

Don Smith

Space, Intuition and Expression

Artist Statement

If one has an interest in painting, I recommend reading the work of Antonio Damasio – the respected Professor of Neuroscience and Philosophy at USC. For he, perhaps more than similar practitioners, has managed to compile one of the clearest descriptions of the formation of “mind,” which, in turn, helps enormously in understanding “feelings,” which are the basis of painting.

A painting as I conceive it is an expression coming from a “felt” response to our sensory life. It is an expression of our ability to create “mental images” which are certainly connected to the art of painting. I would say, although I am no Cartesian, “I see, therefore I paint.”

This short discourse is to establish the fact that I am a sight-oriented painter. This position is laid out in relation to the other position of conceptualism (and no, I am not against this form of art, some of which I very much like).

It is, of course, the oily stuff I identify with (although various painting principals are expressed in other media – here I think of collage or pastel), and, as I have written in other statements, painting is, for me, a discrete category in the visual arts – being related to, but not being illustration or design.

I am a student from Cezanne on down to the New York school of the 1950s and 60s, with its Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock. This infers several things: 1) overall composition; 2) one form moving through or over another; 3) spaces with interstices are as visually important as the object. These are some of the main tenets I try to abide by in my work.

It is because of my identification with the New York school of abstract expressionists of the 50s that I am now, with my work, an anachronism or to be perfectly gauche “old fashioned.” This is now my value – that I, as a painter on one hand and an academic on the other, work to keep something of value in painting alive – a methodology if you will. It insists on what edges are doing, where the painted form is located, and what tonal value is present – atonal or tonal. These and a few other items are what interest me and what give me the ability to compose in paint: the three types offered in this exhibition.

Antonio Damasio tells us in his new book *Feeling & Knowing: Making Minds Conscious*: “What nervous systems bring to the marriage with the body is the possibility of making knowledge explicit, by way of constructing the spatial patterns that [...] constitute *images*.”

Addendum:

The statement originally made for the show is a particular description of some of my present interests in the function of “mind” in imagery – because of this, it is very limited. And as well, it is not a formal description of the paintings’ reality. Hence, I’ve decided to add this brief addendum.

To describe the function of a painting in a mechanical fashion does not deal with the all-important value of content. After all, these works do not picture things in themselves – dogs, cats, trees, houses, people, or narrative situations. However, as an academic instructor in painting and drawing, my first job is not so much teaching what to paint as how to paint – form a methodology, if you will. But what to paint is not so much in the job description, it is more implicit than explicit. How is it that a painting teacher can determine what a student chooses to paint? Who am I to say that student must do a still life, landscape, figure, or non-figurative composition? But we have to begin somewhere, so the student is often stuck with a still life or figure posed in some fashion. In my painting classes, I like to start at the beginning. Not too many do portraits or battle scenes nowadays. But one could predict their return and not lose their money.

What is hoped for is that a student of painting can be outfitted with enough technique, or better, a methodology, which will enable him/her to accomplish what they desire.

I have quoted the painter Leon Golub before (he is a distinguished American painter in the last half of the twentieth century). He said, “I used to worry that my paintings were not more political, but now I realize that to keep painting alive is a political act.” I too have similar thoughts all the time, but conditions of my life with so many elements have become a quest for work which is solid, concrete, real, and, I hope, beautiful for the experience of those who see them. Having said this, I would remind one that the issue of beauty is a complicated one and answers to many masters. For me, I like to imagine these works in the Bannister Gallery to be much like certain counterpoints in musical forms – music without words.