

Lisa Stefanelli, an interview with Jennifer Riley

Lisa Stefanelli is primarily known for complex arabesques flawlessly painted in rich red or blue tones. Hand drawn sumptuous lines stretch into wisps and bulges like thinning taffy across luminous pristine grounds. Some recall complex symmetrical patterns one associates with illuminated manuscripts, hot-rod emblems and lacework while others recall liquid spills and the way drops of ink swirl and fold in a glass of clear water.

For this show Stefanelli develops the work exploring two new territories. Imagery in the past that has been ostensibly abstract pattern, now hints at a more specific figural presence, and she has added an elongated format and denser repetitions of gesture that combine to become more metaphorical than matter-of fact.

The images continue to have the magic of behaving like a cloud that shape-shifts as you watch, yet the concentration of line nudges interpretation towards something more structured and tangible, something in the world, but yet something so elusive that you just can't quite name.

This interview took place in the artist's studio in rural Pennsylvania in early April of this year.

JR: I would like to begin by talking a bit about your process. How did you begin working this way?

LS: It began with a specific project that required a large surface area to be confronted, about 2000 square feet. Being a mark maker, I was searching for a line, a mark, which would allow me the experience of physical engagement. Having my entire body involved in this enormous painting during the drawing process was a familiar place. My formative years were spent as a competitive figure skater, and by being so physical in the drawing I had returned to a language I was able to speak fluently.

JR: What intrigues me about the movement in the work is that it is seldom repeated, and often yields the sensation of spiraling growth and expansion.

LS: The images are a collection of movements and entanglements that do move toward resolution. They try to resolve themselves with as little damage as possible to themselves and those who experience them.

JR: By engaging in this line of thinking, which is indeed a philosophical position about painting and of being in the world, where does it lead you?

LS: It leads me to the source of the chaos, which is a place of optimism. We live in a dense, complicated and ultimately very beautiful world. I look to that beauty and attempt to navigate my way through the other stuff.

JR: Abstraction allows you a platform for articulating this beautiful conundrum, correct?

LS: I long to understand the point where the evasive nature of beauty becomes tangible. That is the precise moment when it is interesting.

JR: Yes, and this way of painting has become a signature of yours and your unwavering commitment to it has allowed for a deepening of vision within your practice, even now the imagery has started to shift.

LS: The work develops with only a slight shift from one series to the next.

JR: Why so?

LS: Change in my world occurs slowly. There is but one fundamental pursuit which remains intact throughout my work, the possibility of being simultaneously involved and uninvolved in complexity. The paintings are elaborate and complicated while yearning to avoid the complexities they themselves embody. It is actually quite melodramatic.

JR: The visual complexities of urban life and the wildness of nature that you live in here are perfectly analogous to what you are speaking of. And now as the forms become more organic, the element of nature in the new work is more evident, especially in the show's title; "Sassyfras."

LS: Absolutely. The imagery of this series owes much to the setting of the natural world where I have had the opportunity to live during this work's development. Daily experience of light within a pristine forest, and the sky and space on this mountain-top... I have been able to observe repetition and atmosphere.

Previously the imagery was painted in lower Manhattan which has its own unique, complex sets of stimuli. As a young person I went to Islamic countries to see the mosques. I can't say that I went for any specific reason other than I was searching for the origin of my pursuit. I was interested in and remain interested in the meditative and elevative qualities of Islamic art.

JR: And how does that play out in your work?

LS: In previous work, cues were taken from the physical world man has made, more specifically, designed, for himself. This was primary in informing the lines, paths and trajectories in the paintings. The cultural clutter we live in daily is mind-boggling. I know there is a joy in that confusion, and I chase that joy. That remains consistent even now that I am no longer living in the center of that culture.

JR: Has working here so close to nature been revelatory?

LS: I have been able to confirm a suspicion we all have regarding the world of man and the world of nature. Nature carries the same intrigues as man's world; it is the foundation of all we perceive. Nature prompts all design and all of the decisions about what we make as artists and designers. There is the question of a parallel complexity between the two worlds, and I have found that the paintings ride exactly upon that parallel.

JR: Despite all of this talk of nature, the light in your work is unexpected; rather than a warm and comforting glow there is a chilliness to your luminosity. The images seem to be backlit with a cool glow around them. How did you decide to make it this way?

LS: I needed to make it possible for the viewer to experience the paintings without being cognizant of a barrier...or a source of "place". I look at the sky and at atmosphere.

JR: Yes, because the pale grey tones of the sprayed ground color creates a fade that yields a very neutral, fictive space. It is as if your images are suspended, hovering between two worlds.

LS: Yes, because to my mind specificity somehow contradicts abstraction. The pale grey tones, the sprayed underground, and the surfaces...they are the place that defies observation.

JR: And of course the combination of the handmade image with that kind of luminosity is unexpected.

LS: Painting has a magnificent tradition. It is necessary for me to make at least part of the painting with brush and paint...keeping one foot inside the door of that tradition... but the paintings themselves, they have to be living in today's "modern" world.

The process and materials I use to fabricate the surface and under-painting acknowledge tradition as well. They offer a refracting light, almost a twenty first century version of the

marble based gesso used by medieval Siense painters. When I was looking at the Siense painters as a young artist, I did not realize it at the time, but I was chasing the refracted backlight of our modern world, (think computer monitors, television). I was not at all interested in making an image which felt digital, which is why I stayed committed to the brush.

JR: You once told me how your background in set design for television and advertising gave you an appreciation for 'highly produced' images and today your studio process includes the labor of experts in the auto body painting industry in which a dialogue goes on between you and the auto-body painter. Was it hard to allow someone "into your process" like that?

LS: It was difficult at first. Typically, painting is a lonely business. Also, we artists can be very, very territorial about our process and our practice. I had to challenge the possession I had for my paintings and consider that maybe the discussion should include more than myself and the paintings. I admire the big production artists who work with a crew. I would love to work that way. I make the surfaces and under-paintings in an auto body shop in New Jersey. It is important that the paintings be part of this technology. When the drawings in the studio are complete, they are transported to the body shop where they undergo a process that abandons the isolation of the studio. It is necessary to prove their commitment to combining simplicity and complexity, reconciling the past within the present...it is a significant act.

JR: You are a Romantic and a traditionalist. The books you read, the music you listen to, the designers you love are the Romantic and Classic ones. When I think about the romantic era in art and literature, I am reminded that it was a time when form, wit, intellect, and the critical took a back seat to content, tenderness, emotion and pathos. Your work seems to speak directly to content, emotions, creativity tenderness and pathos.

LS: I am an intuitive artist. JR: Your marks and actions are mimicking your

body as it performs the gesture of the design. Do you associate this with Pollock?

LS: There is a natural association with Pollack, and I also associate this aspect of gesture with the graffiti writers. I am trying to capture this freedom of gesture with the mark but my process contradicts this.

After the initial drawing, the images are intensely modeled and rendered. It is as if I am taking the freedom away and putting concrete boots on them, and herein lies the

conundrum; they are solid forms which are meant to effervesce. I think often of Karin Davie and her freedom of gesture and feel envious of it.

JR: Understandable, although that is deceptive as well. The magic is that her work creates an illusion of effortless gesture, but it is a series of complicated marks. There are a lot of strokes between those seemingly endless gestures. The magic is that she makes it look completely effortless. You achieve the exact same effect in that there is a graceful fluidity to your line but I know the skill that goes into making it look the way you do. The viewer never gets caught up in the “work” of your work even though it is incredibly labor-intensive.

LS: That is the magic of painting. JR: I recently thought about Joan Mitchell

whose work has an internal struggle, swirling rapture, or torture, on the edge of becoming and dissolving. And in your two blue paintings, the centralized twisting imagery seems to grow outward. Science tells us that the universe is naturally becoming more chaotic. In the beginning, everything was simple, tidy and concise, and as we move forward, things become increasingly complicated.

LS: That seems quite obvious to me. I live in nature now, and one has only to look down at the earth and see any number of natural botanical forms...and observe them through the season. They begin their lives concise and tidy, and by the end of the season, they're a mess.

JR: Your titles suggest worlds within worlds. What I mean by that is when I read your titles, they are always familiar, often humorous and seem to be cobbled from places as diverse as pop culture and the rare books archives. They imply on the one hand a shared experience and on the other hand imply an awareness that within those shared experience each of us have our own private experiences.

LS: This is one of the fundamental aspects of painting; a personal experience which is also shared. The titles are familiar and colloquial and therefore do allude to a common, shared experience, but I apply them for personal reasons.

JR: You are a naturally gifted painter with superb drawing skills, and for much of the last 50 years those skills have been challenged, rejected and sidelined in the art world. Does this surprise you?

LS: No, it does not surprise me, I see it happening. I can't help myself when it comes to utilizing my talent. This is an old argument we are all familiar with, one that goes back to

the roots of modern painting. But for those of us who are encumbered by our hands and eyes, we use our skills because it's efficient and a joy to do so. As a student at RISD drawing was highly valued, as I believe it still is today. I never deviated from my love of drawing...but I adore Photoshop.

JR: I remember once visiting your studio not long after 911, and there was a piece there that was a little darker than you liked, and you mentioned that it's okay to keep it dark, this is New York after all, one doesn't want to be too optimistic.

Has your attitude changed since then?

LS: No. I consider myself a New York artist. I came to New York specifically. I could have practiced in LA, or any number of places, but I love The New York School. We are allowed and encouraged to "bum-out" to a certain degree...that appeals to me.

JR: We've put this off for too long: before we close today, can you speak about your influences?

LS: As a young painter I made extraordinary efforts to align myself with the pleasure principles. Roxy Paine, for his sense of humor and his industry, Beatriz Milhazes, for something you once said about "adding just enough vinegar", Tomaselli for the matt and ugly/ beauty surfaces and Philip Taaffe, because he has remained so flamboyant about being a hedonist. James Nares remains important.

I saw Takashi's show in Soho in the mid 90's and naturally that was a good thing for me to know existed. Before Takashi there was Mel Ramos. Then there were the artists who I wanted to like, but it didn't make sense at the time... Francis Cape for instance. I love that you can see his work and feel almost like you haven't experienced anything at all.

Because of my background in film production and the creating of what I call "visual fraud" in TV land, I admire the industry of the block buster/big production artists, like Robert Therrien, Koons, Kapoor. There are so many others. We are fortunate to live within such a community.

JR: It's a big roster of an even bigger one, and I think about how the influences add up or drop away. In your work influences seem fully absorbed and transformed.

LS: Yes, I avoid specificity and I struggle with commitment.

JR: And the format of the work, where part of the image is lopped off or hidden, like a Guston figure whose leg is off the page, we see only a part of the scenario, alludes to a sense of openness and continuity that invites inclusion.

LS: An infinite space. The paintings are a tiny portion of a dense and complicated world. The conflict is that I want the freedom of having less.

John Good once said something to me that made a lot of sense. He said there are two different kinds of artists in this world, those who use the world and make fun of it (I believe his exact words were “those that fuck with the world”), and those who try to figure it out. I know which sort I am, but I wish I were the other.

JR: And looking forward?

LS: I long to be a minimalist, and I am trying very hard to reach an agreement with the paintings regarding this point. We are in negotiation at the moment...but as you can imagine, it's complicated.

Jennifer Riley is a painter and arts writer who lives and works in NYC. In addition to exhibiting regularly, she has reviewed art for The New York Sun, The Brooklyn Rail and ArtCritical.com and is the Co-Director of The Rome Program for Harvard Graduate School of Design. She has also taught at the Mason Gross School of the Arts, Pratt Institute and Montserrat College of Art. In 2004 she was recipient of the Award in Painting from the Massachusetts State Cultural Council. She is represented in New York by Allegra LaViola and in Boston by Carroll & Sons.