



## Time and Place: An Interview with Kathryn Lynch

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Over her more than 25 years painting and exhibiting her work in New York and elsewhere, Kathryn Lynch has established herself as a painter whose works harness the lush materiality of paint to gesture towards subjects seemingly beyond the frame—relationships, change, the passing of time. On the occasion of Kathryn Lynch's two-part exhibition, *A View of One's Own* at Sears-Peyton Gallery, I sat down with the painter to talk about her life, paintings, and the curiously dictatorial tendencies of her shapes.

Amy Rahn: How would you characterize your trajectory as a painter?

Kathryn Lynch: The easy thing about being a painter or a writer is you have the ability to do it because it doesn't rely on anybody else. It's you and that art form. So, by just showing up every day to do it you make a pathway...you're not in complete control but it's your process, and it ultimately grows in its own way.

AR: Is there anything about that growth that has surprised you?

KL: I'm always surprised by what my paintings look like. I think when I first knew I was a painter I thought my paintings would be much more severe looking and dark, and when they're pretty I think "who did that?" <laughs>

AR: It's funny you say that because you said somewhere "I paint because we die," that there's an underlying knowledge of mortality in the whole practice of painting. So when you say they come out pretty you're like "wait what?"...

KL: I think my paintings are pretty with an undertone to them. There's a mood that allows them to be pretty because pretty paintings can be revolting.

AR: Do you feel that place influences your work? What role does place play?

KL: It plays an extreme role. Going back to the same place—leaving and coming back—is a really strong jumping-off point for making art. I walked from where I used to live to here this morning, and my memories flew back to other times. Yesterday was tangled in today. I was walking around

with my own history that affects how I see and what I think about. It's the routine of going back to a place that lets you see it clearly. So in order to see it I think you have to leave. When you're in a place you never really know too much about it until later. I think that's true with everything. You don't even know you're happy until later! You know if you're miserable. <laughs> But you don't really know that much until later. Perhaps it isn't what we see but how we feel about what we see—how we internalize experiences.

AR: It's interesting you say we don't know *how* we're seeing, that your own perspective is hidden from you.

KL: I guess that's why there's so much psychology, people are mysteries to themselves and to each other. There is a painting by Edvard Munch called "Two Humans, Two Lonely People" it is in an exhibition at the Neue Galerie now and it has a man and woman standing side by side looking out into the sea.

AR: There are a couple of places where you mention painters that influence you, but what you say about seeing differently makes me think of how the same painter could influence five people but they would all take something different from the same artist.

KL: Oh absolutely. Same thing with reading a book. If you go to a book club, it's very interesting what people pick up in a book that other people miss. The space between people is beautiful and mysterious.

AR: So, I wanted to ask you about influences, but maybe it's more interesting to ask you what *about* your influences has affected you most?

KL: I look at paintings to find kindred spirits the way one goes about finding friends. As a painter I am always looking to learn more. I bet everyone has their 10 favorite books. I have books that I really want to see on my bookshelf because they really meant something. They feel like family. [Editor's note: See Lynch's book suggestions following the interview.] A friend of mine said "Oh, it's called your head on a shelf."

AR: Books that you've loved do seem like friends.

KL: Yes! And you can open them up and there will be something still that you connect with twenty years later in a very relevant way, even though twenty years before it wasn't what you connected to. But they're still your writer. They're still your book. They're a loyal bunch of words you can return to again and again. A great painting does the same thing, it just feeds you more and more knowledge and brings you closer to feeling connected and alive.

AR: Speaking of books and painters, is that part of your process as a painter? What do you keep around you when you paint?

KL: I just keep paints. <laughs> Paints and canvas. I don't need anything around me at all other than paint and canvas and some space. And music, I paint with music.

AR: What kind of music?

KL: Oh, it doesn't matter. I actually play my son's playlist because it's just to get you so you're not thinking word-thoughts. Painting is a zone where words don't affect you. So the music doesn't really matter, but Pop is probably best because it's so easy to not pay attention to. My studio is always a little bit cold too so it's good so I prefer music you can dance to.

AR: I was interested in what you've said about "your shapes." Yesterday I saw an image of Philip Guston's *Painter's Shapes* from 1972. I love the idea that he laid his shapes out like a still life—a psychological still life of his own painter's vocabulary of shapes. You talk about finding your shapes in nature...

KL: Well, the shapes become almost symbols. Shape is symbol. And then once again the symbols of those shapes come directly from the world, but, for example, I think a shoe looks more like a shoe in Guston's painting than it does in real life. At least, it's the shoe I want to look at, and that shoe isn't a shoe, but it's about all kinds of things. It's more a shape becomes symbol which becomes metaphor for a lot of things. To make a simple shape—no one realizes how hard that is. For it to be more than simple, it's the equivalent of someone being a good writer. Anyone can write a sentence, or a story about an apple, but it takes a writer to make a story about an apple a worthy story. That's what art is: being able to take a shoe, and make something out of it.

AR: Are there shapes of yours that have shifted in ways that surprised you?

KL: Yes, for sure. I spent two or three years painting tugboats. I couldn't stop. Eventually I felt "Enough of tugboats!" Someone asked me, "What are you going to paint after tugboats?" and I said "I might be painting tugboats for the rest of my life." <laughs> For me, there will be a time when something grabs me, and then eventually it will let itself go, but while I'm in the grip I just have to follow it through until it goes away and another grip takes hold. Probably my tugboat series was the longest a shape stayed, and they still pop up a lot of times in my paintings.

AR: You've said that the subject is something you "hang the paint on" but that you're trying to get to something else. How does a subject present itself as something to paint?

KL: I know when I have to paint something, but I don't know how I know that.

AR: How does it feel when you know you have to paint it?

KL: A dictator! <laughs> "YOU MUST GO PAINT THAT." Very simple, very clear. There's no putting it off. And then you're in a relationship with it, and then it ends. A lot of my paintings change according to what it is that put me in that mode of "you must paint this." I don't have a formula

for how I go about a picture. It's all related to what I'm seeing at that moment. I'll start paintings very differently from each other—some are fast, some are slow. There are no rules. That's why I'm always a little bit surprised, myself. Some are super thick, some are thin. I don't follow any rules.

AR: I was just reading Siri Hustvedt's essay on Goya "There are No Rules in Painting."

KL: I love Goya. He's the master.

AR: I could tell you love Goya.

KL: There really aren't rules in painting. That's why it's so fun. That's why it's so fun to be my type of personality and have painting be what I do, because I truly cannot follow a set of directions and love working in solitude.

AR: You've talked about scale being something that changes wildly and being related to material constraints and also what you want to do, but I'm struck by this image of the dictatorial thing you have to paint...does it also dictate the scale, or do you paint on whatever surface is there?

KL: My finances dictate the scale. <laughs> I love painting large canvases then switching to small paintings. I just enjoy making marks. You get to really vary them when you change the size around.

AR: How do you vary your marks with scale?

KL: Well, you use different size brushes. Your strokes change. When I'm doing super big paintings, my strokes are wild, and my arm span is full-wing. Then when I'm working small, the marks get smaller. It's physically very different. It's the difference between doing pliés and performing a ballet. Or patch to figure skating.

AR: I've heard you talk about how early in your career you worked all these different jobs and said "If I'm going to be poor I'm going to be doing what I love." Do you think it takes courage to keep painting?

KL: No it would take courage to stop painting because what would I do then? Painting is the only thing I ever connected to and wanted to pursue. People that know me think I'm really brave, but I've always known that my conversation with my own work is more important to me than anything else. I need work for some reason. To be, I need to work. I can't work in offices. It's so easy to be a painter when you aren't cut out for anything else, because there's no struggle. There's no "What should I be doing?" You should be painting. It's very lucky to know you're doing what you're meant to be doing. I have a future in painting that I'd never have anywhere else. My talents are not being wasted somewhere else. There is never an end point in painting only new beginnings.

AR: Why specifically paint? Why not graphite or pastel?

KL: I can be delightfully messy with paints <laughs> I like chaos and disorder. I love really soft charcoal but graphite and pastels don't glide as well. Paint glides and gives you a wonderful feeling of freedom.

AR: This exhibition is two exhibitions, so technically you have them broken up by subject matter...

KL: They're broken up by place because some paintings are inspired by Shelter Island and others are inspired by Brooklyn. Most of the Shelter Island paintings were painted in Brooklyn too, because when I leave a place it's still with me—I keep painting it.

AR: That's interesting because when I see your work I see an engagement with interior and exterior.

KL: Looking out the window or through the doorway?

AR: Exactly.

KL: That's something new that happened. I moved and I had new windows. <laughs> You notice your window more when you move. You notice everything more when you move, so I was responding to new things out my window. I think also it responds to the passing of time somehow. I think all my paintings are about time passing.

AR: Can you talk more about passing time?

KL: It goes. <laughs> It goes faster and faster and faster. I think that I am painting time, painting moments in time so I can preserve them and keep them alive.

AR: You've said previously that you know exactly when and where each of your paintings was painted.

KL: Always. I know exactly everything that I ever even thought about when I look at a painting. The same thing happens when you go back to old photographs, but for some reason it's more real to me when I go back and look at paintings.

AR: When you see a painting, what can you remember?

KL: Where I lived, the age of my children... they're snapshots. It's a recording of time, proof that a certain moment existed.

AR: But it's a very personal, interior snapshot, unlike a photograph. No one else can see what you see in the paintings.

KL: Right, but that's why I know so much about that time. If all the paintings were disorganized I would know exactly the order I painted them in.

AR: When they're arranged into exhibitions like this one that are organized around place, your paintings could appear to be clear in a way that, the more you look at them, they seem less and less clear. They have so many layers of reference and non-reference.

KL: I'm glad they do that because I'm not painting what I'm painting. I'm not interested in recording my view out the doorway with accuracy. I'm recording something, but it's the process of looking out, not the view.

AR: As you're painting the Shelter Island Paintings versus the Red Hook paintings, do they develop differently? Is there a different process for paintings that come from different places?

KL: My inspirations come differently, but I'm not sure how. I'm not in complete control of the process. I don't have a method.

AR: What is it like for you when the paintings leave the studio?

KL: More room to paint!

AR: What if you see a painting in someone's home?

KL: I get so excited it's not in a painting rack. It gets to have a life. I mean, you really want your paintings out. You really want to exhibit them. Any artist or writer has a voice, and for some reason you need that voice heard. I'm not sure why that's the way it has to be, but I want my paintings seen as much as they possibly can be seen.

AR: You were saying the paintings always surprise you—that the process always surprises you. Have you ever been surprised seeing your paintings out in the world, outside the studio in an exhibition or collection?

KL: A lot of times they're better lit. <laughs> When they're put in new places you see things that you didn't see when they were in your studio. Again, you've got to let things go to know what they were—or are. No one can tell you what that is, because that's why we have painting.

Kathryn Lynch's book recommendations:

*Interviews with Francis Bacon* by David Sylvester

*Art in Its Own Terms* by Fairfield Porter

*The Artist's Reality* by Mark Rothko

*Pirates and Farmers* by Dave Hickey

*The Crack-Up* by F. Scott Fitzgerald

*The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard