

19th May 2014

Jamie Brunson \ Studio Visit

Jamie Brunson's paintings are subtle but also powerful - in person I have a physical response to the work and can likely look at them for hours on end. Her work has a distinct presence, and not surprisingly, she embodies that sense of presence herself. Her beautiful words that follow are sure to inspire...



I know that your work is based on your meditation practice – how and when did you start meditating, and at what point did it drive your creative process as an artist?

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The art historian, Mark Levy, introduced me to Kundalini meditation practice in the late 1980's. I met him when I was an editor at Artweek and we were both writing art criticism. He had studied in New York with Albert Rudolph, who is also called Rudrananda, who had traveled to India in the 1960's to study with well-known Tantric masters.

We were married for 20 years, and although we're not married anymore, we're best friends—which perhaps says something about the benefits of meditation practice. Mark teaches Kundalini in a small ashram in his home in the East Bay, and still teaches at California State University East Bay. He's written several great books about the relationship between spirituality and art production—*Technicians of Ecstasy: The Modern Artist as Shaman*, and also *Void | In Art*.

In terms of studio practice, I would say that real engagement comes from experimentation coupled with attentive observation. One of the main ways meditation practice informs my studio work is that I've learned through practice to observe situations while being in them. It's a process of being present and also witnessing.

There are also some fairly distinctive physical and visual experiences associated with Kundalini because it is an open-eye, transmission/trance-induction practice. My work is fairly reductive, and I'm relying primarily on a vocabulary of subtle marks, simplified forms, and saturated color. Some of the visual elements in my work come out of what I've seen visually and internally in meditation practice—sensations and optical effects that are very vivid. But some of the imagery also comes from being attentive to details in the physical world.



Interconnectedness is such a vital concept when I think of your paintings, both in terms of the content and how it feels to see them in person. What is your own hope for someone looking at your work?

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Well, I've even written in my statement that I make my work to try to bring the experience of meditation—or more accurately, the benefits of contemplative practice—to the people who see my work. If it's effective, a painting will slow people down, engage them, envelop them in a kind of vibratory, sensate experience that will allow them to take a breath and have a moment of respite from the kind of mental and external chatter that seems to make up a large part of everyday reality.

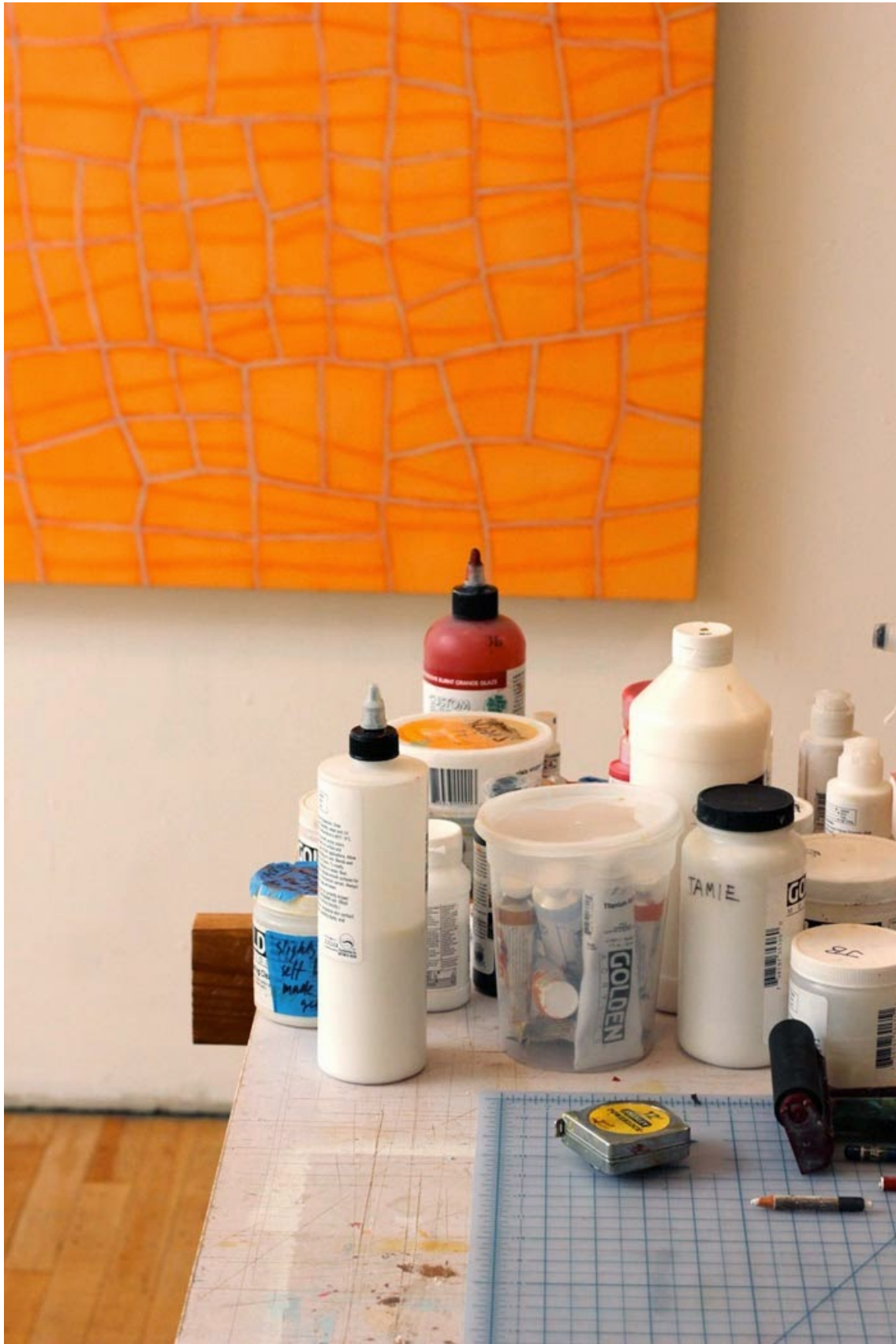
In the paintings I'm translating an experience that's visual, and also sensory and physical. But there's a cognitive component as well. It takes place in the field of the body and the field of vision, so the reductive, formal vocabulary I use is a kind of shorthand, a transcription. What formal structures imply qualities like "radiance," "expansion," "interconnectedness"? Some of the forms I use are very literal, like the simplified hand-drawn lattices as a signifier for the interdependence and interconnectedness of everything in reality. Gradual color shifts and alterations from light to dark telegraph "radiance." The body recognizes these experiences before the mind names them rationally. So it's experiential, but there's something else in there that's not simply mechanical or technical—an x-factor, like intent. I think that's the thing that animates anyone's artwork.



How do you separate yourself from the work in order to see the work as a pair of fresh eyes might?

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I mentioned earlier that meditation practice can help you to observe, or detach, while you're simultaneously participating. That kind of observation, sometimes called mindfulness, develops partly from contemplative practice and partly from an art education. The two things are mutually dependent and enable us to experience the world almost cinematically. That's really the gift of having studied art formally: the capacity to see the world as a tactile, textural, chromatic, environment. To take visual pleasure in the accidental discovery of juxtapositions and compositions as you encounter them.





Tell us more about your color choices – how do they come about?

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I think my palette is a carryover from all those years when I traveled in foreign countries, especially India. It seems to me that the Third World has a much more joyful and willing relationship to saturated color. For example, I remember visiting Kailasantha—an amazing 9th century rock-cut temple in Ellora, India, with near-life size rows of elephant caryatids carved in stone. The stone was very dark and aged, and a group of Indian women wearing vivid canary yellow, and tangerine orange and magenta pink saris were walking among the carved structures. It was like coming upon a great flock of exotic birds. I've had the same experience with roadside stands of Moroccan pottery, and embroidered and woven textiles in Oaxaca markets. That kind of optical vibration in color and pattern is part of opening up your vision, making the world seem more vivid and animate. And returning again to that idea of formal training—you start to see correspondences between color and pattern use in one culture and another, sometimes separated by great geographic and chronological distances. I always have a camera with me, something that I learned early on when I was traveling. I've photographed painted walls in the Dalai Llama's summer palace that were just like Diebenkorn's Ocean Park series! When you're trained to recognize effective composition, you start to find iterations and correspondences that affirm that idea of connection we spoke of earlier.

There really seems to be a particular range of colors that I return to again and again— I can't explain those choices rationally. I use a few opaque mineral-based colors and many more organic semi-transparent colors. I tend to apply many thin layers of color, starting with a slightly darker and more opaque base and then building up gradually lighter and more translucent, slightly waxy glazes, so there's a sense of space and of a kind of expansion or breath in the surfaces of my work. That sense of expansion and space comes directly out of meditation process.



We talked about endurance in the art world, and what that means in terms of creating work that we need to make, and following the ever-inefficient evolution of ideas. I would love to hear more!

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Well, my personal observation is that you need to give yourself a lot of time and space to experiment and play in the studio. I always tell my students, you teach yourself how to paint by painting...it goes back to that idea I mentioned about being in the process and observing the process at the same time. The “veil” series that I’ve been working on concurrently with the “lattices” are based on a process that yields a certain kind of phenomena. Beyond setting up the structure for the process, there isn’t a lot of control in the outcome. I can control format, dimension, scale, surface preparation, medium, pressure, tool, and color—after that, it depends on the paint. There’s a degree of participation and surrender in a process like that. So the most important point in this idea of learning by doing is that you pay attention. That’s where knowledge and some degree of mastery occur. But I’m never happier in the studio than when I’m right on the edge of losing something because I’m pushing it to see where it can go.

I think endurance is about doing work that matters to you, that’s meaningful—we all know that things go in and out of style in a consumer-based material culture, so I think the best idea is to like what you’re doing and to continue doing it for your own satisfaction and curiosity.



You have taught and coached artists in professional development. What would be your best one sentence advice for artists?

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Oh, boy, could I really reduce it to one sentence? Something like: make a lot of work, make the best work you can, make friends with everyone you can, and keep putting your work out there. Seriously, don't see "no" as a defeat, see it as one less obstacle you've gotten past on your way to "yes."

