

Frog

Interview

Austin Eddy

Y

ou like to say you're inspired by personal experiences and emotions. Can you elaborate—and explain how these translate into birds?

The bird here is more of a vehicle. A metaphor for aspects of the self. They never really exist as one thing across all the paintings, sculptures or drawings. They don't even retain the same meaning in the same painting months apart. The bird feels fluid to me, the image becomes a mirror for the viewer in a way. They are there to reflect an experience or thought and allow a space for viewer to construct their own relationships. My personal experiences are being transcribed through painting but get buried in

the process. The story starts with a memory or an experience, something as mundane as water flowing under a bridge or around a sandbar. To recall a feeling is the goal. The sandbar becomes an obstacle or a moment of reprieve. We can all relate to personal obstacles or the need for rest. The bird in this instance is us, you or me. For a long time, I painted figures, the figure was difficult to navigate in that their image can be simple to understand in a way. A person in a room watching the clock has pretty linear narrative. I got too bogged down with the one to one of this, I needed to free myself from it and find more poetry.

— *Birds appeared quite recently in your work. Why did they? Are they a metaphor for humans? Are they here to stay forever?*

The birds grew out of a previous body of work. Prior to this I was working through a more symbol-based abstraction which stemmed

from the rejection of the figure. In these more shape-based works I was looking to construct a story through shape and color. Create a sense of place and tension similar to representational painting via geometry. The forms became more and more complex, and eventually started to echo the world again. The abstract paintings became very focused on time and the transition from one point to another. There was a lot of repetition and a central "figure" emerged. This group of forms slowly transitioned into something reminiscent to that of a boat with riders, sort of similar to boats in illuminated manuscripts. Pushing that form further, the boat eventually transformed into a bird with a figure on its back. After working through that combination, the bird eventually became the focus and the figure was lost. The "bird's" relationship to space became more significant than the rider's to the vessel. It was here that the bird began to be more of a metaphor for self or a stand in for aspects of the human condition and the landscape a psychological state or scenario. I have no idea if the birds are here forever in my work. Oftentimes the evolution and changes that take place are rather organic. Something may happen by chance that could become more interesting and I will follow that. Right now, the paintings are shifting more towards cityscapes and interiors / still lives. Sort of refocusing on the geometric aspects of abstraction. Introducing more pattern and flat space.

— *Warhol said there were many people ready to display the painting of an electric chair in their living room as long as the color matched the color of the sofa. I guess this opens the door to painting birds... What's your relation to the decorative aspect of your work?*

I am not opposed to decoration or the use of decorative aspects. It is a great tool and it has a very rich history. It can be a nice way to welcome the viewer into the world of painting. Decoration can also be a great space for more complicated relationships to unfold, there is sense of familiarity where the viewers can gain their footing. Sort of like a back handed complement. At the end of the day what painting isn't partially decorative? Somedays a nicely embellished chair is more interesting than a contemporary painting. I think I would be more concerned if my paintings were considered illustrative.



— *You used to do sculpture in the past but recently you've experimented bronze sculpture. Why is that and do you like it?*

In school the first year there they made us all take a semester long class where we had to do it all. Performance, video, sculpture, painting, drawing, fibers etc. It was very eye-opening. One quickly learned what they did not like. I was one of those people whose interests were confirmed quite quickly. Painting stuck, drawing stuck, and I was pleasantly introduced to sculpture. Visually it had always been of interest to me, though I never thought I would be able to make it in any serious way. All through college and after I tried to make interesting sculptures. It was not till last year that I was really able to find a voice in the medium, or at least a footing. Bronzes felt historic and something that "Artists" did. I figured if they could do it, so could I. So I did. I think it has been a very freeing addition to my practice. I like being an amateur at things. The learning and the failures that go along with it are freeing. Sometimes those awkwardness makes for the most interesting work. The sculptures are slightly ham-handed and clunky, but there is a subtle elegance to them gifted through the material. I like that as well. They feel like drawings in space to me. They don't really address the 3rd dimension, but maybe the 4th.

— *There's a story going on about your first drawing being one of a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle.*

This is true. My mother likes to share this one often. I think she is being overly kind, but I will take it. When I was younger, independent play was my activity of choice. So I would often be found scribbling away unintelligibly alone until one day I came to my parents drawing in hand. An organized arrangement of scribbles and dashes and proudly told them it was a ninja turtle. One of my heroes at the time. Since then, it's still been a similar undertaking.

— *You've been running a small gallery in your studio and been doing so also out of your studio. Recently you've been curating a show with historical photography. How does all this relate to your painting work?*

For a long time, or maybe a not so long time (2015-2017) I ran a gallery out of the coat closet in my apartment. While living in Chicago I was introduced to the idea of the apartment gallery. There it was a staple, it was a resource free from the "market." They provided a great place to show work and interact with a community of peers. In NYC at the time there seemed to be a need for these kinds of alternative spaces. (There is still a need, and a new generation is chomping at the bit doing and a great job with these alternative spaces. A recent gem I was introduced to was OK gallery. They do their shows in the window of a hardware store in SOHO.) At the time, not having a lot of things to fill a closet with I decided to show art which was being kept in there anyway. At first it was art that I had acquired through trades. These shows were exhausted quite quickly, so I had to start reaching out to people I knew and some I didn't, but respected. The best part about these shows was none of the work was for sale. So you could have work from artists showing in the city without it being a

conflict of interest etc. I thought of it more as a place for artists to do something experimental. After a while, the building sold and we had to move so the gallery closed. Since then, I have been fortunate enough to keep curating some shows in other people's galleries. I really enjoy putting shows together, it's a way to solidify thoughts or perceived connections. The historical photography show was a nice experience. I found a lot of the work very informative. The shows don't really relate to my personal painting practice. They are often objects and works that I admire and like, so in a way they could be considered inspirational. But it was more about the connections with people and the conversations that grew from these shows. The black and white photography show was an alternative way to investigate and discuss something I was interested in at the time.

— *Is there a group of artists you feel close to?*

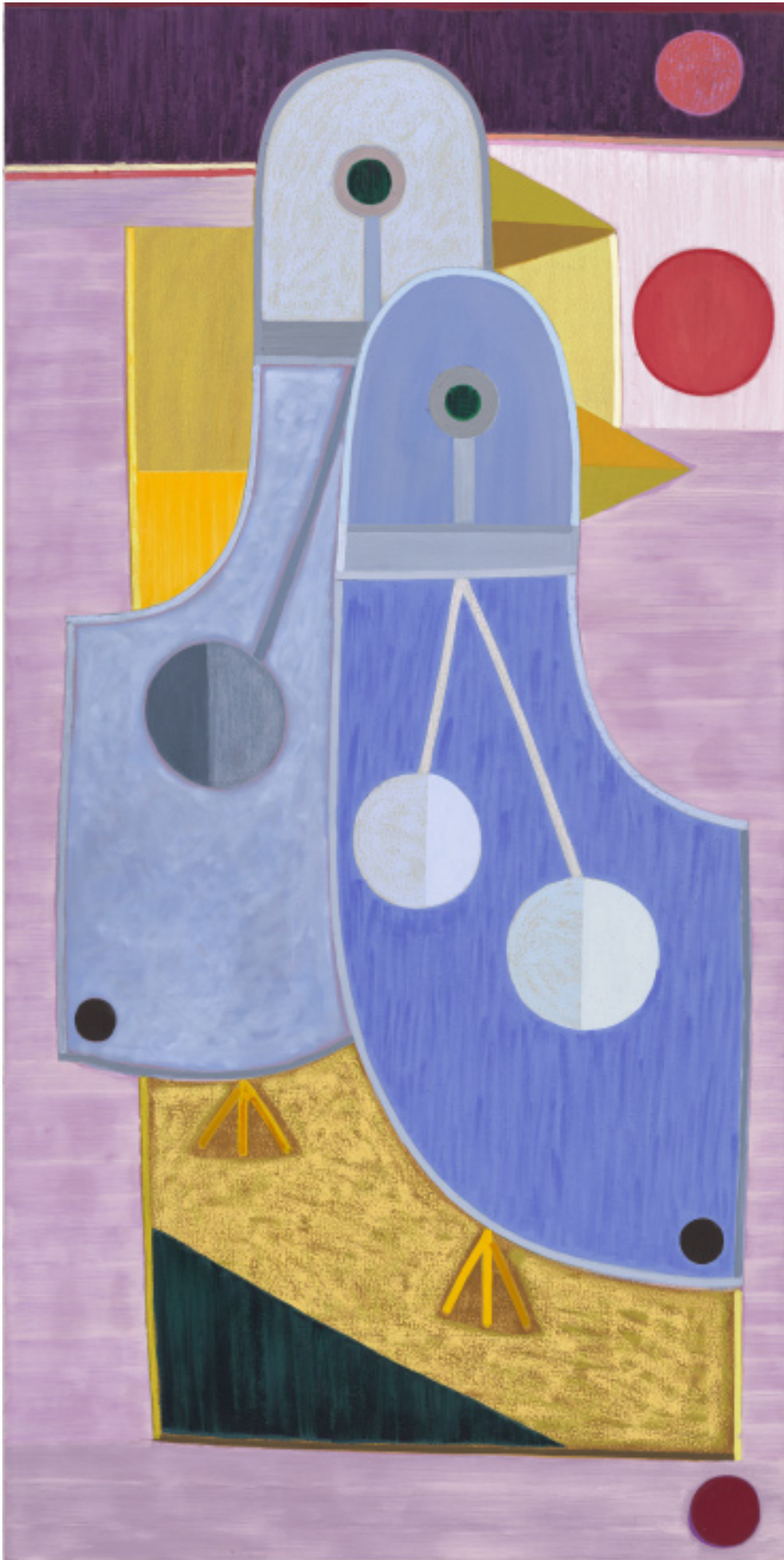
There are a good number of artists whose work I feel a closeness to. I do not know all of them personally, but I feel a kinship. But I do not find myself a part of a movement or something like this. As for day-to-day interpersonal relationships with people, I do have a number of friends who are artists, writers etc. But the pandemic changed a lot of things. Some people moved away, some people are somewhat reluctant to go out, the idea of the pod changed how people interact too. I still find independent play most preferable.

— *You often mention Matisse, Picasso, Arp, Brancusi, and Miro as sources for your work. Anything more recent?*

I do love these artists' work. I find their take on the world fascinating. The way they process information is something I am still trying to understand. There are a number of more contemporary / modern artists who have become very interesting to me. Not necessarily in the more recent category, I have been looking into the work of Doris Lee, Sonia Delaunay, Felix Vallotton, Brassai, Willy Ronis, Milton Avery, Sally Avery, Arthur Dove, Helen Torr and I just rediscovered the work of Wolf Barth. As for more contemporary artists I recently saw some nice shows put on in NYC. I really enjoyed the Sterling Ruby show and Betty Woodman's exhibition. And to keep the list going, I really love the work of Ann Craven, Bendix Harms, Carroll Dunham, Chris Ofili, Josh Smith, Stanley Whitney, Shara Hughes, Tamara Gonzales, vintage needle point (not antique, more 70's) basket weavers from Charleston, and of course my niece's drawings. The list goes on, but I will save your eyes and stop myself here.

— *I remember interviewing William Wegman a long time ago, and he told me then he knew when a painting is done when he could picture this painting in a museum between two great painters he admired. Chose two painters (or better two paintings) to be displayed on each side of one of yours in an ideal museum.*

This is a tough one! There are so many beautiful museums and so many amazing paintings. My gut response for the first painting would be James Ensor's "Christ's Entry Into Brussels" (1889) hanging at the Getty. The painting is amazing, the use of green is really nice. Plus I really like the room it is on display in, and the grounds you go through at that museum to get there are quite special. The second work is a bit more challenging... Maybe it is not a painting, it might have to be a Calder sculpture. I am quite fond of the work "Janey Waney" (1969) which I first saw in the Jardin des Tuileries I think, and then again at the Louisiana. Or maybe it was the other way around. Either way, that work has







made a lasting impression. I really enjoy the back and forth of its solidity and playfulness. Plus both those venues are breath taking, and inspiring on their own. That grouping might make a nice room. Particularly if on display at the Louisiana, in the room where they normally have the Alberto Giacometti (“Walking Man”, 1960) overlooking the pond and cemetery in the distance. But that is for today, tomorrow it will be a new group and a new museum.

— *You’ve really been traveling the world recently. Has this affected your practice in terms of style, subjects or intentions?*

This past year was very exciting and equally exhausting. I was very fortunate and had the opportunity to go to a good number of new cities and countries. Lots to take in really. Mostly for work, and or for my fiancé’s work. After all this traveling there was a lot of visual and emotional stimuli to absorb and even more to process after getting back home. In a way it did have a profound impact on my work. I think it reinvigorated a need for directness and clarity. All these new locations lent me their light, and atmosphere, something refreshing and new. But all this newness begged for something familiar. After absorbing all these new places, I started to paint New York for the first time. Most recently I have been making paintings of the view out of my kitchen window. Something simple and familiar. The scene is rather banal, the window overlooks an empty bird feeder, a wooden fence and stacks of buildings. There is some sky buried in there as well. A turn from the previous paintings which were calling to distant places while confined during the pandemic.

— *The format of your canvasses is more than often non-conventional. Because the birds make your paintings easy to consider, I was wondering if these strange formats were meant to bring weirdness.*

The format shift was really a byproduct of the pandemic. For the longest time, I was working in very standard sizes. At the time I shifted to painting the birds I was still trying to work with those formats. Keeping one known while trying to understand the new motif. Then things started to shut down. Once that happened, I was forced to recycle stretcher bars from my studio when ordering new ones was not an option, putting together the odd sizes of paintings that did not work and leftovers to find these new rectangles. Very often they were very elongated. I found this format rather challenging. It forced a shift in narrative in a way. The paintings were now being read top to bottom, rather than left to right. The image could fold in on its self and start over. In a way the format forced a weirdness, as did the subject matter. But I also think there is an inherent weirdness to trying something new. Right now I am working on mostly squares. That is a whole new set of issues I am working through.

— *Avant-garde painting today seems to embrace styles that were really hated by the avant-garde in the late XXth century. Your birds would probably have had no success in the 80s. I guess at the time, to refer to folk art was not even something an avant-garde artist would consider.*

I am not sure, I don’t think it’s all that popular still. It seems like people really look for the divide between “high” and “low” when it comes to art. Or maybe it is that people have always looked at or have been aware of this kind of work in one form or another. It’s a very honest kind of work, it is hard to deny honesty. It may not have been the most influential, but from my understanding it has always been done simultaneously and so one would think there has been some sense of cross over or influence.

— *Do you sometimes feel a prisoner of the style you’ve established?*

To be a prisoner to something you have developed is a difficult situation or mental space to occupy. I am not sure if I have reached a point of exhaustion in my exploration yet. To the contrary I feel there is a new sense of freedom with the work. I recently started making bronze sculptures in the past year or so, which have been very invigorating and informative. This new process has provided new insight on the previous visual language and has informed other aspects of my practice in new ways. These things tend to feed off one another, constantly growing, absorbing and trimming the fat where need be. Each day feels more like an opportunity and less like a cell. There still seems to be a lot of potential and unexplored areas in the visual language that I have been interested in over the past years. There is an endless potential to the simplest of things. Often where I feel most like a prisoner is in time. There seems to never be enough of it, there is always more work to do, people and things to experience and see.

p.106: “Mystical Dusk” (2022)
Oil, Flashe on canvas 80x40 inches
pp.108-109: “Mystical Dusk” (2022) (details)
Oil, Flashe on canvas 80x40 inches
p.111: “Melancholy” (2022)
Oil, Flashe on canvas 60x36 inches

