

Laurie Danial's Dynamic and Enigmatic Abstraction

by Patrick Collier



Fig. 1. Laurie Danial, Random Talents, 2016, oil and acrylic on panel, 57 x 45 in. (Photo: Harold Hutchinson)

To the casual viewer, abstract painting may seem to lack coherence. Familiar epithets abound, usually because there is an assumption that the artist lacks intentionality. And while abstract expressionist endeavors may suffer this fate more often than structured or geometric works, how much fault can we find with the novice viewer, for isn't our first inclination always to make sense of such works, and even look for things we recognize? Cars, people, dogs, cats, buildings, trees, a glass of ice, a line in the sand. After all, with a penchant for things and concepts to which we can attach a name or phrase, we often play more in the world of utility than imagination.

Abstract painting that gives us an inkling of the world we live in might then have a greater appeal, for it has given us an entree into its complexity by allowing an anchor point from which to extrapolate. Having known Portland painter Laurie Danial for ten years, from studio visits and from her biannual exhibitions at Froelick Gallery in Portland, I've learned how successful her paintings are in giving the open and patient viewer something to work with as they seem to echo the real world. The viewer feels a reciprocity in the engagement (it also makes writing about abstraction a bit easier) even though her paintings remain largely oblique.

However, making paintings that are both suggestive and elusive is no easy task. Danial says her process is "intuitive, chaotic, and circuitous,"¹ and this is certainly evidenced within the work, for one's eye cannot rest in one place for too long before being drawn to another element, then pulled back from the picture plane into deeper aspects. Almost unconsciously, the viewer is manipulated by the formal aspects of the painting.



Left: Fig. 2. Laurie Danial, *The Duchess*, 2018, oil and acrylic on panel, 38 x 34 in. (Photo: Rebekah Johnson)

Right: Fig. 3. Laurie Danial, *Beauty Changing Strings*, 2018, oil on canvas, 20 x 16 in. (Photo: Rebekah Johnson)

Her painting *Random Talents* (2016) not only exemplifies this effect, but the title itself seems to indicate a virtuosity of gesture and movement at play in the piece (fig. 1). Multiple gray diagonals form a grill in the lower left corner to establish a hard foreground, while the wide greenish line that rises up behind it sends the viewer along an upward trajectory on the same side of the painting. Once at the top, background shapes in various shades of orange angle in a manner to make the ochre rectangle in the upper right into a canopy. Below it, a white void forces one to the lower right foreground, only to catch a dark diagonal back to the center of the work. Rather like a road trip into the country with features dotted along the way. One could call it a landscape.

Nor would one be wrong in establishing such a narrative, perhaps led in a direction by memories (as one often is), but if so, then it is a kind of narrative true to the way memories are formed, as non-contiguous and non-continuous snippets with a linearity forced upon them after the fact. Just as this discontinuity is conveniently ignored for the purpose of personal mythmaking and is perhaps why we hold to those narratives so dearly, we look to find meaning within and between the components of an abstract painting. We make memories linear in order to tell a story. Yet they are mere fragments, connected through a construct to make sense, or rather, a kind of sense, for their veracity is only to serve a purpose, to create the illusion of sense, a fitting into a self-fulfilling chronicle.

As interpreting abstraction can be seen as a process of associating memories, it then would seem appropriate for abstraction to bring forth issues of the self and, by extension, take on the genre of portraiture, regardless of how indirectly or obliquely the imagery may appear. (Significantly, Danial's panels often have a vertical orientation). Nor should we be surprised if such an expression within abstraction comes with a certain amount of tension. *The Duchess* (2018) may very well be such a painting (fig. 2). The central figure, or head, tenuously balanced on a fulcrum in what may be an airy interior seems to be in emotional turmoil. The impression of a room space is heightened by the hard-angled perspectival form on the right, which reads like an open casement window and contrasts with the flat green surface—read rear wall—on the left. Similarly, in *Beauty Changing Strings* (2018, fig. 3), a black “figure” that might otherwise wreak havoc is subdued, perhaps even transformed by a swath of pastel colors. No, not every painting of Danial's is wrought with trepidation. In *Advantages of Both* (2018, fig. 4), a figure stands strong in the foreground. Soft, fleshy shades of pink suggest a female form. Undulating striations

in red and ochre make said figure active. And when I look at the underpainting where the head might be, I think I see a calming, earth-tone yin/yang symbol.

There is little Zen in my aligning Danial's imagery with the concrete world, despite the generosity of her framing of space in a manner that suggests landscape, or offering a painted gesture that looks very much like a part of the human anatomy. I worry that by picking passages that might reflect something of the real world I will imply a mundanity that does injustice to the art. Nor does this approach reflect the excitement I have for her excellent work as the motivation behind this essay. Within this conundrum we may find not only the impetus for abstract art but also its value, for while its subject matter purposefully remains largely unnameable, the viewer reacts to the oblique in order to determine some meaning, either by affixing points of reference or by reacting more spontaneously to color, shape, the quality of line, dynamism of the composition, and so forth.

Still, the enigmatic character of the genre makes it immune to reductive analyses, and the corresponding displacement from the real may eventually result in a response that is primarily emotional. Consider the emotions and psychology behind the way memory makes scraps into a self-mythologizing narrative. This example gives license, and, if you will, a theoretical underpinning for an abstract artist to make the type of art she does. No doubt, Danial knows meaning is elusive, yet within that notion there is also a freedom to share her own small-T truth, her only responsibility being to get it just so for herself, and perhaps too, in the integrity of that process, for the viewer.



Fig. 4. Laurie Danial, *Advantages of Both*, 2018, oil and acrylic on panel, 15 x 13 in. (Photo: Rebekah Johnson)

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1. Laurie Danial, artist statement for “The Back of Beyond,” exhibition at Froelick Gallery, Portland, Ore., Oct. 2 - 27, 2018.

Patrick Collier writes art criticism for Oregon ArtsWatch in Portland. When he lived in Chicago, he wrote for the New Art Examiner. He is the author of a number of catalogue essays. Collier is also a multidisciplinary artist, producing poetry, drawing, sculpture, photography, and video. Recent exhibition venues include The Suburban in Illinois, Nine Gallery in Portland, and ArtWorks CEI Project in Corvallis. His exhibition “Field Burns” was presented at the Broadway Gallery at Portland State University in 2018 and traveled to the Schneider Museum of Art at Southern Oregon University and Oregon State University’s Memorial Union this year. Collier holds a BA in philosophy and an MA in English literature, both from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, plus an MFA from the University of Illinois at Chicago. He and his wife moved to Oregon in 2003 and now reside in Corvallis.

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