



Jamie Brunson: Kundalini Meditation and Painting

DR: The first time I saw your work was in the “Big Painting Show- Layers of Abstraction by Eight Bay Area Artists,” at Gray Loft Gallery this past March. I wrote a review about the show and your painting Arcadia (2007) where I was struck by the freshness and clarity of thought that the painting revealed. We spoke at the opening where you explained to me that your studio practice was conjoined with your meditation practice. Can you tell me more about how these two practices influence one another?



“Arcadia”

JB: I have to explain a little about my practice to give my answer some context:

I practice kundalini meditation, which is a Tantric practice, focusing mainly on working with energy in a transformative way—although you could say this is true of almost any type of meditation. The practice itself involves a particular form of breathing that raises and purifies energy by moving it through the chakras—third eye, throat, heart, solar plexus, root, base of spine, crown— of the meditator’s energetic body using breath. Over time, breath and energy merge, and eventually expand into the layers of energetic bodies within and outside your physical body, to encompass everything. At first, it helps to have an adept or advanced teacher to work with you by transmitting energy until you really connect to the energy. Eventually, if you practice kundalini long enough, you enter—or merge with—the Void Body, a kind of oceanic, boundless state of interconnectedness.

I know everything I just wrote sounds slightly incredible to someone who hasn’t actually practiced meditation, but the practice is really very matter of fact on one level: You sit with a straight spine on a cushion or bench. You breathe in a specific way. Sometimes you sit with a teacher with your eyes open and the teacher looks at you, sending energy through his or her eyes. And something starts to happen. You can start to separate transient thoughts from what is really present in the here and now. if you’re lucky, you see the difference between projections and the moment at hand.

Achieving that oceanic bliss state I mentioned is pretty incredible— It’s not something you’d experience in ordinary reality, or let me say it this way: it takes a certain kind of arresting moment in ordinary reality to get to that place of complete openness, recognition or union. This is what I like about meditation practice—it’s engulfing and engaging in a way that material gratification or mere entertainment can’t achieve. You can’t buy it, no one can give it to you—you can only work your way to it with deliberate effort and intent. And even though it feels great, it’s not escapist, because it comes with a kind of knowledge and awareness, a consciousness, that makes you more responsible for what you know to be true about yourself and the world.

One of the things that I’ve become most aware of, that makes the whole process credible to me, is that it’s grounded in the physical world. It takes place in the arena of the body, in the realm of the senses. It’s palpable and sensate, experiential. It’s tied to vision and to touch. It’s as though you enter into your body with expanded breath, and breath opens up into a world where your body dissolves into everything—the boundaries are blurred, everything is connected.

So in the abstract work I’ve been painting since about 2000, I’ve developed a formal vocabulary that addresses the physical qualities of those meditation experiences by relying on an analogous material language. I’m not interested in making an ‘illustration’ of the experience; I’m committed to using formal vocabulary, relying on color, shape, mark, the material phenomena of the medium, and the surface application of paint for its tactile and optical qualities. I’m making paintings that adhere to the canons of craftsmanship and composition, but they’re informed by a certain order of experience.

So I’m drawing on the physical, bodily sensations that paint can evoke—the way that paint by its nature can suggest forms rising out of and dissolving back into a void field, or can imply shimmering light while still being colored pigment on a flat surface, or can evoke a vast continuum containing complex interconnections extending in all directions. It’s more an ‘allusion’ than an “illusion”, if you can see the distinction I mean. But if I’m going to work with a metaphorical construct made out of formal elements, I try to tie that construct to some of the ideas about inter-relatedness or interconnection that arise through meditation practice.

But there's another aspect of my studio work that's informed by meditation, which is the act of painting itself, the literal process. Why does anyone meditate? As I mentioned earlier, it's often about training yourself to be fully present in the moment rather than living in projections and judgements based on arbitrary values. (Of course if you've been through graduate school, as I have—or you participate in the commercial art world, which I do—you've been fully indoctrinated into a set of values and judgements...and of course I'm a human being so I'm fully capable of judgement and of seeing only the projections and not the real thing in front of me.)

As a kind of antidote to all of that, one of the things I've learned from meditation practice is to work with the materials in a way that's collaborative and involves surrender, surrendering the illusion of control: setting up parameters and then working with materials in real time with those parameters, and watching what the process yields. In a way this is like teaching yourself anew how to paint, every day. So there's the freshness of discovery and participation, the uncertainty of outcome. This is the way I like to work best—starting with a general idea of how the scale, the medium, and the colors might work together, and then playing around and seeing where it goes. I'm formally educated enough to have created the parameters that produce an underlying structure or composition, but within that framework there's room for improvisation.

DR: In hearing more about your meditation practice and seeing you in my mind's eye sitting across from your teacher receiving her/his energy, it makes me think about the experience of viewing a painting that has a real presence (like your work does) and how the viewer is in a way receiving the energy from that object. I suppose that is what you mean by interconnectedness.

Something else I find interesting which you mentioned at the end of your explanation of how mediation has informed your painting practice is the, "surrendering of the illusion of control." To me, I can literally see how this is manifested in observing how on your artist website you do not organize your work in a linear fashion by time, but rather into different bodies of work, such as Lattices, Veils and Geometries. Within these works some appear to be abstract and others completely non-objective. I can imagine this has to do with the "blurring of boundaries" you spoke of, but perhaps you could shed some more light on the subject of abstraction and non-representation in your work?

JB: Can you elaborate on what you mean by "abstract" vs "non-objective.?" Maybe you are referring to two different series within my work? I think I can answer this more completely if I'm clearer about how you categorize these two approaches.

DR: By abstract I mean the distillation, or deconstruction of something as a means to create a departure from reality. And by non-objective I mean having nothing to do with the outside world.

JB: The experience you've described, of stopping in front of—or being stopped by—a painting that's genuinely arresting because it has real presence—that's exactly what I'm trying to do in my work. The last line I wrote on a recent artist's statement was: For me, the success of these paintings relies on their capacity to evoke...sensations of sensations and expansion in the people who see them.

Is it literally possible to embed an experience or sensation into physical material, so that the painting—or any work of art—functions as a kind of "transmitter"? You can't make an absolute declaration about that, but there's a good amount of historical, culture evidence for the capacity of art, dance, music, literature and poetry to somehow distill and evoke experiences for their audiences.

I think we've all had the experience of being in the world, and having a sudden moment of awareness—where we just stop what we're doing and we're completely immersed in the sight of something, in that moment of witnessing it. Time is immediate, we're not projecting forward and looking backward. Sometimes, those moments arise around seeing something that we don't recognize—we can't give it a name, we can't interpret it, we can't categorize it, so part of being arrested and engaged is the effort to name it. I've had many of those moments, especially when traveling in foreign countries. There's something about being in an unfamiliar situation, outside of our routines, that really wakes us up and opens us to being aware.

I made a whole body of work around having that kind of experience, which happened a lot during the decade when I got to travel all over Asia and India. I was using pattern as a visual metaphor for that open state—partly because pattern was an element of cultural transmission in those parts of the world, but partly because I was interested in the Islamic idea that you can't use literal representation to describe the divine. So instead of picture, they were using geometric complexity, a more abstract form with a deep structure, to evoke the ineffable. And I think of those moments of openness as a kind of divine state. My experience has been that meditation can also take you to the threshold of that state.

This is a roundabout way to get to the second part of your question. I don't divide my work chronologically on my site—or even in my own mind—because several of the bodies of work are concurrent, and develop over a long period of time. I think I started making the Lattice paintings around 2001, and I'm still making them. But they were an offshoot, or an outgrowth, of the pattern-based abstract work I just mentioned. I really loved making those pattern paintings—they were very technically demanding. I was using some layering techniques that were very unpredictable, so I would either get great surface effects or completely lose

hours of work in the attempt to get those effects. That's part of what I meant about "surrendering yourself to the materials and the process." Working that way was a real collaboration with the materials—I could direct them but I couldn't control them. There's a certain amount of risk and loss involved in that, but that's a great metaphor for the way things go in general.

Anyway, one of the things the pattern paintings made me realize was, that people will attribute unintended qualities to images that have certain recognizable contours. It was too easy for that work to be seen as "decorative" rather than as a metaphor for complexity and interconnectedness. I think it had something to do with the regularity of the pattern structure. When I realized that there was an implicit grid in all that work, I just thought: why not simplify it to the grid structure, which is a kind of absolute visual metaphor for a continuous, interconnected field? So the Lattices were the beginning of that, and they also allowed me to use a more painterly approach, where my hand was in the work with a brush and I was pushing wet paint into wet paint. That physical process is much different than the layer on layer approach I was using in the pattern paintings—there's more room for improvisation and your mind and hand have to really be in the mark you're making.

But getting back to your question about blurring boundaries, and about abstraction/non-representation: one thing I'm really clear about is that I'm not interested in pictorial representation. I did my undergrad work in the age of Photorealism, and I know all those tricks and have made plenty of those paintings. I don't object to other people's representational work—I like it a lot of it. I'm crazy about Vermeer, who you could call 'the ur-photorealist'. Many other artists have done and are successfully doing what I'm trying to do, evoke an emotion or sensation, but doing it indirectly through a visual metaphor like a sunset or a beautiful person's image. But I'm not interested in making illustrations of something; I'm more interested in the idea of reduction or distillation to some kind of essential quality. And also—this is more specific to the Veil paintings—of engaging the inherent material properties of paint, of cooperating with or "surrendering to" the way the material wants to go. In the Veil paintings, my collaboration with the material comes in setting up a methodology that directs, and selectively limits, some of those inherent properties, and the following through. So maybe it's a partial surrender.

This idea of distillation—I see it, for example, in your work—which I also love, by the way. You could say that there might be something like a reference to tree branches or plant forms or some kind of organic arterial structure in your compositions, but they're distinctly not pictures of trees per se. So you've taken a form that exists in reality in a recurrent way, and looked beyond the specific and literal to the pure essential form. That's pretty much what I'm trying to do. I reference sources like aerial maps, scientific images of neural systems, mathematical models like Delaunay triangulations, but only because they all get at this idea of an infinite, complex network of interconnections.

Using line work as a basic compositional element is interesting because there's always the question of whether a line is two dimensional, or whether it begins to define 'space' by implying a figure-ground relationship. Even though the Veil paintings primarily address 'surface', they also end up reading as 'space' if you slow down to look at them. But the distillation, the qualities of "directness" and "immediacy" that I'm trying to achieve, are meant to capture, or literally embody the energy or vibration that animates reality. It's the field we occupy, but we're the field. No center, everything everywhere.

DR: There are so many juicy things you brought up that I will want to talk about further. I will begin with the first point that you made when you said, "people will attribute unintended qualities to images that have certain recognizable contours." It seems to me this is because humans have this habitual need to label and name things in order to be able to understand them. It is much like the game we played as children when we pointed to the clouds and said, "I see a unicorn," or whatever it was our mind made an association to. This negation of narrative or illustration in your work, is exactly the power of making abstract work is it not? Because it defies categorization, we are asked to confront the pureness of the form and the rawness of the material, and see things for what they are. Although I am fully engaged in this kind of seeing and making, I too fall victim to this habituated need sometimes. Perhaps my question insinuated that somehow your work appeared to be divided into work that alluded to forms in nature and other work which negated all form. Now I see why you asked for clarification on the way I was using the terms abstraction and non-objective art.

That leads me to the second thing which you talked about that I loved which was that you have these various bodies of work going on concurrently over a long period of time. Since we are talking about time, my question relates to the relationship of painting and drawing. How do you go about the distillation process when working within the immediacy of your methodology? Are there prior drawings or collage that lead you to painting, or does your meditation practice allow you to be in a "portal" of sort that you can enter without backtracking?

JB: I hope you didn't feel that my response had any kind of criticality attached to it—it is true that we all have the impulse to label and name; pragmatically, it's expedient...although there's a whole conversation about how familiarity or naming can be connected to the idea of "seeking ground." My meditation teacher once joked that "aesthetic" is the opposite of anesthetic, in other words, real visual experience wakes you up. Anyway, I often think about the forms that I've used in the more reductive paintings, asking myself if they veer into something like symbols or graphics, and I keep playing with the forms they take—that near-floral shape that might also be a kind of rotor, interlocking rings, straight and curved shapes. How do you suggest or evoke something while still leaving it open to interpretation?

I have to tell you this little aside—another digression—before I answer your question. When I was in grad school, in the 80's, semiotics had become a big element in the visual arts and in criticism. People were looking at everything as 'texts', people were interested in the relationship between signifier and signified, people were deconstructing sign systems to expose the concealed/received assumptions. I was making work about the urban environment and found an odd piece of discarded cardboard, shaped roughly like a cross, that I put into a painting. It unleashed a torrent of questions and discussion about whether I was religious—you know, a practicing Christian. That incident taught me everything I need to know about the human impulse to take something as abstract as a shape and read all kinds of meaning into it. I think it just says something about the way the human psyche works—that there's a hunger for meaning, maybe for storytelling or some kind of narrative, maybe for resolution. I don't think we're a bunch of nihilists; I find that search for meaning really beautiful and poignant. Maybe what I'm saying is that there's a difference between seeking "meaning" and seeking absolute ground and certainty. Which only exists as a construct, anyway...

But back to your question about process and methodology—your observation about meditation practice being a portal, or at least being a kind of consistent underlying connection between the different bodies of work, is pretty accurate. Given that the different bodies of work are all based on an order of experience, that experience is regularly accessible through practice. There's a tremendous amount of variety within the experience of each meditation, but the place where it takes you and the order of experience you can have, seem to follow certain contours. In other words, I regularly experience what you might call the interior terrain of meditation, and the bodies of work are based on something that I keep revisiting. The experience has qualities, contours—so the lattices are made of simplified line work to represent complexity, interconnection, and de-centered energetic motion distributed across a picture plane. Implicitly, those net or lattice-like structures imply a field or continuum that stretches infinitely beyond the picture plane. It's more of a conceptual model of the experience, like a reductive translation, because the paintings exist on a two-dimensional surface, whereas the actual experience exists in infinite dimensional space and time. But these reductive linear models or forms or diagrams are metaphors for connectivity and interdependence, or of some kind of vibrating energetic field.

I do make drawings and rough sketches, for both the Veils and the Lattices; for the lattices, which I think are much more based in an almost graphic language, I'm constantly working on defining a vocabulary of line qualities and shapes that I feel are a credible, if reductive, representation of something that's really immense and ineffable. I've seen chakras described in several ways: as a kind of iris that opens or closes like a camera lens; as a spinning ball or wheel; as a state of flowering, expanding or opening from the very center—that's partly why that multi-lobed or 'flower' shape seems like a usable symbol for that experiential state. So those "floral" chakra shapes and the simple geometric forms in some of the paintings and works on paper are all graphic, simplified lines/symbols for something that would be impossible to show in literal or pictorial representation because it exists in sense memory, maybe in the imagination, or maybe even in the abstraction of pure mathematics. It's literally a question of how much you can describe with the simplest means possible, so that the quality of the paint application matters as much—maybe more—than the line contours.

And I do make new paintings that are variations on other, earlier paintings, picking up an element and extending it forward or adding to what was in the early version. I think this the nature of painting, it's a collective approach, a kind of bridge-building. You're making the path while you're walking on it.

DR: I liked your story about graduate school and how people read into the cross form you were using which prompted a long discussion on religion and whether you were Christian. I can completely picture the scenario as I have my own memories of long drawn out conversations that end up diverting completely away from what the artist is actually interested in doing within the work. I also have a similar story to yours, which I think is quite a common experience for many artists. Another artist (who is fresh in my mind from the current show up at the DeYoung) is Georgia O'Keeffe, whose work was labeled as sexual after Stieglitz had photographed her in the nude. People see one form and then make associations, even if they are not there or intended.

It seems like our conversation keeps coming back to my first question about abstract painting and non-objective work. No matter how you word it, whether you call it abstract or symbolic, this kind of work historically leads to the conversation about Saussurean semiotics which you mentioned. I love when you said, "Maybe what I'm saying is that there's a difference between seeking "meaning" and seeking absolute ground and certainty." This seems to be the right perspective to have when working with suggestive forms, because as we now both know, one cannot control how people interpret things.

Jamie I want to draw this interview to a close by asking you about your recent show at Andrea Schwartz Gallery. I was struck by your new painting "Generator," which functions as a kind of bridge between your series Lattices and Veils. It seems like this an example of what you meant when you talked about making the path as your walking on it. Can you talk about this painting and any other ones which feel significant to you, so we can get an idea about where you see yourself now?



“Generator”

JB: It's very astute of you to recognize that I was trying to bridge those two bodies of work with that piece! This is something that has come up occasionally when I find myself working across multiple bodies of work and trying to decipher where the points of connection are. You could say it's a way of trying to map my own consciousness. I mean, I know the different technical and conceptual sources that gave rise to the Veils and the Lattices: both come from meditation practice but they're shaped by two different formal, technical approaches: the Lattices are more line-based or drawing-based (and I think that's where you and I share an affinity in our approaches) so they involve using painting tools in a particular, almost non-painterly way to produce a kind of diagrammatic or map-like image. The other work, the Veil work, is about using specific tools and physical gestures in a way that's more painterly and improvisational. Actually, both series are simultaneously improvisational and directed—really, delimited—but in different ways, by different rules and circumstances.

So with *Generator*, I wanted to see what it would look like to put those two approaches together on the same plane, to see if they would work together, or how they might work together. I worked on the right side of the panel for a very long time, and sanded it down and repainted it several times. The form on the left side is quiet and subtle, but it does suggest motion—it's a formal translation of the kind of radiating energy that comes out of meditation practice. I had painted several versions of veils on the narrow right panel, using varied colors and thick/thin, transparent/opaque, wavering or vibrating lines. But I thought that visual solution unbalanced the composition—I'm always looking for ways to make the most economic gestures—in terms of color and mark or layers—elicit the most effect. So I repainted it with a quieter, more reductive version of what the veils are, and brought it closer to the 'line-drawing' approach on the left side. I think the strength of the solution on the right side is that the subtle variations in thickness and thinness of the hand-painted vertical lines, and the concentration and patience they required, also creates a kind of thrum or vibration. In my mind, you could read the 'floral/chakra' shape on the left as a kind of transformer, generating the band or field of energy on the right.

The other thing about *Generator* is that I painted it on a long rectangle instead of a square, the format I've been using for a very long time. A square seems like a perfectly balanced, neutral format while rectangles can evoke landscape or the human body, depending on their orientation. Maybe a square is more like a window into an abstract or conceptual/constructed reality? But I'm getting more interested in this idea of dividing the picture plane into abutting zones characterized by different material applications or processes, or by similar processes in different palettes or differing scales. This was something I was doing in the pattern-based work I made in the 1990's, which was partly informed by real, physical buildings and structures like the temples, churches and ruins I saw when I got to travel.

There are a lot of examples of ornamental tiers or divisions on simple vertical walls in those structures, so I've used that trope compositionally before. I've been thinking a lot about the space in open fields of color, fields united by a single gesture or mark, versus painting surfaces that are divided into asymmetrical sectors—how to do that so that the picture plane remains cohesive? There are formal painters whose work I admire who have accomplished both approaches so beautifully—different phases of Brice Marden's work, Ricardo Mazal's Kailash series, Robert Kelly's work. My partner Walter, who's also an artist, and whose opinion I trust, suggested that I try working on a golden rectangle because of the inherently perfect proportions. So I've had some much larger panels fabricated, and some of them are longer, narrow rectangles than I would have chosen instinctively for myself—but I like the idea of trying to break my own rules, or habits, because change is always a great way to make yourself pay attention...

The other painting in the show that I think represents some kind of threshold is *Lux Aureum*, the horizontally banded, golden, Veil piece that has a lot of transparent color variation and layering. A fair amount of my work really starts formally with seeing something in the real world and using it as point of departure. Paying attention to the details of the real physical world is a great tool for being conscious in the present—and it makes the world animate and alive. I used to drive across the old Bay Bridge returning from my studio in Oakland, and every day I saw a sign about halfway across the second span, made of two painted yellow squares—different yellows, one cold and lemony, the other more school bus yellow-orange. I spent so much time looking at, thinking about, even anticipating the sight of those squares, that I decided I had to use them as the basis for a painting. It's

great to find something out in the world, almost like a gift from the universe, that you can use this way! So the two 48 inch veils in the show that are hung together started there. The orange vertical one, Flicker, gradually became more orange than the initial underpainting. I'm happy with the quiet movement in that piece but I also felt as though I used a formal resolution that I already understood. Lux Aureum was different—it involved more risk, more improvisation, more experimentation. I opened up the palette, putting down layers of a complementary blue over the cold lemony base color. I usually stay in a tight palette range so that was different. I feel as if, as a result, that piece has great spatial depth and color complexity, working at a level I haven't reached before. It was a real challenge to integrate that color range, but the piece has a kind of enveloping quality, the sense of seeing a segment of a continuum, that I was very happy with. I wonder if that sounds nerdy, or inexplicable to someone who's more invested in representational imagery or narrative? But when you work to evoke a state or sensation with an economy of means, everything—the format, the proportions, the degree of contrast, the palette shifts, the character of the mark—takes on new resonance. I'm really clear that this is the place I want to occupy and investigate, using my work to create a place where people can step into the transcendent space that I get to enter every day, as part of my practice.



"Lux Aureum"

About the Author danilarum

I exhibit my work at IMA Gallery in Seattle and SFMOMA Gallery in San Francisco. Online, I show with UGallery, participate with BayVan artist registry and have work available on my website. I currently live in San Francisco, where I work as a full-time artist from my home studio. I feel blessed to be surrounded by such a loving and supportive family and community of artistic friends.