

## MW CAPACITY

A painter blog for no-coasters



### Interview with Megan Williamson

April 12, 2009 by Chris



Please give our readers a little bit of information about yourself (upbringing, education, location, news, etc.):

*I grew up in a big family in an unincorporated village north of Chicago. The suburbs eventually reached and went past us, but we always had gravel roads, well water, no streetlights and no commercial development. I attended Catholic grade school. No art classes until high school and college where I couldn't get enough of them. I received my BA in art from Knox College and then attended the New York Studio School for two years.*

**Many of us don't grow up with painting and art as part of our daily life, especially many of us away from the coasts and our routes into the fine arts are circuitous. Was that your experience? How and when did you say, 'I'm going to do this?'**

*I always loved to draw. Looking back I understand that it was one of my tools for learning. If I could draw it (biology, geometry etc.), I could learn it.*

*When I was 19 I thought that I should try to be an artist when I was young, because if it didn't work out I'd still have time for another career (excellent 19 year-old logic). So far, I'm still trying. I always say I've had a lot of jobs (waiter, chauffeur, working for photographers, etc.) but I have only had one career.*

**Talk about your creative mulch—that is your daily inspirations, 'fine' art & not fine art:**

*My mentor Nick Carone told me what his teacher told him, "Neglect nothing." My inspiration comes from such a variety of things and places it doesn't make sense to start a list. I do listen to certain music in the studio. I get taken with the structure of it and at any given time am playing a few CDs over and over. Also, I look at a lot of art in person – from museums to friends' studios.*



**Tell us about one useful thing you were taught or told.**

*A line doesn't make space, it divides it.*

**Tell us about one useful thing you learned for yourself.**

*It takes a long time to learn how to paint and then to find your own voice.*

**How much of your work is done from direct observation of the motif?**

*I almost always work from observation. In the beginning it is like watching a tennis match – looking back and forth constantly. Eventually the canvas commands most of my attention as it has its own structure. I always keep the still life or landscape before me, because it does inform the painting from beginning to end.*



**How much of this work is correctly described as autobiographical?**

*I don't want to sound flip – but it all is. It is about what I see and how I construct the work.*

**When is accuracy important in painting? (your painting, or in general?)**

*Always – my work isn't about rendering, but I want to communicate with accuracy.*

**When is authenticity?**

*Again – always.*

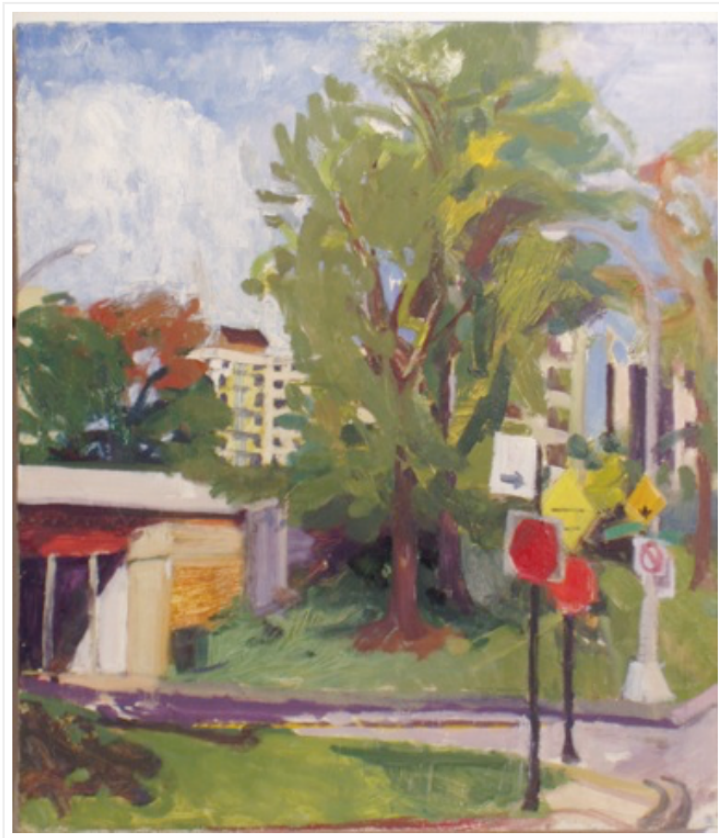
**When is authority?**

*I have no idea.*

**Do you have any thoughts about how place, or the memory of place, affects your work?**

*Place is very important.*

*I feel like I am in mid-thought with a new idea about it, so I won't say anything else because I can't articulate it the way I'd like to.*



**What is the importance if any of Light in your work? Working in still life you seem to favor a luminous approach to color. In landscape there seems to be more chiaroscuro effect fighting to get in.**

*Light, yes. It's a kind of magic isn't it? The first time I was in Paris it was just to change planes. It had just stopped raining and the sky had that torn cloud thing going on. I was walking on the tarmac from the plane to the gate and just stopped. I like to think of myself standing there with my mouth open, but I don't remember. It felt that shocking though, to see the light that I recognized from so many favorite paintings. It was a revelation in terms of the relationship of place (and the light of a place) to invention and interpretation.*

**What is the role of drawing in your work?**

*Drawing is a separate activity from painting for me. A painting begins and ends with paint. Often I'll spend the day doing one or the other. Funny how over time the two have separated themselves that way. When I am landscape painting and I have finished for the day I'll often do a few drawings. I sometimes need to have a last thought about the landscape in black and white.*

**Work from the last few years seems exploring linear or near linear gestures. Can you tell us about this?**

*Right – nothing is static in the studio. For years I have maintained that drawing and painting are two different things. Then of course colored lines started to appear in my paintings. I say appear because they came unbidden and I kept trying to eliminate them. Wasn't it Jung who said whatever you reject comes back a monster? So (before any monsters appeared) I started accepting them as color as much a line, which grew into pattern which I have been involved with over that last few years. I have been thinking of how pattern-to-pattern makes space in a way similar to how color relationships make space. Pattern seems exponentially more complex. I love falling into that world of pattern and space and light. It seems both complex and contemplative or calm.*



**What is a day in the studio like for you? It includes dogs it seems...**

*There is a dog named Bird, and sometimes a sister or friend's dog – usually sleeping.*

*My days start with trying to get to the studio (or landscape) in the morning. I have had to have discipline over the years to keep art making, not exactly on a schedule, but to carve out regular time for it. Not only could daily life take over studio time, but also whatever you call that part of being an artist that involves emails and shipping and proposals and phone calls and all that stuff that makes my head spin... But it comes down to the fact that on a very basic level I need to paint. It is one of my anchors and one of the ways I make sense of the world (or my bit of it). When I don't do it I am more than unhappy. When I do (no matter how the individual pieces are going) I am grounded in the world.*

**It seems like there must be a reason that a body of work as varied as yours wouldn't include the figure as a subject.**

*Yeah, it would wouldn't it? I drew from the figure regularly from age 17 to 26. I think working from the figure was a terrific way to learn about a lot of things, especially scale – what is our physical, human-size relation to the world and the things in it? Then one day I simply didn't want to do it any more. Mostly though I don't like the dynamic of the model in the studio. I like to be alone when I am working. I do like having a dog with me, especially in the landscape. He keeps an extra pair of eyes out for me.*

*That said, I have begun a series of portraits of healers I have known. I want the series to range from my husband's neurosurgeon to my massage therapist. They do sit in my studio for a few hours. I am drawing them with their eyes closed.*

**How do you start a painting?**

*I start a painting by painting. I work all over the canvas with loose, light marks of different colors. I keep moving around the rectangle until I think I might know what the scale will be. Then I – keep painting.*

**Do you work slowly or quickly? What are the benefits of working this way?**

*Both — it's really beyond my poor writing skills to explain. That's not very helpful, but I just work whatever way suits the painting on the easel. It can take a day or more than a year to resolve one.*



**Can you tell us about the "Please Respond" books?**

*I've been making and sending out the Please Respond books for more than 5 years. Each book is done with one other artist. We send it back and forth until we decide it is finished. It began as a way to get other artists to let me know how they responded to a new thing I was doing. I was copying and experimenting with Islamic and Japanese patterns, different color ink, different color paper. It took over my studio practice. It was strange because I didn't want to do anything else, but I didn't know what I was suppose to do with all these sheets of paper covered with patterns. I needed feedback. My friends were very generous with their responses and I think of the books as conversations or improvisations. The books have been great because I get to respond to a lot of different artists and it has pulled all kinds of images out of me, a lot of them are done only partially or not at all from observation. I feel very free when I am working on them.*

**What are you working on now?**

*I'm working on making a black and white catalogue of drawings of single objects. I draw them in small shops in my neighborhood. It will eventually serve as a fundraiser for a local rails-to-trails project that will bring more green space into the neighborhood.*

*I have a solo show coming up in October in Chicago at [Madron Gallery](#). It will be of the landscapes I paint in the city, where infrastructure meets nature.*

*I'm doing an artist-in-residence at the Gary Comer Youth Center's rooftop garden. One Sunday a month I go and draw or do watercolors of whatever is growing while the master gardener there, Marji Hess, writes. We conceived of the project through an organization called New Alliances, which partners artists and environmental groups. We don't know what the project will eventually look like, but for now I leave my work up on the garden room walls. I hope it gives the students and anyone else who visits another lens to look at the garden.*

*I show with a couple of painting groups – [Zeuxis](#) (an association of still life painters) and [MPG, the Midwest Paint Group](#) and they each have ongoing projects and shows that I paint for and help organize.*

*I'm redoing my web site. It has gotten too clunky and my web-master (aka my husband) wants to have another go at it.*

*And as always, I am working on getting in the studio and putting brush to canvas or ink to paper as often and as honestly as I can.*

**Great! Thanks so much for taking the time to answer our questions. Stay honest!**