

John Zurier
Aesence Interview with Sarah Dorweiler
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SD: You spoke about your last show *Pink Dust* as a farewell to the farm and studio you had in Iceland. What does it mean for you, emotionally and artistically, to have left that place?

JZ: When I hear you say it, I sound dramatic. Like there's a ship with someone clutching their heart and waving a scarf; and I cringe a bit as it's like me to say "farewell" rather than "goodbye." There was a big moving truck, nobody waved, and without intention I ended up in a much nicer place. At the time, I was referring to the largest painting in that show. But it was true of all the paintings in it. There was a sense of an ending. I was thinking about time and time spent in a place, however long. I was reading Bashō's travel journals again with his famous "every day is a journey, and the journey itself is home," and thinking about his attention to the transitory. The beauty and loneliness of something passing through rather than something being fixed.

SD: How does this change influence the works for *along – between* at Galerie Nordenhake – and what does that title hold for you?

JZ: With the change comes my wanting to make the work more direct. To have variety and give the smaller paintings, especially, an intensification and density. Also, different influences are coming into the mix. I've been looking at Delacroix, and Gwen John and Courbet with their surfaces like masonry.

along – between is a title of one of the paintings in the show. It came by chance because I couldn't decide if the title should be "Along" or "Between," and had put them together separated with an em dash on the list I sent the gallery with the photos. When the gallery said they liked it, I realized it was perfect as it was. The indecision proved to be very helpful. It's a compressed piece of language, and I like that it's visual—it implies a gap (it is a gap), a movement between and within the gap. It's a fragment and interval, with *along* and *between* not referring to anything, so they stay transient, floating in a place language skips over.

SD: You originally studied landscape architecture before turning to painting. In what ways does this background still inform your paintings today?

JZ: I studied them both at the same time and received an undergraduate degree in landscape architecture. I also worked in landscape offices in Belfast Northern Ireland and in California before I went to grad school to focus on painting.

Landscape architecture taught me how to think analytically about a site and its program and use drawing as the display of information, which is not something I use now, but was helpful then. The most memorable courses were the history of gardens and landscape architecture, J. B. Jackson's course on looking at the vernacular landscape, and an experiential seminar taught by Xiaoxiang Sun and Lawrence Halprin focusing on analyzing the natural and urban landscape through collaborative and interpretive "scores." From these I understood that my interest was more philosophical and poetic than analytical and professional. It took me a long time to realize that I had no feeling for design, or plants for that matter. But I did have a feeling for paint.

I remember two things from then that informed my thinking. The first painting I made when I stopped working from the model in class was of a blue sky seen between two buildings out the window. Making the blue paint look spacious, with no obvious indication of space, was almost impossible. I'm still involved with this. Later I told someone I wanted natural color and pointed to a stand of silver green eucalyptus trees against the concrete of the architecture building. They said, paint a picture of it. I said — not a picture of it, but that. That color, that tone, that texture, that dust. I've been thinking about these things for a long time.

SD: You once said that the thing you want to grasp is the thing that can't be grasped. And yet your practice is deeply rooted in the physical – grinding pigments, choosing grounds, weave, and support. What is it about these tangible materials that allows you to approach something so elusive?

JZ: One of the paradoxes of painting involves the difference between looking and seeing. Looking is like grasping and seeing is what escapes the grasp. I want to preserve that tension by working in the gap between them. I use a variety of traditional painting materials. I like the limitations of using them. I like that they come loaded with their own physical history and full of art historical baggage.

I like them precisely because they are stubborn, simply themselves, and I like the way they smell. I think I got the idea of making my own paints and paying attention to the weave of fabric, sizes and supports from looking at two very different Arthur Dove paintings from a material viewpoint, when I was very young. When I found later that he made his own paints and experiments with materials, the differences of each painting made more sense to me. It wasn't just the iconography that made the difference. The support, grounds, viscosities of paint themselves affected how the strokes were made and the overall expression. The raw material generates the making of the painting itself.

SD: At what point do those deliberate material decisions give way to intuition, and what role does intentionlessness play in this process?

JZ: Intuition operates all the time, even when I'm being very deliberate and my attention is fully focused on material decisions. It could be that while I'm doing one thing, it allows for something else, the elusive or ineffable, to appear. In that way intentionlessness is more like self-forgetting. I don't know when I start a painting what it will end up looking like in the end. My painting is more improvisational than methodical, but I'm aware there's often a jump or a switch into seeing that comes while painting that feels like surrender. That's when I become aware of intentions I didn't even know I had, and something gives. I wouldn't say I'm working without intention as much as working between moments of deliberation and complete openness.

SD: Many of your titles name places, seasons, weather, or particular qualities of light. When does a title arrive – before, during, or after the painting?

The titles come afterwards. Occasionally, one will come while I'm painting, and if it works, I'll keep it. After many years of using "Untitled" or numbers and dates, I gave myself permission to use lyrical and poetic titles. Often, they come from poems I'm reading. I like it when a title rhymes with the painting, or even better, makes you feel the painting differently and the painting makes you feel the title differently. A good example of that in this show is "Evening and Elsewhere" and "Holding the Rain." The first is from John Ashbery and the second is from Bashō.

SD: You've spoken about "naturalness" as something you're after in painting, but also about the difficulty of naming it without turning it into something conceptual. How does that shape the way you speak about your work?

JZ: I was thinking of it as how the paintings just appear and you don't see them coming. They don't introduce and announce themselves. They are. And if we talk about this a lot, it can dilute the sudden surprise of them. But since some of my paintings are slow and take time to see, I think a better way of saying it is "effortlessness." I want them to look and feel that way. Even if the surface and touch say otherwise, I want them to look easy, relaxed, almost undone. I haven't thought about this as shaping the way I talk about my work. That's interesting. The first thing that comes to mind is to be clear, talk about what can be seen. Explain less. Be straight forward.

SD: After more than four decades of painting, what helps you to maintain a beginner's mind when approaching your work?

Remembering that all I need to do is start, let the paint make its own bed, and see what's right in front of me.

SD: Is there a work in the upcoming exhibition *along – between* that you feel especially attached to - and if so, why?

Yes, many of them. When I'm attached it's because I know what they cost me, the struggle and work involved. How much time it took between putting things down, or how quickly they came together. Or pushing through and finally seeing, a total surprise. Or being only aware of the sound of the brush and the feeling of floating. "Rakovina (Seashell)", for example, emerged from all of that.