

Ask the Expert...Maggie Siner

ON MARCH 9, 2016

BY KELLEY SANFORD IN ASK THE EXPERT



<http://intheartiststudio.com/2016/03/09/ask-the-expert-maggie-siner-2/>

What does “seeing” like an artist really mean?

To me, the word ‘artist’ only applies to a few people who’ve reached the highest degree of mastery, so it’s not a word I use very often. But when it comes to painting, I think the most important thing is learning to see shapes instead of objects. Maurice Denis said it beautifully in 1890: *“Remember that a picture - before being a war-horse, a nude, or some other subject, is essentially a flat surface covered with colors arranged in a particular order.”*

This means objects and scenes must be broken down to their constituent color planes, one color next to another, in order to create the illusion of three dimensional objects and space. Shapes of color are the only tool we have.

With such limited means, how are we to make air, space, three dimensional forms, light, movement, weight, temperature, surfaces and all the qualities of our real experience? The

way is to use those flat colored shapes in the same way our brains take the colored shapes



of real light stimulating our eyes to create a picture of the real world outside our bodies.

Pont Julian, 2015, 11x13ins oil on linen
WW 692 Hand on Neck, 2015, 13x20, oil on paper
Deck Chairs, 2013, 10x15, oil on linen
San Marco Sun, 2015, 8x9ins, oil on linen

Study visual perception. Take our clues from how we actually see and become an exceptionally sensitive seer.



Green Blanket, 24×30, oil, ©2016Maggie Siner

Just as a musician has to become an extremely sensitive hearing creature, with ears attuned to the finest shades in order to communicate auditory experience, so the painter develops his or her sense of vision to a very nuanced degree. That doesn't mean having good eyesight, but it does mean knowing how we actually see, how we respond to color and shape in a physical and emotional way, how our eyes move and travel, stop on an edge or leap to a point of contrast, how we react to verticals and diagonals, how one color alters another color, and how shapes create weight, movement and lead our eyes along a path. This is the visual language. If we see it, we can translate it into paint.

In ordinary life our brains mostly bypass the mechanism of 'seeing' and take us directly to the conclusion. That means we think we see objects, nameable things and events; here is a sunset, a dinner plate, my husband Harry, but in fact, we only see colors and shapes. It is our brains busily putting these bits of light together that make the world comprehensible and alive. Basically, a painter must learn to see the world before naming; to see the abstract world of color and shape.



Laundry, 11x15, oil, ©2016 Maggie Siner

For example, we have a basic instinct to put a line around an object, to identify and separate it from its surroundings, but it only takes a little visual education to see that there are no lines around objects. A line is simply the meeting of two different areas of color. Earth meets sky and we see a line. The line around an object is a conceptual event, not a visual event (unless the object is silhouetted against a starkly different background). Three dimensional objects are made of several shapes depending on the change of surface direction, toward or away from the light. These are planes. We learn to see how each plane changes direction and color, and where these planes join or separate from their surroundings, in order to understand our perception of three dimensionality. Learning to see patterns of light and dark, value, color and position, the painter quickly discovers that all these visual events are related and relative. The visual system depends on the brain constantly comparing one thing to another: This thing is light because it is near a dark, this is small because something else is big, this is red because it is redder than its surroundings. The entire visual field is interconnected and interdependent.



Lido Bathers, 10×15, oil, ©2016 Maggie Siner

In seeing, our brains are busy eliminating most of the information we receive, because it is habitual or it is not important at that moment. In painting, we have to learn to do something similar, to focus on the important bits of information and eliminate the rest. Otherwise all is confusion and clutter. Inevitably, the most important bits of information are not what we expect. Rather, they concern what is absent from painting, namely, three dimensionality, space and movement.

Our eyes are constantly in motion, comparing and selecting. We see very quickly, and we paint very slowly! While painting we gather a vast amount of visual detail, most of which just confuses the original impact of the thing we saw.

Seeing like a painter also means knowing one's way around the rectangle. Boundaries have a critical effect on what happens inside the painting. It is the same for any designer (stage, interior, architect): What can be done in this space? The boundary of the rectangle creates four walls against which everything in the painting moves. Different places inside the rectangle have different weight and meaning. (For example, shapes at the bottom seem heavy. Shapes meeting the edge imply continuation of space outside the rectangle.) Each mark and each direction set up movements that affect everything else in the painting.



Deserted Island, 6×16, oil, ©2016 Maggie Siner

As an aside, many people use photographs as a shortcut for seeing. Although photos can be useful visual reminders, they pretty much prevent any kind of real understanding of vision or three-dimensionality, since a camera doesn't 'see' the way humans do. Painting from photos is the best way to retard your ability to see. I could go on about this at great length.

Ways to push beyond technique to create engaging and powerful paintings?

Perhaps it's a mistake to focus on 'technique' by itself.

If there is technique without honest emotion, then it is not good technique. Even the simplest line drawing should come from a direct sincere physical source. In other words, technique shouldn't be separate from intent. Of course a painter wants to develop skills, and this takes many years, but skills should always be at the service of the painting's expressive meaning. To put it in another way, technique should reflect your passion. If you love the human form, you will want to develop your understanding of anatomy, and if you love color, you will want to learn about color relationships. Technique is at the service of larger goals. Painting is a continual process of development, not a series of techniques learned and then applied. My training (at Boston University) was seriously technique-based, so I don't mean to downplay having good foundational skills. They are essential. But I think they should always be connected to the source, and that way you will never have to "push beyond technique" for powerful paintings.



Maximillian, 19x23, oil, ©2016 Maggie Siner

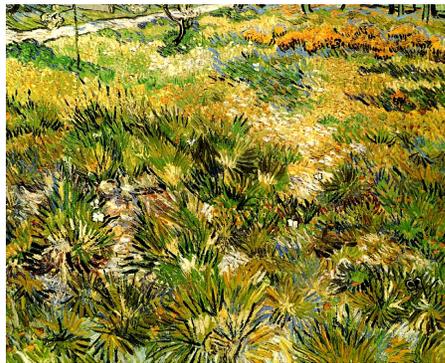
How to find beauty in unexpected places?

That is easy! Just look at the world in terms of colors and shapes. Stop looking at objects. Look at the patterns made by shapes of light and dark, see how beautiful they are and what they say. Look at textures. Look at the interactions of forms. Look at the spaces between objects (the negative shapes). Look at the drama among shapes. Change your scale. I think the easiest way to find something beautiful is to put a rectangle around it. Hold up your viewfinder to just about anything and it will suddenly become interesting, rich with pattern and meaning, because the addition of boundaries brings shapes more clearly into view, and emphasizes their gesture and energy and creates a structure. Limits are the source of invention.

How to build or develop your own visual language or style?

Style, in a way, is like handwriting. It comes naturally from one's own body and hand; an expression of one's interaction with the visual world and the materials used. It's not something applied from the outside, but something that comes from within.

At first one learns from a wide range of approaches, but eventually one's interests will focus and guide stylistic choices. Sometimes painting requires the invention of new styles. When Van Gogh put down his brushes and squeezed paint directly out of the tube onto the canvas, it was out of necessity. There was no other way to get the saturation of color and movement of paint that he needed. (Unfortunately many of those pigments were fugitive and so what we now see are not likely the colors he intended.)



Van Gogh, *Cypresses*, 1890, 37x29ins, oil on canvas, Rogers Fund 1949

Van Gogh, *Meadow in the Garden St-Paul Hospital*, 1890, 64.5x81cm, oil on canvas, Nat Gal London

There are many aspects to the visual world, many ways to see, and many materials to use. All of these take the artist in a different stylistic direction.

The best way to find your own voice is not to look at what people around you are doing, and to be honest in your own responses. Degas put it very well: *“It seems to me that today, if the artist wishes to be serious - to cut out a little original niche for himself, or at least preserve his own innocence of personality - he must sink himself in solitude.”*

We are all unique individuals with different life experiences. This is one of the amazing things about painting and why it continues to be a vital means of expression in spite of contemporary views telling us painting is old hat. If you were interested in atmosphere and the substance of air and light in the moment it filters through the space between eye and distant objects, then you might develop a style of broken brushwork and eroded fuzzy edges, like some Impressionist painters. If you were passionate about tactile physicality of forms as they come into being when struck by light, then you may end up painting like Rembrandt (we should be so lucky!) If you felt the clarity of timeless silent moments, you might end up with smooth surfaces of verticals and horizontals, painting like Vermeer. If you were urgently trying to measure the distances between and around objects in space, you might paint like Giacometti, and so on. Style is your response to the world.



Monet, *Rue Montorgueil Paris*, 1878, 81x50cm, oil on canvas, Musee d'Orsay
Rembrandt, *Woman Bathing in a Stream*, 1654, 62x47 cm, oil on oak, Nat Gal London
Vermeer, *Woman Holding a Balance*, c.1664, 39.7 x 35.5 cm, oil on canvas, Nat Gal DC
Giacometti, *Annette*, 1951, Leopold Museum

It comes directly out of paint handling; it's not really about subject matter. Paint handling means developing a physical relationship with the material of paint so that it is responsive to your every breath - to use it generously, respectfully, honestly, and to let it have its own way. Too much control of the paint itself makes a surface that is stultified or facile. It takes a long time to develop that kind of relationship, but that is where the individual voice sings.

Years ago when I was teaching painting at a Chinese university, the students, in their final year of painting, all had exceptionally perfect technique in the classic sense of drawing and rendering form. They also all painted exactly alike - in the style of 19th century Salon Academies applied to social realism subjects. That is how they were taught. No one had ever suggested that they develop individual handwriting or personal style and yet that is what they all wanted to accomplish. I set them out on a series of painting exercises, each one focusing a different aspect of painting. Each approach greatly simplified the available visual information and the painting elements used. One painting used only flat shapes, another only broken brushstrokes. One painting using patterns of light and dark, another painting used straight lines and parallel angles, and so on. Each of these emphasized a particular way of seeing. By the end of a few weeks, each painter had very acutely discovered which aspects of perception and the visual world were most moving to them. Out of this they pursued and developed their own styles.

Copying and studying the Masters is a great way to experience different world views and ways of painting. It's not that one is trying to paint 'like Rembrandt', or 'like Cezanne'. That would be impossible and anachronistic and not honest to oneself. It's more that one learns how different perceptual minds work by re-living the visual experience and world of the painter. Through this one discovers what parts of reality and painting truly resonate with oneself and what one is trying to communicate. The more painters you copy, the better, but only copy the really good ones!

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