

Sigrid Burton and Carole Ann Klonarides both came to New York in the early 70s as painters and met in the then close-knit art community of SoHo/Tribeca. Klonarides, discovered video at its onset and stopped painting but never lost her love for it.

This interview was conducted as a continuation of their ongoing conversation in anticipation of Burton's solo exhibition at Tufenkian Fine Arts.

CAK: Why do you feel obliged to paint? I mean, what is that attracts you to this medium above all others available to artists today?

SB: The physicality, the muscularity, if you will, of paint as a medium appeals to me both as a maker and a viewer. Although there's obviously a limitation with a two-dimensional surface, I find oil paint to be almost limitless in both color range and the effects achieved from application.

CAK: I remember that sensation of resistance and release as the brush is applied to the canvas, it gives back to you. A seductive energy exchange.

SB: Yes, there is a dialogue between the hand and the brush and the surface of the canvas. I'm very hard on my brushes to the point they become disarticulate in very particular ways. But the result is that the brush will give up this really specific line or mark. Paintings have their own individual histories embedded in their fabrication and these accretions over time add to the mystery and enchantment of the work.

CAK: Painting abstractly demands a different consideration and understanding of material and process. But is there deliberate content?

SB: Content is critical and particularly in work that is not figurative or explicitly narrative. For my own purposes, there has to be more content than paint for paint's sake, so my work has always referred to natural phenomena and objects. I draw from the natural world, landscape, weather, botanical and marine life, anatomical structures. There's nothing more idiosyncratic or interesting than the way things are in nature, unique and specific. I think of my paintings as presenting imagery, color, atmospheric effects, rhythms, and energies in the same way a piece of music or a poem might, in order to engage the viewer.

CAK: Do you go into a state when you paint? Is it revelatory?

SB: In India, canonical texts describe how the artist has to get him or herself into a proper state of mind in order to create ritual icons or art; the artist is considered merely a conduit of divine expression. The preparation to achieve this deep concentration is considered parallel to yogic spiritual practices. I think many artists would describe a sensation of becoming entranced, so completely immersed in the making or doing that everything else falls away. One becomes in the moment with one's work. When it's going well, that's a deeply rich and fulfilling experience. It is the process that interests me. In the end, I have a product but that's almost a side effect of the act of making.

CAK: During our studio visits over the years, we often have long conversations about your use of color, and how oil paint is the best medium to create the desired effects.

SB: Color is my first consideration when I'm starting a painting. I begin with an underpainting, an Old Master technique, applying a colored ground on the white base ground. I choose the complementary or contrasting color for the underpainting. While it seems counterintuitive in a sense to use, for example, an orange ground for a painting that one intends to be primarily green; this technique makes the color sing. It creates a richer field than painting on a white

ground. Ultimately, as more and more layers of color are added they interact, reflect, refract with the colors that are underneath and this can create deep and chromatically complicated atmospheric fields.

The Red Studio by Matisse, one of the most seminal works of the 20th Century, is a painting wholly about color—color as both subject and structure. If you look at it closely, the entire painting is a bright Indian red which has been painted on a green ground. You can see that sometimes the green ground becomes the drawing that delineates the objects you see in the studio. Rothko apparently looked at The Red Studio every day for weeks and through studying it, understood how he could use color to structure his own work.

CAK: I like how you leave little vestiges of those background colors for the viewer to enjoy or a border of color on the edges of the painting so there is a hint of the buildup of layers.

SB: Leaving the underpainting around the edge or adding color on the edge, sets up the painting as a window by creating a frame through which you are viewing what is happening in the painting and also serves as a type of decorative border. It is calling attention to the edge and thinking about the relationship of the edge to what's happening in the body of the painting. The consideration of the edge, defines where the painting ends. , In a sense, this adds the punctuation.

CAK: And beyond the technical, your use of color seems to go further; its enveloping and deep in every sense of the word.

SB: Color is its own unique language; it is sui generis. Color causes a physiological as well as psychological and emotional response in the viewer. It's its own voice, a kind of poetry. Color is light and it creates atmosphere. I think in this sense color can be like Proust's madeleine eliciting all kinds of associative feelings and reverie; because color has an expressive and impressive impact all of its own. While recently traveling in the Netherlands, I became enamored of the palette and surface in Dutch and Flemish paintings, especially the use of black on black for rich textiles against the stark white of the lace, the deep backgrounds. Experiencing how the color operates in those paintings prompted me to think about ways of introducing light in chromatically dark paintings, an idea that I have been exploring in my recent work.

CAK: Ah, the existential darks and lights of those paintings! But I know that for the last two decades you have traveled extensively in the Indian subcontinent investigating its art forms and aesthetic theory. Having never been to India myself, I have an idea that being there is experiencing color on steroids. This must have greatly influenced your use of color in another way.

SB: Yes, because of the way color is so thoroughly embedded culturally throughout South Asia. Color has meaning and is a signifier of literally everything: the cardinal points, the planets, Chakras, musical notes. The color and patterns of saris and turbans geographically locate the wearer and often identify one as part of a community or religious sect. However, what I gleaned from my research was that a specific color does not equal a specific object or philosophical concept. There's not a specific red that is associated with brides but red in general is the bridal color, associated with fecundity, blood, and creativity. Krishna is, the blue-skinned God. One of his names is Shyam. The meaning of Shyam in Sanskrit is very poetic. It's the tempestuous color of blue of the sky right before the monsoon rain starts. Monsoon season is regarded as the most romantic time of year and Krishna is the cosmic lover. Colors and their associations are layered in meaning throughout the culture.

In addition, there's an ancient and sophisticated Indian aesthetic theory based on Rasa which loosely translates as flavor or essence. This holds that the importance of the work of art is the response that it elicits from the viewer. This response, which is emotional, intellectual, philosophical, spiritual, if you will, presumes active engagement and also a rigorous connoisseurship. This thinking resonates with some currents in contemporary art.

CAK: Besides being drawn in by the color, I also feel like I am entering another dimension, one of great depth. They are immersive.

SB: I hope so. I aim for a slow unfolding and reveal rather than an immediate graphic visual effect. Matisse described the process of painting as “a slow elaboration.” My ideal audience would be willing to spend the time to explore the multiple layers of both drawing and color. Because of the way I layer color, my paintings appear differently throughout the day; the work reveals itself over time and under varying light conditions. And I consciously work to achieve an ambiguity of spatial relationship.

CAK: And is this spatial relationship intentionally one of great depth?

SB: I am very interested in creating a sense of deep space in my painting. Since we've moved to California, I've become quite involved with the Carnegie Observatories, the astronomical arm of the Carnegie Institute, I've been attending lectures and seeing a lot of images of space, actual photographic images, as well as computer-generated theoretical models. This has been a marvelous source of inspiration. There is an interesting relationship for me between contemporary images of space and 16th and 17th century Jain and Hindu cosmological diagrams I studied in India. There is a curious correlation between what we now know to exist and how the universe was imagined and depicted.

CAK: I can't help but think how painting is still one of the most difficult technologies to do right, especially in the age of advanced technologies such as virtual and augmented technology. It would be remiss not to discuss the artists whose work comments on art in the age of mechanical reproduction, like Gerhard Richter. He commented that he can make no statement about reality clearer than his own relationship to reality; and this has a great deal to do with imprecision, uncertainty, transience, incompleteness, or whatever—not to explain the pictures, but at best it explains what led to their being painted. How would you explain what led up to your paintings being painted?

SB: In our technologically driven society, almost everything is made by machines and most of what we see every day are made or generated by technology. As a result, there is an integrity, something distinctive and compelling, about the hand-made, with attention to craft and technique that will always have value. Although I am working spontaneously and intuitively, I have been a painter for 50 plus years and understand the technical aspects of putting the paint down while allowing for things that are unexpected to happen and to elaborate on them. I use marks to create a surface or atmosphere or energy within the painting. At the same time, I am drawing from nature, which is a different skill and hand.

CAK: Do you consider these marks signatory, unique to your hand?

SB: Yes. We can identify people from their handwriting; autographical mark-making is specific to every individual. A scholar looked at a series of Monet's late waterlily paintings and determined that there were 26 distinct brushstrokes or marks that Monet used, explicitly corresponding to an alphabet. In my own work, I would make a distinction between mark making which is autographical and gestural and drawing from nature, which is more deliberate and attuned to the contours and idiosyncrasies of the object.

CAK: So, do you see your painting being part of the dialogue that is taking place in the art world now?

SB: The intent of my work has always been a call to beauty or wonder, the sublime, as it were, and not the purely decorative. What I mean by this is hope for an experience that transcends the quotidian. This is a critical concept especially in response to our times—often so depressing or apocalyptic—to engage the mind and the spirit of the viewer in an imaginative process touching upon our common humanity.