

ZEUXIS

An Association of Still Life Painters

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On Observation, Memory, and Joy: A Conversation

with

Megan Williamson - Kathleen Craig - Richard
Castellana

by

Imogen Smith



Megan Williamson *Flowers from
Someone Else's Garden* 2019
oil on canvas 13 x 11 in.



Kathleen Craig *Under the Table series 1* 2020
oil on canvas 17 x 17 in.



Richard Castellana *The Eyes Have It*
2020 oil on canvas 18 x 24 in.

In 2019, I wrote an essay to accompany the Zeuxis exhibition "My Studio," in which I explored artists' relationships to the spaces in which they work. Revisiting the essay this past spring, I was struck by how some of its themes resonated during this time of quarantine and sheltering in place: the idea of still life as an art that allows us to see familiar, quotidian objects freshly; the way that artists were reflecting on their own processes and habits by looking at the studios where they worked. In particular, I found myself thinking again about Giorgio Morandi, who chose to spend his whole career working in a single room in his family's apartment, painting variations on a collection of familiar objects. Morandi said: "One can travel this world and see nothing. To achieve understanding it is necessary not to see many things, but to look hard at what you do see."

Richard Castellana, Kathleen Craig, and Megan Williamson, the three artists I spoke with, have all cited Morandi as an influence, and I was intrigued by their statements about the interplay between observation, imagination, and memory in their practice. All of these artists paint still lifes, figures, landscapes, and abstractions, but I have chosen to largely focus on still life in honor of Zeuxis' mission. Our conversation ranged from Morandi to Matisse, and from working during the quarantine to the role of joy and comfort in art. I would like to thank these artists for generously sharing their time and thinking deeply about these questions.



Giorgio Morandi Still Life 1957

Smith: How has Morandi been an influence on you? In light of the quote from him above, do you think still life has something to teach us in this moment, as we all experience a new reality largely confined to our homes?

Megan Williamson: I was introduced to Morandi's work when I was an undergraduate. I couldn't understand why it appealed to me, but he still informed my own work. He was the first painter's painter I was drawn to.

I continue to look and find layers of meaning in his work. As with other Masters' work—the more I paint and the deeper I go in my own work—there is constantly more to see in what they did.

I went from reproductions to seeing his work in person. We all know what a revelation that can be! The subtleties of his tone and color, and how he applied the paint was so much more meaningful in person. It made me want to... be a better painter.



Megan Williamson Italian Farmhouse & Fields, Umbria 1991

Another time I thought about him a lot was when I started going to Umbria. I recognized that the light I was seeing there was also the light I had seen in his work! He fused the light of the place with the light of his mind—inspiration from his environment that went beyond a tabletop or a landscape. And his connection to Piero [della Francesca] and Giotto was so clear when I saw all of their work in person - where it was originally painted. He came out of the long Italian tradition of Grand Painting and made his contribution to it.

In Italy I also learned that though he may have had a simple home and studio, he was a sophisticated painter who was known by many of his contemporaries. He had one foot in the past and one in the present.

As for his quote about seeing - it reminds me of the old Roman saying "everywhere is nowhere." When I was a young painter I needed inspiring landscapes and interesting still life set ups to keep me at the easel. The longer I paint the less I need to get and keep me going. It's the landscapes (or still lifes) within...



Henri Matisse *The Piano Lesson*
1916



Henri Matisse *Interior with a Goldfish*
1914

I remember a short story by the English author A.S. Byatt ("The Chinese Lobster," originally published in *The New Yorker* and then in her collected *Matisse Stories*), in which she talks about this notorious quote:

"What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which could be for every mental worker, for the businessman as well as the man of letters, for example, a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue."

Byatt has one of her characters say, "Matisse knew the most shocking thing he could tell people about the purpose of his art was that it was designed to please and be comfortable."

Why is this so shocking? Has the idea of art bringing joy or solace become unfashionable, or even taboo in modern times?

Williamson: [Max] Beckmann said Art serves understanding, not entertainment. What I have always taken from the Matisse quote was the truth of the last part, about being a soothing, calming influence on the mind. He may have said the whole thing tongue-in-cheek, but we all know about the famously photographed figure painting he did over the course of more than a dozen sittings, and how he had the canvas stripped down at the end of the day so he could begin anew. The struggle and work that went into it wasn't something that he showed. He wasn't bringing the viewer on that trip. The final painting looks spontaneous and effortless. Matisse does often bring us to places of, as you said, stillness, energy, calm and joy.

The tension between the effort and the final painting interests me a lot. I want to put everything I can into my work, but I don't want the viewer to feel overwhelmed or assaulted by it (I do a lot of putting down and taking out myself). And however in or out of fashion joy, solace or beauty is right now, it is where I go. While I am not painting symmetrical mandalas, I do think a painting of mine is successful when it can (among other things) act as a visual meditation—where everything is connected to something else and can create all kinds of pathways and arabesques for the viewer to follow. This is especially true in my still lifes. I absolutely learned about this from Matisse. The joy being held in one of his paintings is like nothing else. There is something unexplainable about Matisse's fluidity and light and color and harmony that inspires me keeps me coming back. Of course everyone has their own reason, impulse and drive that keeps them painting. I think whatever it is, *Luxe, Calme, et Volupté* or *Guernica*, the joy or the tragedy (or both) has to come through the artist and the act of painting. It is the years and decades of painting that leads there. Political, satirical, deconstructed, ugly or beautiful—we don't get to choose as much as we might think. It bubbles up through us and if we can stay still, as Kafka urged in the quote from the last email, we can see what happens and maybe paint something good.

I just finished a commission for a painting where I really had to think about this. It hangs in a pediatric, oncology, infusion waiting room. Those are heavy places to be. My intention is that children and adults can find joy in it. And when they come back again and again they can find something new, or just enjoy the comfort of a summer day full of people and animals beside a circus tent. I still employed a layered, nuanced composition through color, light, shape and placement—but I was conscious as never before of wanting there to be joy.



Megan Williamson *Rush University Hospital's Pediatric Oncology Infusion Waiting Room* 2020 oil on canvas 12 x 20 in.

Smith: Due to a loss in her family, Megan Williamson was unable to respond to the final question. Our thoughts and sympathy are with Megan in this difficult time.

Before we started this Conversation, Megan and I spoke on the phone to get to know one another and discuss the topics we wanted to explore. We learned that we shared a love for Bologna, Italy, the lifelong home of Giorgio Morandi—its light, colors, and incredible food. In talking about the experience of sheltering at home during the pandemic, we discovered that we were both fascinated by the same quote from Franz Kafka, with which I will leave you:

"There is no need for you to leave the house. Stay at your table and listen. Don't even listen, just wait. Don't wait, be completely quiet and alone. The world will offer itself to you to be unmasked; it can't do otherwise. In ecstasy it will writhe before you."



Megan Williamson *Banner with High Diver* 2020 made during covid-19 isolation



Megan Williamson is a still life and landscape painter who looks for a combination of beauty, complexity and simplicity in her subject matter. The artist's work emerges from of a modernist and cubist understanding of space, light and construction. Her influences include Matisse, Morandi, Pollock, Islamic tile patterns, Bonnard, Braque and her friend, mentor and teacher Nicolas Carone. Ms. Williamson lives in Chicago.

www.zeuxis.us/williamson
www.meganwilliamson.com



Kathleen Craig paints abstract still lifes, landscapes, and figures, working from observation and memory, with an emphasis on color, composition, and expression. Her work has been influenced by Giorgio Morandi, Nicolas de Stael, and Ken Kewley's essay on color. She currently exhibits with Nancy Margolis Gallery (NYC), Elder Gallery of Contemporary Art (Charlotte, NC), and Cerulean Arts (Philadelphia).

www.zeuxis.us/craig



Richard Castellana paints still life, landscape, and figure compositions from a mix of observation, imagination, and memory. He is a member of the Blue Mountain Gallery and lives and works in New York City. Since the 1970's he has exhibited widely and received national and international recognition and awards for his work. Castellana studied at the Art Students League, New York Studio School, and Queens College. His teachers included Edwin Dickinson, Charles Cajori, Mercedes Matter, Esteban Vicente, John Ferren, and Louis Finkelstein. Castellana taught at Fairleigh Dickinson University for over 25 years, retired in 2013 as director of the B. A. in Interdisciplinary Studies program, and is now Professor Emeritus of Humanities and Fine Arts.

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Imogen Sara Smith is a freelance writer and film critic based in New York City. She is the author of two books, *In Lonely Places: Film Noir Beyond the City*, and *Buster Keaton: The Persistence of Comedy*. Her writing has appeared in *Film Comment*, *Sight and Sound*, *The Criterion Collection*, *The Threepenny Review*, and many other publications. She is a frequent speaker on cinema; and she teaches film history at the School of Visual Arts. Imogen has written essays for several Zeuxis exhibitions and moderated events with Zeuxis artists in New York and Lancaster.