

"I GUESS I THINK OF THEM THAT WAY, EQUAL, EXCLUSIVE OF GENDER, SENTIENT BEINGS."

March 16, 2017 | Interview with Nancy Depew



"Someone said to me once that I would be happy working with androgynous figures. I guess I think of them that way, equal, exclusive of gender, sentient beings."

Nancy, when did you first know you wanted to be an artist?

My very earliest memories are of painting and drawing. My parents owned a photographic studio and I grew up watching my mom work with transparent oils on black and white prints before the days of color photographs. She set up a small table for me next to her desk where I could work along with her. I loved it, so painting has always been part of my life. But I didn't really think of myself as an artist until much later when I was able to grapple with art making as a process, where the experience of working leads to insight, revelation and discovery, where the finished work documents the process.

What drew you toward painting in particular?

I have a real fascination with painting and drawing materials on a very primal level. I'm drawn to the stuff like a bee to honey. If I had to choose only one medium to work with, there's no competition, it would be oil paint. Painting is a kind of magic, and the whole process is nothing short of alchemy.





How did you develop your own painting style? Your images look like photographs, it's extraordinary.

My painting process has evolved over the years, mostly through trial and error. I've never had specific instruction on 'how to' paint. I was very fortunate to be able to study art under people who gave me free reign to pursue my art. I have studied the methods and approaches of painters from many time periods. I have worked extensively both from life, and from various forms of photographic references. I grew up around cameras and have learned to use them, but I have never considered myself a photographer. And I don't paint as a photo-realist. I only rely so far on the photos themselves. I use photos as references, a starting point. The physicality of the paint itself is what motivates me and I let the paint take over.

What are you most inspired by?

My instincts are to turn inward when looking for inspiration. I choose subject matter that I connect with deeply on a visceral level. I focus on the parts of my awareness that function without words. For me, looking is at the heart of inspiration. Sometimes I come upon inspiration by accident, but more often I go searching. I choose a subject and I study it. I look to see where it can take me. At the heart of what inspires me is the fact that we are part of nature, not separate from it. That's at the core of everything I do.

Who are the women in your paintings, how would you describe them?

The figures in my paintings are not specific individuals. I have worked most often with female models, but I approach male and female models the same way. I look more to core sensuality rather than surface sexuality. I think more about the physicality of the pose rather than I do about any specific identity. Someone said to me once that I would be happy working with androgynous figures. I guess I think of them that way, equal, exclusive of gender, sentient beings. The figures in my paintings function as a vehicle for communicating a certain level of experience. I hope for the viewer to empathize, to be able to understand, to be able to say yes, I know what that feels like.

That being said, I see all my paintings, landscape, still life, and the figure paintings, as extensions of the same voice, my voice, undeniably a female voice. As subjects, they all have their own idiosyncrasies and limitations when it comes to imparting my internal responses to the world. I approach them all from the point of view that they are able to communicate the complexities of life, not as if they were only inanimate objects. I try to cut through the clutter and use them to ponder the miraculous phenomenon of existence and inquire into our ability to experience the world. The different subjects merge in my thinking, though that has only begun to manifest itself in the work and I'm not sure how far I will carry that line of inquiry in the paintings.





"It has been a long complicated road, with endless difficulties and obstacles, but I have not wavered much from the path of making art I believe to be the best I can make."

Can you tell us more about your process, from start to finish?

I try to avoid a formulaic approach to painting. I don't have a set method that I repeat each time I work. I think of art making as a process, where the experience of working leads to insight, revelation and discovery. It's an adventure filled with perils and surprises. I try to respond to the artwork as it forms, choosing options that will lead me to learning the most I can from and about the work. This is often not the fastest way to make a painting, but it's the best way I've found for making art I'm happy with. There are thousands of options every time you pick up a brush. What will guide the decisions you make and what priorities will be revealed by those decisions? Those are the questions that fascinate me. My paintings are done only after I've resolved every question.

I start with subject matter that I connect with deeply. While focusing on the intuitive aspects of the subject, I look for a visual, rather than a verbal idea. I build the paint up slowly through many layers, allowing the true subject of the painting to materialize. I find the words that eventually become titles during the process of painting. In my most recent work, I mix traditional painting techniques with more contemporary approaches to create a highly realized, three-dimensional and believable image, but I am not interested in documenting reality. I use my subjects as a vehicle for a highly orchestrated exploration of a metaphysical terrain. I dig into the nature of experience.

I frequently work on multiple paintings simultaneously. There are the practical considerations, like drying time for oil paints, that make it better to have several works in progress. There are also the conceptual issues that often arise in the course of making a work that require reflection before proceeding further. That often means that I will set one piece aside and go on to another to switch my focus for a while. The paintings often seem to feed each other, where the problems solved in one take me deeper into the next.

How have you changed as an artist through time and how has this been reflected in your paintings?

Though the work is constantly evolving as I gain knowledge and insight, I am frequently surprised to see how consistent my intent has been over the decades. I'm still focused on the same ideas, the impetus behind my painting remains constant. The forms, the subject matter and the approach all evolve, but the intent has remained constant.



What has shaped you most as an artist?

It has been a long complicated road, with endless difficulties and obstacles, but I have not wavered much from the path of making art I believe to be the best I can make. I focus on being honest and try not to be distracted by extraneous input.

How would you describe your own experience as a woman in the art world?

When I started painting, I never dreamed I would be able to make a living from painting and so I have not always made the best decisions about how to guide my career. My priorities have made it so that I have never experienced the quintessential gallery relationship where the artist is a star, coddled and encouraged. But I have through much hard work, some good luck and persistence developed some relationships that allow me to continue pursuing my art. I'm very grateful to all the people who have helped me along the way.

Do you have any advice for young female painters who wish to reach a professional level with their work?

The art world is complex and continually evolving. The challenges are endless. You won't have to look far to find rejection. Women are playing a more significant role all the time, but there are issues. There are always plenty of negative voices around. I try to listen to the voices that offer constructive insight, the ones that will help and not hurt for no good reason. Stay true to yourself and don't give up looking for the people who will appreciate what you do.

What are you working on currently?

My life has changed quite a bit lately. I've just moved into a new studio and am experimenting with some new subjects. I'm very curious myself to see where this all takes me.



