

Liz di Giorgio — *Stillness and Light*

An exhibition of paintings on display at the Queens Historical Society

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queenshistoricalsociety.org

I recently had the opportunity to discuss my work in the context of the exhibition at the Queens Historical Society entitled “Practicing Equality: Quakers in Queens.” That presentation grew out of a talk that I gave at Pendle Hill, where I also had the privilege to exhibit body of work in an exhibition entitled “Still Light” (August 27th – October 30th).

The first time I was asked to discuss the evolution of my work, I realized that all of my earliest encounters with art led me to understand painting as being something very powerful. For this reason, I never believed that art was solely about self-expression. Self-expression seemed to be only half the equation. Because paintings had such a powerful effect on me, I always felt a sense of responsibility for the images that I put into the world.

I had an amazing experience the first time that I stood before an easel as a child. I remember thinking that children are supposed to paint houses, so I started to paint the roof of a house with alternating stripes of red and blue. When I reached the point where the roof should have ended, I decided to keep going. Soon after, I became aware of a purple aura that seemed to emanate from the paper. I was baffled because I had not placed purple paint anywhere on the paper. Of course I didn’t understand color theory or realize that red and blue always vibrate when placed adjacent to each other. I was just astounded by the purple glow that encompassed me and seemed to unite me with that painting. I remember walking away from that easel thinking that painting was a powerful thing.

I also recall finding a small prayer book when I was a child, and coming upon a reproduction of Duccio’s *Temptation of Christ on the Mountain*. Even though the reproduction was no larger than 3 inches square, the painting had a great effect on me. Although Duccio was working without the knowledge of linear perspective or a good sense of anatomy, and in spite of the limits of tempera paint, he used the tools that he did have, composition, body language and facial expressions, to tell the story in a powerful way. I later learned from studying his work that every element of painting could be used in concert to convey meaning.

I attended an elementary school that did not offer art classes. I didn’t really know what I was missing until a young woman came to class one day with a slide projector, and presented us with a survey of Western art. I was riveted and eagerly awaited her return. Although she never did return, her presentation left me with a hunger for art. From that moment on, I was fascinated by any mention of art or artists that came up in class or in our textbooks. When I encountered Albert Pinkham Ryder’s *The Racetrack (Death on a Pale Horse)* in an English textbook, I was astonished, and I believe that my path as an artist was set at that moment. That painting was a revelation to me in that it taught me that art didn’t have to be limited to narrative content; that it could symbolize the big

issues like life, death, and our inevitable encounters with evil, both as individuals and for the human race as a whole.

I eventually studied painting at Cooper Union, where I became interested in the work of the painters who called themselves the Nabis, especially Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard. I loved the honest and intimate nature of their work and the fact that they turned everyday life, including family, friends, the breakfast table and even family pets, into subjects for art. Vuillard's mother was a dressmaker, and his paintings were often filled with vibrant, colorful patterns. I began to decorate my apartment with fabrics that would lend themselves to Nabis-like interiors, but I eventually came to the reluctant conclusion that that style of painting did not honestly reflect my life or times.

It was then that I turned to the work of Giorgio Morandi. I was deeply moved by the simplicity and humility inherent in his work. Although Morandi had a masterful command of paint and color, he devoted his life to painting simple bottles and vases. Inspired by his example, I began to also work with simple domestic objects. I began to see this work as a kind of tribute to the work that women have traditionally done in the world to sustain their families. While Morandi painted his objects from eye level, I gradually began to lower the objects that I painted, and, when they finally reached the floor, I felt a great sense of liberation in seeing them from this aerial view, seemingly free of gravity. I was amazed by how powerful a teapot could appear from that perspective, and I realized immediately that it perfectly represented all of the unsung efforts and positive energy that women contribute to the world.

I had a very low moment in meeting one day during the Iraq war. I thought about all of those mothers trying to feed and protect their children in the midst of war. I thought about how hard it is to raise a child, even in a country with food, clean water and disposable diapers. I thought about the vast amount of energy that those mothers had to put into sustaining their families, and it was a consolation to realize at that moment that, even in the midst of war, the vast majority of human energy goes into sustaining, not destroying, life. Eventually I came to see the teapot in a broader gender-neutral way as a universal symbol of hospitality and goodwill, the very basic building blocks of peace.

Each painting on exhibit at the Queens Historical Society is similarly embedded with deeply held personal and spiritual beliefs. The painting entitled *Still Life for 2009* was made with great sympathy for those losing their jobs, homes and pensions. The hand depicted appears to be making a calming gesture that can also be interpreted as a universal gesture of blessing. It also holds great personal meaning for me in that it reminds me of my daughter's childhood, adding yet another layer of meaning.

Birds are a recurring image in my work, often representing the conscience. Nature-related imagery often appears within a spare context, symbolizing the idea that simplicity can increase our capacity to appreciate beauty. Integrity is symbolized by the strong, raking light that illuminates all of the objects depicted. Because it is the most revealing light, I think of it as representing truth.

As someone who lives and teaches in one of the most diverse urban areas in the world, I feel enormous gratitude to those early settlers of Queens who sacrificed so much to establish freedom of conscience in America. I am grateful to the Queens Historical

Society for telling their story, and for including my work as part of the continuum presented there. The exhibition is on view through May of 2014.