

ART PLATFORM

Interview with Jennifer Bilek

Your creative process, art and the creative act are a vital part of your art as a whole. How are you able to know when a work is complete, and when you use such a variety of approaches how do you arrive at the process of realization its complete?

Every painting is a new process for me and I rarely know exactly what will emerge on the canvas. I don't know when a painting is finished until it announces itself as finished. Paintings are like dreams - they have their own logic and come from a place that is beyond what we can know. Sometimes I see the painting completely before I even start and the finished painting aligns perfectly with the vision bestowed upon me in advance. My paintings often, though not always, arrive like a vision on a breeze. Other times, I have an idea of what I think I am going to create and the end comes before I have reached that idea or is completely different than the idea I began with. The painting shows it has a mind, a will of it's own, that there are processes at work beside me. As an artist I am fully aware that while I play a role in the process of painting, it does not belong to me alone, that there is something beyond me that is coming through. My best moments as an artist come from learning how to let go, to trust my muse, to step out of the way, so to speak. One of my favorite quotes, and I don't know where it comes from, is: "Faith is more beautiful than god." This quote speaks to me about the process of art and hitting divine moments by having faith that everything is already in place for a painting. All I have to do is let go and let it emerge. Even a commissioned portraiture, where I think I have the most control over the outcome, proves to me every time that I am only part of the equation of this creative process. I hone my skills as a painter and I lend them to this essence that chooses me for its host of expression. I feel quite honored and blessed to have been chosen for this in life.

How do you arrive at creating a work, from the idea and inception to the work in process- How do you decide the medium and material? Does it start with the medium, or the idea then the material that suits it best?

I have so many ideas for paintings that never get painted. For the paintings that do emerge, I am usually called to paint them with some urgency. I will have a vague idea for something but if it keeps presenting, then my attention goes to it. When I am commissioned to do a painting, as in a portrait, that too is being called. I can see myself painting portraits that are commissioned, well before any contracts have been signed. I once had an inquiry about a portrait that didn't materialize for an entire year. I couldn't understand why the client hadn't called because I saw myself in the process of painting the portrait. I knew that the painting was there, that it was already in existence somewhere and wanted to be born and didn't understand where the client had gone. I simply waited, understanding it would come and a year later, the client called and said she was ready. Sometimes when I am working on one painting, another will emerge in a vision and demand to be attended to. I once had three commissioned portraits going at one time and I was already late for delivery when this other painting came into consciousness and it would not let me rest. I kept thinking I can't possibly stop working on commissioned pieces that are late, to work on another painting and yet, it just kept coming to the foreground. I finally relented to painting it. The painting emerged in less than a week and remains one of my favorite paintings to this day.

My first love as a medium is oil paint. My second is pastel. Oil paint takes a lot longer so I will often choose to work in pastel because I have less time but sometimes, I just want to work in another medium too and I love the soft buttery texture of pastels. They are unique and glide and blend in ways that paint does not. I suppose, though I have never aspired to be married, that oil and pastel mediums, for me, are not unlike being married and having a mistress simultaneously. I am married to oil paint. I know it, I trust it, it is my home and my hearth but pastels are my mistress, the place I go when I need to break the mold that a marriage can be. I want to be surprised and get that exuberant, heightened in-love feeling all over again which can only happen with a new medium. I bring that freshness back to my marriage. In this case, my spouse never minds so I am lucky in this way.

***How does your message, vision and concept change depending on the medium (figurative drawing, painting, pastel to oil etc).**

The question is like asking if a dream changes if you have it in the daytime while napping or the nighttime when you engage in extended sleep. The dream emerges from its own place, as does creative expression regardless of the medium I choose. To show an example, I once went on a

nine day hiking excursion with twelve other women in the Maine wilderness. I wanted so much to sketch the women I hiked with and had the sketching materials with me. There proved to be no time for sketching as every moment was taken up with hiking, preparing food and campsites or breaking them down. One day, we all went into our own individual spaces in the woods for several hours and created a sacred meditation circle. As I sat in my circle, alone and surrounded by wilderness, my surroundings began to talk to me but not in words. I looked at a piece of white, birch bark lying on the ground. It was covered in pale, green and grey moss that was dried to its aging skin and I could see one of the women in the hiking group in this piece of bark, her white hair, aging skin, her pale green eyes with flecks of gold. The wilderness became my medium. I found the other women on my trip inside the forest that day too and I made a collection that I shared with the group when we came back together, much to their astonishment and delight. If an artist is cut off from one medium, they will gravitate to another. The calling is the cake, the substance, the food, the medium is the icing – almost any flavor or color will do even if we have a favorite.

Given the themes and focus of your work, does the process of creativity find you more drained and exhausted, or is it a cathartic and therapeutic experience?

The creative process is exhilarating for the most part. I am so intensely focused most of the time, that I disappear and whatever is coming through fills me with inexplicable joy, so that even ‘I’ am not there exactly. It is more like I have disappeared into joy, love and bliss and have fused with it. There is no differentiation between me and bliss, in those moments. There are times however when I have lost my focus and am overthinking my part in the creative process – Are my technical abilities up to this? How do I do this particular thing? Will this look right? Why doesn’t this look right? – These are terrible moments. It is like being in terrible disaccord with your lover, and you can see no end in sight. It is frustrating, heartbreaking and draining. So yes, there is an element of the creative process that is draining and exhausting but I would say the overall amazingness far outweighs those moments. Artists really have the best of life in this way. We create our own glory and do not have to depend on other people. We also don’t have to actually be engaged with another person to get that “I am over-the-moon-in-love” feeling. All we have to do is work.

I suppose it is cathartic in some ways. I often need to take a break from painting after I have completed a piece or several pieces in a row. Some painters are very prolific. I am not one of them. I need to rest and I am

not sure why because the process doesn't feel cathartic but the rest I need afterward would speak to having had a catharsis.

In all styles (from lone portraits to long terms studies) of your works there is an intense balance, struggle and conversation between raw, emotive energy and poetry- and the more formalist concerns. You have a clear ability and strength as a draftswoman, artist, painter and creative who understands color, perspective, composition and depth of pane. Does this sometimes conflict with your vision as a fine artist and conceptualist, who is clearly creating without internal rules and restrictions?

Oh absolutely! Conflict would be an understatement. There are very few of my pieces that I continue to love afterward for any length of time because of this conflict. I can see where I resisted. I think all artists, maybe especially visual artists experience this conflict, because we are always watching what is unfolding in front of us and are at war between letting go and getting into the mix. There is the divine essence coming through but this essence is using our skills. Sometimes it turns into a battle of wills and this is a great struggle, creating moments of great conflict. It is only by letting go that I can succeed as a painter. I want to show my skills, I want to present what I want to present and always there is the dream, the energy beyond me that wants what it wants and if I hold onto me and my own demands, the painting becomes restricted, lacks flow or honesty, is filled with my ego, my feeble attempts to make myself great – alone. I may not need other people to experience the glory of creativity but I cannot do without my muse. When I forget that we are collaborating, I am reminded with a painting that is stiff and a heart breaking with frustration. It is a relationship. You cannot go it alone. When you try, the work suffers.