



Color Me Abstract: Confronting the Canvas at MOCA Jacksonville

By Erin Thursby

EU Jacksonville

July 24, 2016

When interviewing some of the various artists for *Confronting the Canvas: Women of Abstraction*, there were two words that kept cropping up from the artists: physicality and color. Jill Nathanson says, “The two things together are central to the way the color moves through us. The paint has to move to engage you in that process.” And so, the artists have to move and use their bodies to achieve that. Fran O’Neill dons a raincoat and gloves to her elbows, using her arms as giant brushes. Jackie Saccoccio says that her process is something like a dance. She works on multiple canvases, using the drips of color from one to change another, perhaps a bit like a dancer changing partners, going from one to another as the spirit moves her and the paint allows. “There’s a performative aspect to my paintings,” says Saccoccio. That’s an aspect that people rarely understand, except in the few cases where a video is posted of her process, but it’s something, if you know about it, that can inform a viewing of her work.

For artist Fran O’Neill, her art is about subtraction, the act of wiping things away on the canvas with her arms as the brush. Looking at it, I felt as though I was viewing some next-level sophisticated, large-scale finger painting, with each abstraction touching on a series of different feelings and impressions almost unreachable. All of the artists in this show seem to have an innate understanding of layering and translucency, but hers is unique in the active process of taking away layers more often. The other artists in this show most actively layer one thing atop another—O’Neill’s tendency is to layer and strip away, perhaps layering again, which makes for some very intriguing canvases. She says that she works by going into her zone, starting with, she says, “Coffee and brain work.” The best work happens for her when she’s given up on a piece, because that’s when she starts taking the risks which pay off for her artistically. Those bits that are just on the edge of perception, color just peeking through behind a layer, are her “ghosts of memory,” a colorful shadow of what came before, which you can only see through her reduction of layers.

Even though this exhibition is an all female show, none of the artists we spoke to feel that’s the main reason you should see this showing. In a perfect world, for Jackie Saccoccio, an artist’s gender wouldn’t be foremost. She and her husband are both artists, they’ve both had their share of struggles and successes. “I don’t think that women should refer to themselves as women artists,” she says, “Just artists. That’s true equality. Mostly I like the painters that were in for the

show.” When she saw the list, she felt strongly that all the artists were, she says, “Pursuing very different paths, so it’s exciting to be in a show like this.”

Jackie Saccoccio’s work begins with notebooks filled with notes on different paints, forms, and colors. She doesn’t generally refer back to the inspiration of her pieces as she works, more often concentrating on the feelings and colors she has in memory. Her jumping off point mainly comes from the portraiture of 15–1600s, drawing from the works of greats such as Correggio. The inspiration for one piece came simply from the curve of an arm in a portrait by Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez, who is probably the most admired portrait artist of that era. Her abstract results seem far from the highly realistic and structured work that has inspired them. She produces large-scale canvases of drip-driven paint, works of structured improvisation, forming complex lattice-works over layers of abstraction, with contrast not only in color, but in texture and sheen, since she layers shiny mica infused paint over and under matte paint. Those contrasts are the reason why her works are best seen in person, as only a special printing could come close to conveying that. She mixes her own paints, which are inspired by 16th and 17th century paints, and that makes for a lot of drying time. The dance of painting she has with a particular canvas can last anywhere from six weeks to three months.

Jill Nathanson’s work is so subtle and so dependant on translucency that her work is something you have to see in person, as it could never be properly translated into a print, like those musicians whose work is best enjoyed live. The translucent polymers, acrylics, and handmade oils are poured and layered on to the canvas in fields of color. Besides the physical pouring of the work, Nathanson engages in a deeper aspect prior to engaging the canvas, starting with what she wants to achieve, thinking about color interaction and doing color experiments to see what will work. Most often, she says, people experience a sense of calm when looking at her work. For those who look deeper, she hopes to achieve a sense of “intense meditation” and hopes that those viewing her work not only find that sense of calm but will also feel “very alive at the same time.”

As the oldest artist in the show, Nathanson has been painting since the 1970s. She believes that this is a pivotal moment, and the most exciting time to be an artist that she’s experienced thus far. For her, *Confronting the Canvas* captures the essence of abstract art today. She feels that for a long time, people tried to make that next great work of art to become the next art star rather than being devoted to the art itself, a wearying state of affairs. But in this past decade, she says, it’s been the people who are just fascinated by the process, who really love art, who work alone in their studios trying to stretch the bounds of art that are now making their mark on the art world. Nathanson feels that the show “encapsulates the energy and experimental concepts.” Each artist in the exhibition, she says, is using the language of painting to get to a feeling of huge possibilities.