion of what the end result should be just kills the energy and spirit of a piece. The work tells me, as it is unfolding, what it is about – it tells me what to do or what my next step is, and it is important to pay attention to that voice. In my experience, the muse is real.

Ellen: Oh absolutely! I am the cheerleader for the happy accidents that come through the media. I will sometimes use photos for color research, especially in landscape paintings. Other times I go out and touch the plants, look for something in the corner of my eye, and then head to the studio.

-----

Jean: A similar question: do you ever give yourself “assignments”? (that is, create a set of self-imposed parameters or guidelines for a piece or series of pieces?)

I do create assignments sometimes and find this helpful. Assignments always create limitations, but creativity arises from challenge and problem-solving. The right set of self-imposed limits can spur surprising and wonderful results.

My best example of an assignment in the show is the piece called **Full Circle**, in which I decided to create a full panorama of a view in Salt Lake City, doing  $\frac{1}{8}$  of the view with each session.

Ellen: Rarely do I set up an assignment – although I am an avid researcher of techniques. I look at a lot of work to see how others approach problems I might have stumbled upon in the past. I do wish sometimes that I had someone say to me, DO THIS – haha. Pulling it all out by yourself is difficult... but I guess in the end as you mentioned before looking for that muse is always golden when it appears. In my case, memories of scents, memories of experiences unfold much like poetry. Sometimes I post lines of poems next to my canvas. Other times – most always music is my muse... I listen to all genres, but lately I am drawn to Phillip Glass and different cello compositions. If it's sunny outside I always end up with some Motown.

Jean: Ellen, what about your feathers piece? Wasn't that an assignment you created that extended for much of a year?

Ellen: Yes, **Book of Flight** was a ninth-month concerted effort to intentionally find a feather daily.

-----

Jean: Tell me again about the piece with the bird that you said was about boundaries, *The Gates*. This painting is paired with my piece *Big Pit* which depicts the Kennecott Copper Pit. One can certainly discuss boundaries in the context of large-scale mining operations: What land is habitat for wildlife? What land is owned by individuals? What land is owned by multinational corporations, slated for irreversible destruction, and how did they get that land?

Ellen: In my MFA experience, I set up intentionally to learn everything I could about several spaces, walking the boundaries, especially at Mann Lake in Lewiston. The area is both a bird refuge as well as an agricultural area; the boundaries there are set up to define the park area around the lake. I was always drawn to that path that separated them; a road was another boundary. With the piece about the collection of feathers, *Book of Flight* (nine months' intention) and with that particular painting *The Gates*, the breaks in the wind rows especially became gates to another area. I saw badgers, scores of birds, learned more about ground nesters, and eventually earned the trust of local deer, by repeatedly having them SEE me as well as me seeing them. I was rewarded greatly by what I saw, what place I came to know in ways that I have not had the depth of understanding before. There is a great depth and a spiritual gratitude gained from that practice of knowing.

-----

Jean: Ellen, you might want to ask me: Why Malden? It's a question I've been considering anyway and want to explore.

I think a lot about the systemic, "Earth Systems" big-picture – about how humans are altering the very basis of existence, and how this is now affecting our very lives. Many people are experiencing devastating losses of all sorts, the burned-out town of Malden being a prime example. Increasingly we are confronted with these scenes of wreckage, whether from fire, flooding, or storms. This is becoming a part of our experienced landscape of our world as-it-now-is.

When I was asked to participate in an exhibit on wildfires, I chose to work with the Malden imagery, and I knew I wanted to make a whole Malden series.

It is one thing to create work in the studio; it is quite another to see that work in a show. Seeing the Malden work in the context of Ellen's beautiful work was a bit of a jolt, giving me some glimpse of how others might experience it as horrific and ugly. Certainly, that is a legitimate response. But a close view reveals the careful, even loving, rendering that could be construed as beautiful. Beauty is not necessarily just visual: "moral beauty" includes acts of bearing witness to challenging subjects which we would want to turn away from, a kind of homage or tribute to those who have suffered. Beauty and horror often intermingle in unexpected ways.

Ellen: AHH yes. I was fascinated by the work on Malden Jean. I knew right away the importance of those images. The carefulness of execution – and your draftsmanship or history of – was very apparent in the details. Once I dove into the discussion on moral beauty, I admired your take on it even more, because of your love for the Earth, and what is currently happening all around. As always, artists are often the canaries in the mine, witnesses – it's hard to look at, but it's important to understand that it is beautiful as well.

-----  
Jean: We both embrace “process” as an integral part of our artmaking, allowing it to become part of the content. In much of our work, we also both strive for a marriage between the inner and outer realms, for some combination of abstraction with real-world reference.

But what would you note about our different approaches? I would say that my work is much more directly perceptually-oriented, working more with photo reference and direct observation. Your work seems more related to an integration of memory, impressions, symbol, emotional states with your observations of the world around you. Ellen, what would you say about this? Is this a fair characterization, and if so, what would you add?

Ellen: Absolutely spot on, Jean!

-----  
Jean: What is your challenging “edge” right now in your work? In other words, what are you striving for, that you might see only glimpses of, or that you might experience falling short in? What new things are you striving to achieve right now?

Having been away from the work for a while, I’m simply discovering what my work is about at this point. I’m in a transition period that artists experience when between bodies of work, although one could argue that the Malden work is a new direction. The Malden work has allowed me to get back into the flow without too much concern about approach or stylistic manner, as the “subject matter” itself is so much the content.

That being said, in my recent work I have felt somewhat enslaved by aiming for a competent rendering of images. I want to release into a more immediate and expressive approach. I know that just simply doing more work once again will carry me into a realm where I am not so in conscious control – the realm of new, unexpected possibilities – where the inner and the outer realms merge.

Ellen: It’s funny, I’m not married to one style – I’m influenced by others, but always trying to bring something different to the mix. I ask myself: Does it feel true to me and authentic? It’s difficult painting for a living; too many voices in my head some days that conflict with imagery vs abstraction.

-----  
Jean: What do you feel are some important themes or motifs in your work?

For me, the contoured Palouse landscape figures strongly across a number of bodies of work. I started working with Palouse imagery in undergraduate art classes. My aerial abstracted landscapes of 1994-95 are based on aerial photos of agricultural fields. In my Italian landscapes during my studies there in 1997-98, I found a

wonderful resonance with the Palouse landscape. In my mining imagery starting in 2011, I emphasized the contours seen in the mining operations.

Ellen: I too am drawn to this landscape – it is infinitely paintable if you will! I love your bird's eye view. I am possessed by horizons and long views in a lot of the work. I seem to now hone in on repetition, whether it is red bushes, sticks and copses of trees, or the reduction of brush strokes that appear over and over. Some are short and choppy, others I'm pushing them to feel languid. Isn't painting wonderful??

Jean: Ellen, what about that shed that recurs in your paintings and photos? Is there something that you want to share about this? Does it have some sort of symbolic meaning for you?

Ellen: Thanks for asking about the Shed pieces, Jean. Since 2009 I have been photographing it, making sketches and a few paintings. One of the things that drew me to that small barn was the location as well as the odd squareness of it. Built before the turn of the century it is on the Linehan property and has been in use since then. I think initially it was the solitary placement in a field that drew me to think of it as a minimalist piece. Sitting quietly there while everything else around it changes. Over the years the Shed itself has changed – paint and improvements, but to be honest the original Shed still pulls my heart in a way that the improvements do not. Having photographed it now for over 13+ years, has provided me with a constant in a changing environment close to home.

Thank you for the great discussion Jean, and always thoughtful questions. You make me think deeper, and I love you for that!!

Jean: Thank you Ellen, for such wonderful artistic dialogue! I love having you as an art buddy!