

In anticipation of the debut exhibition of **Brush/Lens Project** at the Jeanie Tengelsen Gallery, Peter Pitzele, who writes a regular column for the Art League of Long Island, visited Holly Gordon and Ward Hooper in their respective homes and studios to capture the essence of their collaboration.

Confluence

Musings on the Brush/Lens Project

Art/Write by Peter Pitzele

According to the conventional story, the arrival of photography into the cultural moment of the 19th century (and co-incident, as it was, with the manufacture of oil paint into tubes) brought about a rift in the world of the visual arts. Painting, formerly enshrined in the European Academies, was dislodged by the unsurpassable realism of the camera, and in search of its particular means, painting headed out of town: first Impressionism took to the country, then came the urban cavalcade of modernism with its dodgy relationship to representation.

Whatever truth there is in this story, the present show “Brush/Lens” offers a challenge to our conception of the relationship between painting and photography. That angled backslash tilting between Brush and Lens brings them closer than a stodgy hyphen. Far from wishing to mark how different brush is from lens, I think Holly Gordon and Ward Hooper want to say something about how the two can relate to one another as dancers rather than adversaries.

And there is something even deeper in what is to be seen here. We are not only invited to re-evaluate the relationship between brush and lens, but to think for a bit about the relationship of Holly and Ward. When they talk about their collaboration---and they do so with openly--- I hear them both marveling at having been brought together at this time in their lives and not just for the opportunity to make an exhibition in a show that by point and counterpoint might reveal each to better advantage. They attest that a more mysterious and deeper purpose has drawn them together. They see “Brush/Lens” as just the beginning.

Puzzling on their relationship, I suddenly found the word “confluence” occurring to me. The word refers to the flowing together of two strong and formerly independent streams. Confluence in the arts can only occur, it seems to me, when at least three elements are present: 1. each artist must retain the strongest sense of identity; 2. each must be capable of a deep empathic and aesthetic admiration for the work of the other; and 3. each must receive with and from the other an added measure of inspiration.

So it seems with Holly and Ward. They come to one another from a lifetime of dedication, Holly to her camera, Ward to his watercolors. Neither was looking for any kind of partnership. But then out of the blue (a color of glowing and signature significance for each of them) what began as a Face Book glance almost immediately became very real and, well, confluential connection.

The question then arises: What do I see in their pictures that might illuminate this confluence? What do they have in common as artists, albeit working in different mediums, that combusts into collaboration? Before looking in particular at one of their pairs, I have some notions about structure, tempo, and color that come from surveying the show.

Ward Hooper’s way of working as a watercolorist derives from his professional life on Madison Avenue as a graphic designer. That career and its discipline strengthened and directed his native gifts, one of which is his ability to grasp the essential and realize that on paper. Call the essential “structure.” All of Ward’s paintings are set before the viewer with a solidity, a rightness, that is not muscular but skeletal. He gets the bones right.

Holly’s structural sense has been schooled in the hard-wiring of the camera itself, where there is always a frame and a view. Some of Holly’s most intimate and intense moments have come to her through the lens. Her visual imagination is wedded to the camera’s settings and refined in the darkrooms of various computer applications. Her eidetic memory is an archive of stills. She, too, knows about structures, both of the world she sees and the instrument with which she sees it.

In both cases, the seeing eye came first, then the art. Artists such as Holly and Ward seek to use their art to share the way they see. Does Ward really see the world in colors that may not seem to us purely natural? And the same of Holly: does she really see this way, sometimes soft, sometimes surreal? My sense is the answer is yes and no. No, the color shifts, the compressions, the edits transform the world as it appears to the naked eye; but at the same time through all these actions these artists seek to render the visual/feel of the world as it registered on their nerves. The word “aesthetics,” I am fond of repeating, comes from the Greek work to feel.

Let me say something about pace or speed. Some artists work fast and other slow, and the lure of a medium in part depends on something like one’s aesthetic metabolism, the tempo at which creative flow finds its rhythm. Part of what Holly and Ward have in common, I suspect, is their heart rate.

Of course, we think we know how quickly one takes a photograph. Snap. Shot. Most of us leave the settings on automatic. But digital cameras admit of a wide range of adjustments, and Holly knows them intimately. Therefore she knows without thinking what version of her seeing the camera will capture. The result may be final or the occasion for creative refinement on the computer, a synthesis of reflex and revision. And I believe this synthesis between reflex and reflection, so different given their mediums, is common to Ward’s work as well. They both work up their image and they both know when to stop.

And to return for a moment to this matter of the feeling of seeing. For many artists color generates a feeling-sense. I believe that both Holly and Ward share this capacity to feel color. If one thinks of color metaphorically as having, say, a musical quality, then part of what you “hear” in this show are their harmonies, the color duets, their riffs, for which their motifs are sometimes scaffolds---structurally sound, quickly achieved, but armatures nonetheless for the music of color. For feelings. The colors to which they return again and again---look around at the exhibition and feel the zones of color in which you are invited to swim---are a huge part of their confluence.

Here are two pictures from the show where I can try out these general notions:

Ward Hooper: "Long Island City"



Holly Gordon: "Night Lights"



Ward's "Long Island City" is a jazzy riff of color and shapes. The pale descending blues and pinks of sky solidify into the far-off cityscape. The bridge's curving cables swoop into the painting's middle distance; the strong angular roofline of the shed directs us to the blue rail-yard with its small band of workers; the powerfully realized signal light at the left lead back into the that open blue space and the small perfectly scaled figures; the red signal light to the right looks straight out at us and brings into focus the grasses in the foreground, bent as if in the backwash of a vanished train. The bustle of these elements are orchestrated with swift assurance in watercolor, that most unforgiving of mediums. "Long Island City" is a moment yanked out of the flux, put down with freedom, and informed by a lifetime of practice.

Holly tells me that she found "City Lights" from her own archives, as if it were waiting for "Long Island City." That discovery provided one of her Eureka! moments about what I am calling confluence. But what did Holly see in her picture that made her know that "City Lights" was the right companion to Ward's?

I can only guess: perhaps it was the feeling of an image that was a perfect reply to Ward's painting. Despite and because of the differences: Where Ward's moment is bright daylight; Holly's is night. Ward's painting is packed with accurately realized detail, Holly's somewhat surreal scene is vibrant and desolate at once.

On the other hand, there are echoing affinities. Take the blur of that ominous white building in "Night Lights;" it tells me Holly's picture might have been taken from the window of a moving vehicle. Ward's bent grasses suggest wind and the entire scene is one familiar to any Long Island commuter. The looping cables of Ward's bridge find their echo in the swag of Holly's power lines. Each artist uses a strong rectangular and largely empty space to mark the middle distance. Each has a foreground vertical that intersects the planes behind it.

The show is full of opportunities to explore the harmonic resonances between their works and to speculate, as I am doing here, about what are the deeper affinities that create the confluence of talent and heart. In the end it is not only their reflexes, tempos, color feelings, and structuring eyes that constitute their common bonds. Their sympathy grows from a preternatural alertness each has to the

dramatic range of the given world. It is an alertness wedded to the means of expression.

I bet they say “Wow” at the same things. And my guess is that this exclamation springs from suddenly elevated pulse rates, and from an intuitive sense of how they can respond, one by means of brush, the other by means of lens. Together they speak one of Beauty’s most ancient dialects, the one in which she displays our visible world for pleasure, reverence, and, if she makes an artist of you, a visible world to which you pay a grateful and persistent homage through your art.

Peter Pitzele, Ph.D in literature from Harvard, well-published author, teacher, writer. Art/Write column for of Art League of Long Island. See website <http://artleagueli.net>

For more information, see peterpitzele.com