

For Mary Conrad, painting is an exploration of sight. The artist, who was trained in early life as a biologist, is enamored with the function of seeing and the ways we process visual information. While the majority of Conrad's work is highly cerebral and systems-based, her paintings offer a grounded analysis into one of our universal and foundational truths – our ability to see. She uses painting as a method of thinking and a tool to shift from her mind into her body. This is a crucial step in information processing that allows the artist to bring forth nascence creativity. It is through the act of seeing that she moves out of her mind space into the physical realm.

The artist often muses on the pleasure in seeing and is fascinated by the mysterious and wonder-filled mechanisms behind the act of sight. Viewing most of her experience through a scientific lens, the artist thinks about the eye as an organ – its intake of light as wavelengths, the processing of color, and our brains' ability to make sense of what we see. Philosophically, she views seeing as a kind of a magic – defined by the liminal space between knowing and not knowing. That is why, as she describes, the world is magical to children, who are in continuous awe of their surroundings as they attempt to make sense of their experience. Conrad remarks on walking through the Impressionist rooms at Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the delight in seeing the quality of color, the use of light, the textures and shape. Conrad's work is influenced by painters like Paul Cézanne who, like his Impressionist peers, are able to paint not only what they see, but what they feel, in an exploration of our spectacular and uncanny ability to observe and enjoy.

At the genesis of Conrad's painting process, she is visually struck by something so moving that it becomes a catalyst for a series of subsequent investigations. Sometimes she will take a photograph or create a sketch as she slates her painting. Each

expression is a way to see the subject new. She explores her love of artist materials, like Arches Watercolor Paper, Kremer and Blockx paints, and Conté crayons, that root her in physicality and allow her to watch as her vision unfolds under different mediums. Whether a sketch on toothed papers or saturated paint on canvas or board, every iteration becomes a variance in sight that brings Conrad one step closer to who she is and what she wants to say.

Her subject matter includes Impressionistic interpretations of lush gardens and tall trees, intimate portraits of her family and friends, or large canvases of shapes and colors fill the walls of her studio. Her subject matter is two-fold, working in both figuration and abstracted compositions. In her figurative work, she chooses loved ones to paint in ecstatic color. In *Tony*, Conrad paints her husband in loose expression, a beloved figure softening into the lilac sky and natural landscape behind him. The piece is curious, like it is exploring a secret that only the artist and her partner know. She sees not only the physicality of her sitter but the magic and unknowingness that's present between them.

Some of Conrad's work reaches even further into abstraction. But because she lives and thinks in a very concrete world, she chooses to anchor even her most abstract pieces in something tangible and, oftentimes, universal. In her *Alphabets* series, she explores her fascination with language and alphabets as shape, form, and meaning. Marked in her oeuvre by grids containing amorphous shapes, the series uses visual cadence and repetitive gestures to navigate the act of pattern-seeking and the process of turning visual information into something coherent and significant. She uses the ambiguous forms to mimic our continuous search for meaning, a process that humans have labored over since the dawn of the species. It is the suggestion of a story,

rendered in contained, rhythmic space and abstract marks, that elicits a curiosity in the viewer to make sense of its message. As if bringing us back to our preverbal state, we experience the phenomenon of trying to know.

Conrad's sculptural work is highly conceptual, often centering existential theory and societal infrastructure with a focus on the ways humans have built and engage with their environment. She is heavily influenced by climate change and uses her mathematical and architectural background to inform much of her work on the subject. Though this part of her practice is disparate from her paintings, she applies the same exact care to it as she would a portrait of a loved one and uses her painting practice to guide her into attention to the larger systems at play. She says, "I'm a painter like Rauschenberg is a painter," who skillfully blurred the lines between painting, mixed media, and sculpture while maintaining a conceptual centrum. Conrad similarly frees herself from one medium as she examines the ways in which macro-systems and our inherent drives influence our collective experience and our dynamic need to progress. Like in *In Martha's Vineyard at Robbie's, By the Pool*, a diptych of her two sons who are long since grown, the artist witnesses stages of development and their potentials through attentive observation. We find the same sense of intimacy and responsibility applied both to kin and collective alike, taking care of whatever subject she chooses.

Whether abstract or figurative, there is this sense of intimacy, curiosity, and awe in each work as she explores different aspects of our humanness. The love of her subjects and of seeing and understanding are omnipresent, and, above all, there is an overwhelming sense of care. This is the core of Conrad's work – an ability to mother; to pay attention to, to understand, to soothe, and help grow. Most importantly, it is Conrad's work to see.