
INTERVIEW WITH PAINTER, RHIA HURT

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Introduction by Jennifer Gonzalez

When I met Rhia Hurt in her California studio last fall, I was intrigued by her project and wanted to know more. I was drawn to her Balancing Act Series because of a profound serenity in the minimalist forms she created, coupled with an undercurrent of urgency regarding planetary climate change. The surface quality of the paint subtly recreates the geological qualities of earth, water, and fire. The emotional tension in the work between quiet beauty and planetary emergency echoes the way we experience nature on a human scale. We began our interview informally through my interest in her work, which led to a more in-depth discussion.

How does your current work relate to the history of minimalism? Which artists/painters inspired you? Why?

With color field painting and minimal abstraction, there is a connection beyond a literal experience. With abstraction, I sense an entry into an unconscious territory. The brain mediates a lot of what is considered as being “allowed”. Abstraction seems like a way to circumvent “the rules” of thinking, and open up new territory. There is a non-logic logic. When I am in conversation with abstraction, there is more to it than one translation to meaning. There are layers; there is feeling, association, and connection on a visceral level.

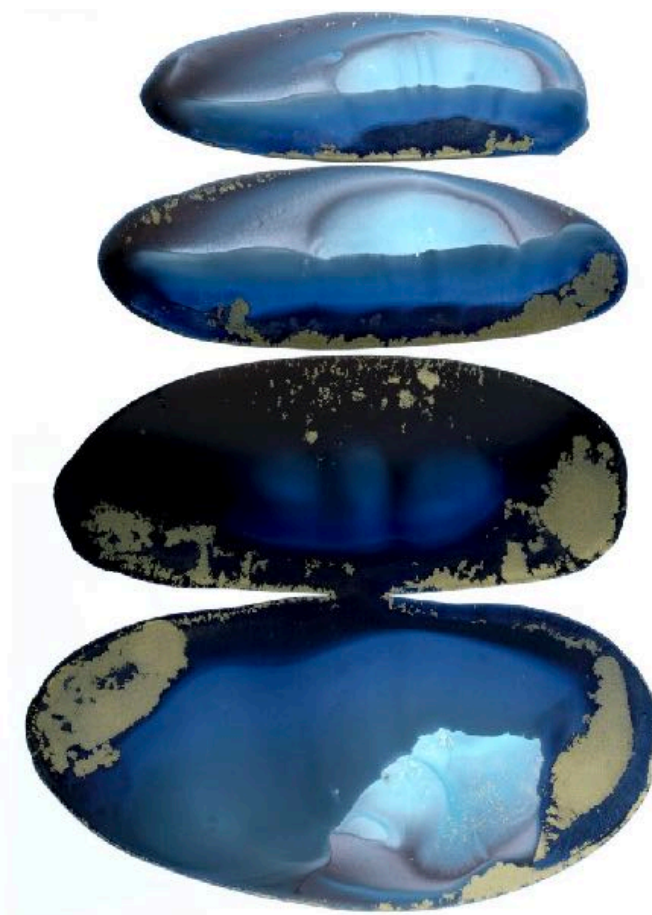
When I began making artwork focusing on color relationships, the materiality of paint, and reductive forms (these concepts developed by minimalists), I felt more at home with my process. Mark Rothko’s color fields blend soft edges that seem to merge with eternity. Rich colors pull the viewer in. The paintings teach us to be

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present, immersed. There is a sense of surrender when confronted with large swaths of color that seem to exist in unexpected harmony. As viewers, these combinations would not exist if we were left to imagine them on our own, yet they make perfect sense. Helen Frankenthaler painted from nature. Her shapes map real landscapes with boldness. Her paintings both complicate and simplify flattened land masses and coastlines, unapologetically. Joseph Albers made color a life-long study. With a purely exploratory approach, he created exercises to get to the bottom of colors' interactions/relationships and how the eye views color devoid of external biases. Hilma Af Klint was one of the first abstract artists, working in secret during the turn of the century. She bravely pioneered a spiritual path toward image-making that included far out, visionary explorations and, again, a surrender to a world outside of her immediate experience, courageously following an outsider path to realizing her vision.

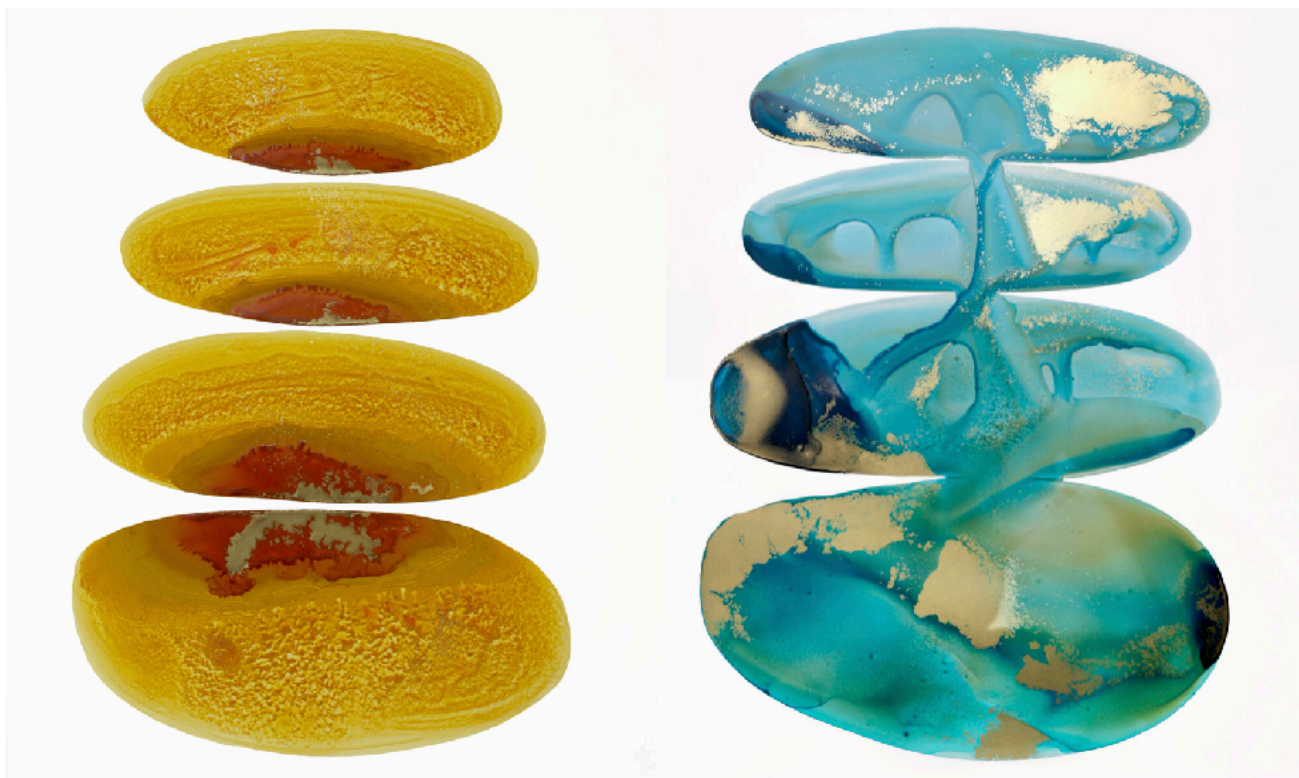
You are working with a pooling technique of painting that harkens to other artists who focus on the properties of the medium: its viscosity, its liquid qualities, its possibilities for flow. How does the quality of paint remind us of the qualities of the earth, the planet? Why is it important to recognize that painting is a part of our material existence?



“To make these paintings, paint must fall apart somewhat to reveal itself. It has to lose its composure—mineral and chemical pigments are pulled from their binders to be held in watery tension.”

—RHIA HURT

Paint is somewhat basic; it has just three ingredients: pigment, binder, and solvent. I love the immediacy of this fact. In my artwork, I have deconstructed the paint so that it shows me its many qualities, whether intended or not. I use a lot of pigments and binders, and I learn about the materiality of each of them through experimentation. Some are made of minerals, and some are chemical (yellow ochre v fluorescent yellow, for example). Since I am using acrylic paint, water is a solvent and can further pull paint apart to a point where the pigment separates; some particles sink and some float, while some map contours as the solvents dry. All of this is to say that I am looking for interactions and a variety of mark-making through letting the paint fall apart and come together. There may be a bigger metaphor at play here, about the material, about growth and entropy. Control, lack of control. Intention, accident. When I think about the planet and how industry has negatively impacted it, it is challenging, but it can still heal, over time (with or without us). As fragile as our material world can feel, there is a strength and consistency to how it behaves. I find that inspiring.



There is an elemental focus in the work with colors and textures that mimic water, stone, lava. Say more about why you chose to center these elements.

In a world becoming increasingly digital, I am still emotionally drawn to what is tangible, and elemental. I grew up in a small coastal town in Northern CA, surrounded by redwood trees, jagged shorelines, and lagoons. The fog, the dirt, the experience of looking up in wonder, were all part of my earliest understanding of the world. These physical experiences with nature helped me observe the look and feel of the material world. There is a lot of richness to be encountered with a keen focus on observation in this way, and I have a desire to get at something in my artwork that is akin to the uncanny sensation of having seen something like this before in nature. It helps me feel connected to memories, and experiences in new ways. Since Living in Oakland, CA, and then Brooklyn, NY, I have also integrated visual traces of walking in urban, industrial settings. The colors I choose can come from the neon green of new growth in a forest, or grease-black in an oily puddle left behind by a parked car. There is a strong sense of association in how I see color; it makes sense to put colors together in relationship to each other to see how they can co-exist.

Can you say more about what it means to think about the surface quality of the works? Are the layers difficult to achieve? What kind of process did you need to invent to get the effect you wanted?

I am working with a very shallow surface, with the intention of showing an illusion of depth. I have achieved the illusion through a sort of pouring technique with various densities of paint, and the ability to move the base of the artwork so the paint can also move as it dries. The challenging and difficult part of the technique is that it takes time to “watch paint dry,” which is sort of a joke I have with myself. As it dries, I tilt and adjust the base until it creates the effect I am interested in. It is working in line with some ideas of land art... but on a much smaller scale, of course. Instead of a spiral jetty, I let the stoney earth

pigments settle and find their own edgy shorelines, not unlike the sediment in a dried-up riverbed. The mapping left by the process can be like a frozen time capsule of what happened to make the painting.

How do your paintings join a broader conversation with art history? Whose paintings do you admire today, and why?

Currently, I have been thinking of my artwork as installation-based, and as action painting to a degree. Action painting from the 1950s and 1960s came from a political climate and worldview very specific to its time. It was a movement that originated in New York City, with a group of artists who pioneered what they considered “pure” painting, or in other words, pushing the paint towards new results, often void of recognizable imagery. They wanted to make something that no one had seen before. They took wild, unconventional risks to create fresh work. There were a lot of conditions that allowed certain artists to explore their ideas this way. Back then it helped to have some level of financial backing (or no extra risk involved with being poor), it helped to be white, it helped to be male. Absorbed in an individualist, American attitude, painters were invested in ownership for their visions and inventions through pushing the frontiers of abstraction. The idea of action painting has changed of course because it is not “new” anymore. We aren’t in the 1950’s/60’s, but the language of abstraction developed during that time persists. The immediacy of gesture, inventive mark-making, and flow continues to carry a certain meaning.

Feminist art helped us consider the maker in relation to society and social, political, and environmental issues. We all have a point of view that enters into the equation. There is context. Individual ideas matter, but more so as part of a broader conversation. This adds to the meaning of our artwork and how we perceive others’ artworks. The lessons of feminist artwork from the ’70s and ’80s connect “me”/“I” to this time and place as an artist. My experience as a person identifying as a woman and a feminist includes a value system of honoring the places where we come from and the contributions of others.

Performance is part of art-making, even if not always with an audience, even without being public. When the event of art-making happens, there is a sense of a private performance. There are the stage fright jitters when I gear up to make something before I am in my creative flow. The societal engagement happens when/if folks see what I am attempting. The risk is that the painting might fail to move me (or others) beyond being something nice to look at. The risk is being considered decorative or pretty, instead of meaningful. All of the contemporary artists I love tend to deal with color, a sort of mapping of visual ideas, and mark-making that zeros in on bigger social and political concerns through their artwork. Some art crush examples include Julie Mehretu, Wangechi Mutu, Mark Grotjahn, Katherine Bradford.

