

Sarah Boyts Yoder

with Kim Rae Taylor

Something that attracts me to your work is the unique dynamic you achieve through mark making and forms, conveying a sense of loose, playful spontaneity that's simultaneously assertive and elegant. Because of this I'm really curious to know more about your process. How do you get started and how does the work develop into finished pieces?

It's about improvisation within structure. That's the foundation of my practice. Structure for me comes from the repetition of the same select forms I've been developing over the last several years. My hand is so used to the shapes by now, it knows them so well, that I don't have to think about making them anymore. I can play with them, improvise—they're what jokes are for a stand-up comedian or notes and riffs for a jazz musician. And they've become more plastic and flexible and changing over time.

Giving in to the urge to repeat something I'd already done was the key to finding a confidence in my mark making. I believe it's more difficult to find a new thing in something so familiar than it is to come up with a totally different idea every time. I heard a basketball coach say on tv: "We don't practice 'til we get it right, we practice 'til we *can't get it wrong*."

Pieces start with drawing a few of these familiar forms, layered and interacting, using a drawing utensil or a small paintbrush. These forms become a literal structure, hinges and scaffolding for the looser, more intuitive elements. I find compartments between each intersection with paint and color, creating layers, playing with ground. Gradually a space emerges, develops, and usually one or two of the initial forms jump out to create a narrative in my mind, even if it's just a few words. I've been thinking of inevitability a lot. And unknowability. A piece is finished when you can strike a balance between the two; they're inseparable partners.

Your website includes an assortment of studio shots and I notice you use a wide variety of media, including house paint. Can you describe how these paints influence the way you work? How does it impact your palette and use of texture?

I'm usually picking out or searching for stuff solely based on the color within the tube, can or bottle. I end up with house paint, fabric dye, drafting ink, spray paint. I think another important concept for me is this finding, making sure there is always something to react to or against because these materials add unknown and unpredictable

elements. I'm not always sure how they will interact with one another or how they will dry exactly. They keep all this structure I've set up for myself from being too static. It also creates 'limited time only' palettes, which can be interesting if you really love a certain color and can't get it again. It also sets certain bodies of work down in a distinct place and time.

As an artist who enjoys playing with text, I'm really drawn to your use of letters and words. Can you speak to the role textual elements play within your imagery?

Letters and words are another set of extremely familiar forms— they include and invite everyone, not just me. Yet they can hold a uniqueness in their shape according to my hand. I like not finishing words, letting them trail off the side or bottom of the painting. They subvert knowing or reading but your brain unconsciously tries to sort them out, to finish the word, to try multiple endings, which opens you up to trying to do all those things to the painting itself.

You touch on the idea of narrative in your work and how the forms can reach a point to create that narrative by conjuring up words. Are these words the text that appears in your imagery?

They are. And they are almost always verbs, action words. Because the forms get repeated so much I start to see them in motion...slight shifts, nods and bends. I tend to give them toy-like or often human characteristics. This head is bowed, that knee bent at an angle, a kicking foot. I like the action words because they offer an idea for how to manipulate that shape in one's mind. It's an invitation to set a story in motion; it starts the narrative. In a way it's quite literally about *reading* a painting. You get an invitation or clue, with a clear but ambiguous word, about how to start. Then hopefully you look at the next passage within the painting the same way. What's that form doing? How do they all interact? Then apply this all to the individual pieces themselves. How does one painting interact with the piece next to it? What insights do they have to give about each other? Of course the goal is to create individual works that can stand alone, but they also need to strengthen or, conversely, complicate one another if viewed together. For my work as a whole, that interaction and connective exchange is important to me.

Your works on canvas seem to stay contained within the boundaries of the surface but I notice that often your works on paper are freeform, with shapes asserting themselves

on their own. Is this a result of what you describe as the forms becoming a “literal structure”? And do you approach the forms differently when they’re contained within the canvas as opposed to paper?

In larger paintings on canvas I think more about dimensional space. Creating a room for the forms themselves to become suspended, to confront one another, to float and hide, to be veiled. That space to me is different from the forms themselves. At some point I thought that the forms were *doing* all these things but contained in the painting. Why can’t they *be* the painting? And hold within them all the aspects and richness of surface that the canvas has? If you could pluck one out of the square and magnify and define it what would it *really* look like up close? The last line from *The Little Island* by Margaret Wise Brown came to my mind just now: “A part of the world and a world of its own.”

As you continue working with repetition to develop forms, do you ever envision particular shapes becoming three-dimensional objects?

Yes. I really admire artists like Leif Low Beer and Marie Engelsvold who are fantastic painters and drawers, but also manage to translate their works into three dimensions perfectly. Nothing is lost in the translation. The sculptures *look* like the paintings, but the essence of the work is there too. I’m not a good fabricator, though it’s something I want to explore, but I’m afraid of it looking hokey. It’s a confidence issue. But maybe I’ll get there someday *because* I’m not a builder. I don’t know. I think there’s an element of jerry-rigging that goes on, at least I would want there to be if and when I try to make three-dimensional objects. I really love flatness but I do feel drawn to that idea. It’s funny how releasing a piece from a simple rectangle or square, and even just rounding off the corners, denies it from just being a surface and gives it a ‘thing-ness’. And then I want to cradle or play with it.

You’re clearly very comfortable with both abstraction and representational elements. Can you speak to this interplay of approaches? Is this part of the balance you describe between the inevitable and unknowable?

Yes, totally! But in my mind I think the two are flip-flopped or reversed. The abstraction feels inevitable and the recognizable elements are unknowable. The abstracted passages I recognize as Self, the representational elements come from outside. That representation, it’s like a bridge between the world and me. And I can push them just to the edge of recognition. There’s an awkwardness and strangeness to them I can force,

in contrast to the other, more graceful aspects I can't control at all, those painterly, abstracted surfaces and passages. It's how I feel about the difference between painting and drawing, basically. Drawing seeks to grasp, explain, and define. Painting undoes all that. I want both. Can meaning be defined and confounded at the same time? Instead of frustration, is it freedom?

In the piece *The Search for Meaning: Verbs Only OR Progression of a Painting in Flat Comic Format*, your use of verbs is very much apparent. Did you place each piece in chronological order? I also see how the repetition identifies what you describe as seeing them in motion, which prompts me to ask if you've ever experimented with animation?

At the beginning I started working on one huge sheet of paper and had chosen 20 'S' action words. I had the concept in mind that there would be 20 small works, each with a word attached. I painted the black forms all at once, without words, together on one large sheet, then cut them up. After that I assigned the words according to which verb most closely seemed to describe what each shape was doing. At the end, I arranged them in chronological order, like a comic book might be—a big story. It goes from 'Scope' to 'Swear', describing how I feel a painting progresses. You search around for a while, then come to something you can swear by, but only after lots and lots of tries, changes, iterations, switches.

After I finished, I took the whole thing apart and I found myself playing around with making little stories. I was fascinated with arranging little groups of them in a certain order to form small narratives or tiny poems that, to me, were really rich. Because I'm so familiar with the shapes, it's like being in an intimate relationship when things are unspoken, but known. Sometimes I'm very moved. For example, 'Scope, Set, Shift, Swing': a valiant attempt. 'Slip, Seize, Save, Swear': a transgression, then healing.

The closest I've gotten to animation is sometimes making Flipagrams of the progression of a painting, or playing around with scraps in varying positions. It's not sophisticated at all, but it adds another layer of playfulness that I love! It's something on my mind to explore and seems a natural step. I really love what Amy Sillman does with her work and animation.

The way you describe engaging words and imagery really underscores the significance of both text and process within your work. It also brings to mind the cutup technique employed in Dada poetry. It seems as though in constructing an image, you're indirectly composing a poem. Is this a deliberate point of reference and do you write poetry? Or do you write in a context that's completely separate from your visual art?

Any writing I do is about my work, in the form of artist statements or conversations like this one. I don't write poetry but I love words and language. The title of a piece is so important – it's what makes the work an entire package. And for me, it's often a way to inject humor. Sometimes I do think of the titles as one-word poems. Or a story told in just three words. Of course, the words need the image to give them weight and vice versa.

I see the text and images as inseparable. But the words I use are not drawn at random, like a Dada poem would be, I always wait for the image to suggest the word. Or if a word strikes me I'll tuck it away until the right form appears. I never start a painting with words in mind that I intend to use. But always, and this is when I know I'm on the right track, words come into my mind (they float up to the surface and bob around) according to what is being developed, what I can eventually sense the forms are *doing*. That is what ends up being the title. And it gives the painting direction too.

Since you quoted a line from Margaret Wise Brown's *The Little Island*, does this mean children's books and / or children's art provide a source of inspiration?

Yes definitely. During the time when my children were small, the art in kids' books was all the art I was seeing, and it was / is very, very good. Marc Boutavant, Dahlov Ipcar, Oliver Jeffers and Francoise Seignobosc come to mind. Visually simple, colorful, full of joy, well balanced and composed, but playful and mischievous, and open in a slightly "off" way; all the things I feel make up great abstract paintings. Two of my favorite forms came directly from pages in children's books. They struck me immediately with their strength, but also how malleable I knew they could be for my work. I suppose it was the first time I really got it that innocence and purity weren't in opposition to sophistication and a little darkness. The simple things aren't all that simple under the surface. Nothing is black and white.

What role did art play in your childhood? At what age did you realize you wanted to be an artist?

I drew a lot as a kid and my sister and I would play 'Painting Show' like Bob Ross. I grew up in a city (Fort Worth, TX) that fortunately had stellar museums. The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth has an amazing permanent collection and also hosts major exhibits. I remember seeing a Joan Mitchell retrospective when I was in high school and

a Chris Ofili show. They have several great Richard Diebenkorns, too. My first experiences with being really touched by a piece of art, specifically painting, happened then, at a formative time.

I had a wonderful art teacher in middle school named John Conard. We did interesting projects and he really encouraged me. When I got to college I said I wanted to major in art, and eventually, thank goodness, another teacher (Lisa Weiss) said 'Go to grad school.' Because I'd had good teachers I felt it was the thing I was good at. I didn't know what I'd make of it but it was *my* thing.

Your statement about unknowability and joy resonated with me for different reasons: "What if the defining quality of a thing is that it can't be known? It can't be uncoded or deciphered or understood. And instead of a frustration—it is a joy?" It also relates to how you explain the appeal of children's books in that, "The simple things aren't all that simple under the surface. Nothing is black and white." It seems this push and pull of what's known and what's not, fuels your curiosity while propelling the direction of your work, especially when considering the use of improvisation you mentioned earlier. By acknowledging this duality, does it allow you to improvise more freely? Can you also elaborate on what you mean by the sense of joy in what can't be known?

The duality I feel and acknowledge *definitely* allows me to improvise more freely. If you believe that not being sure but trusting anyway is just fine, you'll take bigger risks as you work. Or at least you'll hold whatever you're doing at that moment as the most *and* least important thing at once. If I'm tuned in to that I can make big decisions faster – letting go of stuff I like, doing something kind of ugly, knowing it will all come back around. What I just described is the connection to having joy instead of frustration with unknowability, which I suppose is about trust. I feel joy is a deeper form of happiness, it contains more than lightness. In a way, it exists and is known *because of* its 'opposites' like grief, sadness or most importantly, turmoil. As an emotion, it's a lot more complex and encompassing.

I'm reading Anne Truitt's journal *Daybook*, and there is a passage where she describes this idea so well, her process is the vehicle she uses to illustrate the point.

'...the forces of instinct and the forces of intuition fought for control of my work. Yesterday intuition fell back briefly before instinct. My hand wanted to draw, to run free. Colors overran, lines tilted, and with the same degree of effectiveness as Son Quixote going at the windmills. For one whole day I entertained the notion, which had been creeping upon me, of turning my back on the live nerve of myself and having fun. This morning I am sober. I would be a fool to sacrifice joy to fun.'

The joy an artist experiences when a work is finished isn't just about happiness or relief. Anyone will tell you how fraught the painting process is. Rapidly cycling between dejection, frustration, despair, elation, despair again. It's a roller coaster and it's really hard. But through the work you attempt to find an internal compass or center and then trust it during the process.

Another advantage to unknowability is that we're all off the hook. The pressure to define, decode, deconstruct something in order to understand it is gone. What a relief, to look at something without this expectation. The experience has room to get bigger, to expand, and to include more ideas. It fosters imagination too, which is a uniquely human capability.

You've mentioned a number of different artists as having an influence on your work, including the impact of forms found in children's books, but are there other artists that continue to inspire you?

I'm so inspired by and so admire Amy Sillman. I'm really drawn to her paintings, but she also seamlessly does lots of drawing, animation, installations. She speaks and writes so well about her work. I mentioned I've been reading Anne Truitt's books lately. I love her sculptures but she writes about her life as an artist and a mother and a woman really matter-of-factly and concisely, yet beautifully. I'm marking practically every page.

I am inspired by painters Ky Anderson, Elizabeth Murray, Rose Wylie, Arturo Herrera. And artists like Polly Shindler and David Shrigley for their hilarious and dark sense of humor and use of text. Another artist painter I really look up to is John Yoyogi Fortes, he's out of Sacramento. I came to know his work through social media and it holds for me everything painting should be, but he also works a lot on paper, found paper, and even sheetrock. As a person too, I admire him.

You recently returned from travel in Australia and I'm curious to know how this impacted you as an artist? Is there something from this experience that you expect to see cropping up in your work?

To be honest, I'm not sure. I didn't get to see a lot of contemporary stuff on this trip. But I love the Australian artist Fred Fowler's paintings so much and then I found out he did a delightful collaboration with Gorman, a clothing company in Melbourne. The designers nailed it with translating his work to textiles and then objects/garments. Whenever we

travel, I always pay close attention to the graffiti in the place, and usually I can pick out the same tag a few times. (I'm obsessed with train tagging here in the US -- it's not graffiti exactly, but monikers. There are some folks who have been drawing on freight cars since the seventies with the same image and words. If you stood and watched a train go by, if it was slow enough that you could really look, you'd see them.) Of course the natural landscape in Australia is just beyond comprehension—my eyes saw so many beautiful sights. It has to come out somehow, right? I'll keep you posted...

Do you have upcoming projects or shows you'd like to mention?

I have a group exhibition entitled *Adherence* opening in Charlottesville on June 3rd with two other talented painters, Cate West Zahl and Isabelle Abbot. It will be a pretty pared down and sparse show of large paintings on paper and canvas.

In another vein, I've also been working with two other great artists, Ryan Trott and Ken Horne, on a book / zine project (and eventually an exhibition). We started out with a set number of pieces each and then have been trading and working on top of -- in collaboration with each other for a few months. Seeing another's work so close hand and trying to add to the conversation has been a little intimidating and challenging but mostly awesome.

I'm fortunate enough to live in a city where, although small in size, there are a lot of talented people working in lots of different mediums, and who collaborate often. There are arts organizations that support the artists living and working here and also bring in high caliber contemporary shows. I'm really happy to be a part of this community.