

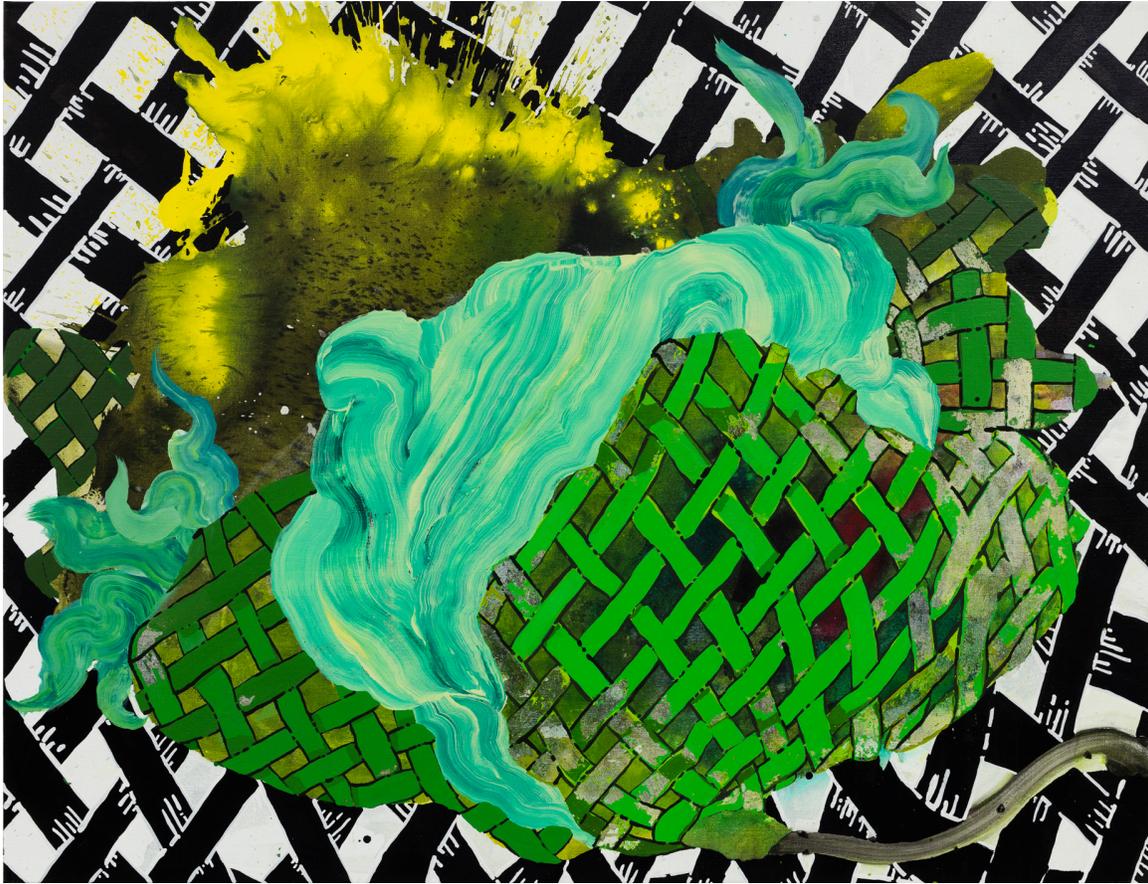
ARTISTS INTERVIEWING ARTISTS

The Clemente 2021 Open Studios

NICOLE PARCHER and KYLIE HEIDENHEIMER interview ELISABETH CONDON. January, 2021



Elisabeth Condon, Sidewalk, 2019, ink, acrylic on linen, 90 x 84 inches



Elisabeth Condon, Basket Weave Flower, 2019, ink, acrylic on linen, 40 x 52 inches / 101.6 x 132.08 cm

Nicole Parcher (NP)

Elisabeth, I am very drawn to the work you created in the Effulgence series and the installations you created in your exhibition at Emerson Dorsch Gallery in 2019. Why did you choose this title for this series?

Elisabeth Condon (EC)

Effulgence is “brightness taken to the extreme. You may be dazzled by it, stunned by it, or even overcome by it. Usually used to refer to the sun or some other mega-star, effulgence can also be used more figuratively” is the dictionary definition. I was thinking of *Effulgence* in terms of lavishness, color, richness, paint, immediacy, solar eclipse-like, all at once, startling, epic, yet transitory. These paintings were made during an intensely productive time after 8 months of brush painting and a print residency etching with Graphicstudio. There was a lot to work out. There was a real sense of freedom with this work from the brush painting practice, a lot of experimentation and one-shot paintings.

NP: Much has been written about this exhibition in two essays, one by Jason Stopa in *Two Coats of Paint* and the other by Tyler Emerson-Dorsch in the accompanying exhibition catalog.

EC: I really loved how Stopa linked my paintings to *Pattern and Decoration* as well as *visionary painting*, because both are enormous influences on my work.

Emerson-Dorsch also wrote a great essay foregrounding my work with Georgia O'Keefe's flowers.

NP: It was difficult to choose only two pieces to discuss from your amazing body of work but I settled on **Basket Weave Flower**, made with ink and acrylic on linen and **Sidewalk**, ink, acrylic and pumice on linen. I love the variety of brush marks and washes, loose painterly marks, drips, and pours in contrast with the tight more controlled lines. The varied textures and marks and layers have a feeling of collage to me. Some of the paintings look like collages in the way the images are arranged and juxtaposed. Does that resonate with you? Do you see elements of collage in your work? Have you ever worked with collage?

EC: When I returned from my first solo exhibition in Beijing in 2009, I became obsessed with collage and made a series of fourteen works that put ideas into motion, such as thinly layered spaces bumping up against each other and using imagery as gesture, like abstraction. This approach upended my sense of gravity and opened my work to a new way of seeing, suspended without a horizon line.



Elisabeth Condon, Figment 9, 2009, 22.5 x 37.5 inches

NP: I think of Arturo Herrera's paintings that are so influenced by his collages. Do you work primarily on the floor or a table, do you pour the paint or is it all done with brushes? Can you describe your process for creating your work? It feels

very physical to me and I know music is a part of your process because I can hear it from my studio down the hall.

EC: Arturo Herrera and I both received MFAs from SAIC but I didn't know him and am not sure when he was there! Your question makes me look at his work closely; he and I both work serially, in topical groups, like batches.

To answer your question I work on the floor with pours then bringing it to the wall with brushes. I pour paint then brush on it, and also go through a very weird process of chipping away at paint with a palette knife, a very physical kind of erasure that leaves traces on the painting that really satisfy me, a kind of digging. Lately, in painting patterns, I've been using more drawing and image-based approaches. I liken painting lattice to brush painting practice, both demand focus and repetition until the patterns or gestures and ink load for each form are embodied, before its time to paint. Pouring can happen below and on top of the lattice because each forms a sliver-like layer in the composition, as if tectonic plates were slowly crossing over each other.

NP: I snuck in a third image because I want to discuss the use of 3-D elements in your exhibition. What made you choose to add the pieces of wooden lattice and birds? Did you have this in mind when you first created the pieces? How do the sculptural elements work with the paintings? I like how realistic imagery is often suggested in your work and plays with the abstract shapes. Can you talk a bit about this?

EC: I really love pouring and gesture and material, playing with material as a way to back into a painting, but our world is filled with imagery, signs and symbols that are also part of the landscape. After a residency at the print atelier Graphicstudio, where we produced a 7 bite etching, I was thinking of multiple shallow layers of space. I had also been playing with print spinoffs in the studio there, creating dimensional landscapes from the trial runs. This got me excited about flattening space, which first came up in the flower paintings I made on return from China in 2015.

So I flattened space as best I could in the painting *Effulgence* (2019). Though a broad, flat painter by nature, I find it awfully hard to suck volume out of an image. Incorporating lattice from wallpaper pattern samples, structures such as the Matterhorn at Disneyland being built, and pigeons within a poured landscape, keeping the color minimal, on three linen substrates gridded and flattened the space in a pleasing way. I began to think of wallpaper samples like billboards in this painting, and placed them that way in the landscape.

Afterwards, I worked with an excellent woodworker and metalsmith to build lattice, bird and plant props that would lean back toward, yet pull space out from the painting surface. In a way this brought collage to three-dimensional space in the gallery. Before *Effulgence*, I'd spent eight months intensively practicing brush painting, which shows up in the plant form most especially. Pattern is like brush painting, perhaps not challenging in the same way, but very much alike in its demand to keep eye and hand sharp despite the idiom's familiarity.



Elisabeth Condon, *Effulgence*, Installation View, 2019
Acrylic on linen panels, painted wood and metal structures, Emerson Dorsch Gallery, Miami



Elisabeth Condon, *Checkers* 2020, calligraphy and dispersion inks and acrylic on linen
30 x 21 inches / 76.2 x 53.34 cm



Elisabeth Condon, *Lattice Dreams* 2020, Calligraphy and dispersion inks and acrylic on Fabriano scroll, 55 x252 inches

Kylie Heidenheimer (KH)

Elisabeth, I see in some of your work, a declarative quality. Gestures and pours can have a swift, deliberate, sword-brandishing feel. Recent lattice works can be “slower”. Some pour areas are left pristine. Other parts you go back into. The scrolls and larger earlier works as well possess this kind of aplomb. There seems to be reverence for the pristine. There are places - at times dominant underpinnings - in the work that are a single-swath, or un-layered.

Elisabeth Condon (EC)

I cannot overestimate the importance of landscape in my work, in the sense of my immediate surroundings. My hand and eye absorb atmosphere faster than my mind can. Heavier paintings reflect urban density. Lighter paintings reflect warmer, more natural climes. It is really at the core that simple.

Yet my love for brush painting enters in as well. When practicing, I leave room for emptiness. I am also in awe of pure color. Pristine is a very good word. It speaks to my desire to reach epiphany with each painting. It is fortunate when I achieve it and less so when I cannot, although sometimes the recognition comes later. There is a strong push-me-pull-you relationship with struggle I can get into. It’s real, but there’s a lot more in the way when that is happening.

KH: Is this to materialize and preserve pristineness? Is it also a way to keep energy moving, i.e. moving forward? Is it finally too, a way of respecting the support, a kind of reverence for the latter? In that, there should be places on it that are not “dug in to”?

EC: I respect the surface quality in painting and use the absolute best materials I can afford. Pristine can be a way of letting things be, as the start of a painting can be so beautiful. I sometimes question labor in painting, particularly as brush painting happens so quickly. That said, plenty of labor goes on behind the performance of brush painting. So it is a question of whether the labor is on the surface, or not.

KH: Finally, and perhaps most to the point, I wonder too, with the horizontal works, if there is a keeping apace with real time. In that regard, I wonder if in addition to the notion and implementation of the scroll, if the pace of film/ cinema is an influence.

EC: Cinema is nothing more than a mechanical scroll, really, writ large in dimensional scale. Though I watch a lot of movies as a fan of auteur films, I savor the pristine nature of scrolls and their ability to animate. This refers to Walter Benjamin’s essay *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in which he discusses the immediate impact of mechanically made films and newspapers, as opposed to the slowed time of viewing art. Time for me is simultaneous. As a confluent thinker with very fast instincts, I can be slow to understand sequencing. This results in pouring all at once, then patterning willy-nilly, like an abstract expressionist more than a designer. Therefore, painting in sessions with long bouts of looking between splice time and allow me to manipulate the various paint

applications in new ways and also splice time, mechanically, then assembling it so it seems immediate.

KH: In reflecting on your work's horizontality, David Reed's paintings now come to mind. Since two of his pieces were in POUR curated by you and Carol Prusa at Lesley Heller and Asya Geisberg galleries, I know you see his work, at least in certain respects, as pivotal and seminal. Do you feel both you and he use horizontality similarly, or differently? Are vertical, smaller weave pieces like *Checkers*, 2020 and *Basket Weave Flowers*, 2020 "slices" of time as opposed to the horizontal works' possible mirror of it?

EC: Reed too is about the performative mark, like brush painting but from a completely different line of enquiry. His gesture is almost like a lasso, a "move", a camera pan from the painter. Yet media is a point where our work intersects. He references Hitchcock, while I resonate with cartoons, but the result in both cases is a mediated space that is both self-conscious and also spellbound by paint. There is a, to use your word again, an insistence on the pristine: perhaps the desire to get it right, sweep a surface clean of unnecessary information, make the point, and be concise.

The smaller works you cite, *Checkers* and *Basket Weave Flowers*, are outtakes from a larger whole, in that the breadth of my work forms an unfurling scroll that one day may come together in a singular context, but they contain that whole within them. All the elements are there in a smaller bite. So though each contains a full sense of time, in terms of scale and how they will be viewed they will communicate in bite-sized slices.

KH: *Checkers*, beyond its verticality, does something quite different than *Lattice Dreams* and some of your other compositions: there is an atypical directionality. Things are shooting diagonally up and outward of the canvas, almost into the air. Might this be a way to further emphasize sliced time? Also atypical in *Checkers* are the heavy, greenish/reddish darks in conjunction with a saturated orange red. Can you mention inclinations behind this?

EC: The directional pours are, in other paintings, enclosed and encased by thin additions of color. Here I let them be, perhaps as relief from the heavier pours in the central form.

The heavy pours are both limited and unlimited in their capacity to surprise. There's a very small format, just 30 x 21 inches, for the pours to exist within. And this allows me to push forward with the heaviness very quickly, to see how far I can go, how far the paint will go. It's hurry up and wait, the pours are quick so there is a heated full engagement before the slow drying time ensues. I find that color poured within another color resurfaces in the most interesting way, which have brought my palettes to a very low tonality to achieve subtle, rich tonalities.

Yet, a painting wants some fire, so I brought in the cadmium red light to ignite the palette beyond its autumnal sobriety. There is also a comparison between the way this painting is made with volcanic explosions, which are volatile and epic and then leave traces over time.

KH: One thing I love about *Lattice Dreams* (and true to parts of *Checkers*) is the way there is tighter, more imploded energy on the left that furls across the support and bursts openly at the right. Yet at the same time, the energy is encircled by broken, multi-directional lattice; also with the lattice green/yellows sitting back from the furl pink/whites. There is also on the left side of the scroll, a twisted green lattice piece facing outside the canvas—a way, perhaps, to bring the viewer to another, outer plane. The

leaves atop the poured furl seem, in a hovering way, as with the pours themselves, to pay the support homage.

In looking at *Lattice Dreams* more, I am beginning to see slowness and aplomb merge. A new tempo is forming. Swiftness is perhaps encountering temper. Is this a ferment of cultural, personal and experiential knowledge (the lattice) that comes together with forces that are not knowable? Is the pour stream a step into the unknown? Is seeking the not-readily-explicable the impetus for your extensive involvement with Chinese scrolls/ landscape? Finally is the lattice a bridge between the present and the past? It was ubiquitous in wallpaper design and literally when and where you grew up. Is it perhaps re-definable for you today?

EC: The pour is always the contingency, the unexpected, which keeps me coming back to painting, the surprise of what it can do. Chinese scrolls and the practice inherent in them is simultaneously a material (ink), spiritual (concentrated, or meditative), and image-making practice. You are literally breathing ink and paper, fusing form and gesture together with the inflection of your wrist. Scroll painting is not always “wrist-y”, but there is no shame in so saying, unlike Western abstract expressionism. I sought a system without binaries as early as 2000, exhausted by the conflicts and manufactured geometries in western painting. In 2003, I discovered the holistic philosophy in scroll painting.

The lattice is indeed a bridge to my past, for it was literally wallpaper in my mother’s bathroom and is taken from her sample. But setting it free in flows of color unmoors it from interior space into a river, coursing to new unknowns. In its grid-like weaves, it also signals a return to New York, infused with the harmonies of Shanghai. I began thinking about how to adapt scroll painting and the culture of soothing, from sappy pop music to excellent tea, into the urban grid of Manhattan, and lattice appeared as the next step.