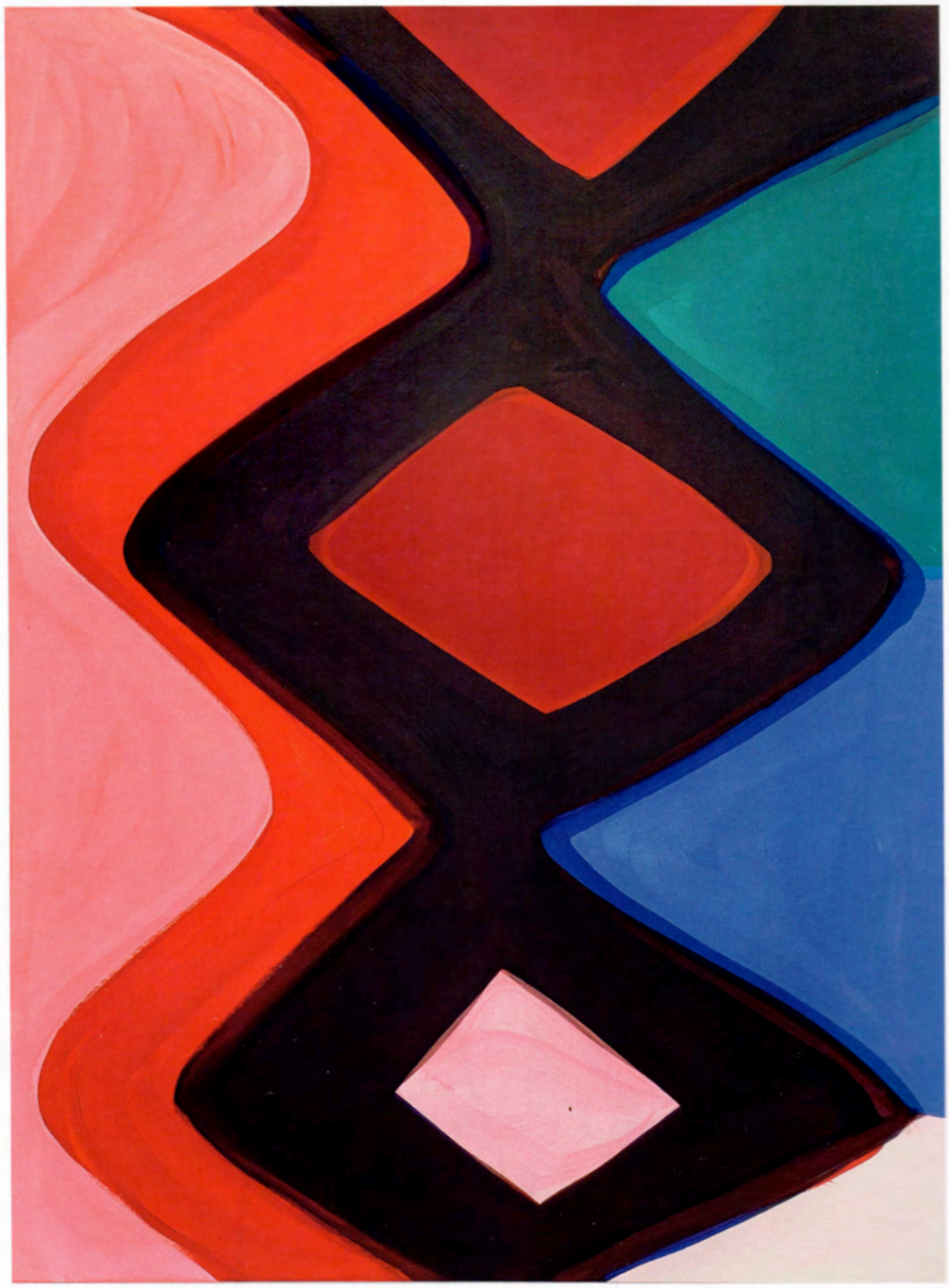
Marina Adams



and

Martha Tuttle

It was more than twenty years ago that I visited Marina Adams in her studio and first saw her work. At that time there were variegated samples of cloth attached to her paintings. Soon after, we met again, shopping at the now long-gone Frontier Fabrics on Canal and Broadway. "I'm doing what you're doing now," I told her. She later moved on to straightforward paint and canvas and more recently, so have I. We have danced with the substrate, plucked on its strings. What one learns from the cloth experience, oddly, is that paint is a thing, too.

Many contemporary painters are utilizing fabric in an experimental process. The current model for a painting is one constructed from or enhanced with repurposed, woven material as both ground and image. In Martha Tuttle's case, the wooden structure beneath it is revealed. This glimpse of the strainer along with the various transparent and opaque textured tones constitutes the painting's motif. Tuttle's variating of the painting's constituent elements includes making plant dyes for color, which can be seen as another step toward the basics. Because *basics* is what the Adams and Tuttle discuss in the exchange that follows.

Abstract art originated in a striving for a more direct act of composition. The process became the subject matter. There was seen to be a therapeutic value in the equation of physicality and spirituality. In their conversation, the artists reveal themselves as ardently anti-materialistic, as they discuss empathy, inclusivity, and the exploration of bodily being via the canvas. Art is a human statement in these precincts. It does not need to comment on the dominant culture so much as provide a reparative alternative. The painting is a homeopathic mechanism.

Tuttle also refers to "ghost realms" in relation to abstraction, and this may lend a clue to what is ultimately at stake for both artists: a reduction of means in order to watch the painting reveal itself, to catch it at the moment when it becomes what it represents.

—Joe Fyfe

page 120: Marina Adams, *See-Line Woman*, 2020, acrylic on linen, 40 × 30 inches. Images courtesy of the artist, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, and Salon 94, New York, unless otherwise noted.

page 121: Martha Tuttle, *Convergence Memory*, 2020, wool, silk, dye, graphite, and pigment, 72 × 48 inches. Images courtesy of the artist and Tilton Gallery, New York.

Marina Adams, *RBG*, 2020, acrylic on linen, 88 × 78 inches.

MARINA ADAMS: I wanted to talk to an artist from a different generation who also works nonfiguratively, and when I ran into you recently, I loved our conversation and thought it'd be great to continue it.

MARTHA TUTTLE: I was remembering this morning something you said about the category of *abstraction* feeling limited: How are you thinking and feeling about that term these days?

MA: Your question makes me think about a talk that Willem de Kooning gave at the Museum of Modern Art, titled "What Abstract Art Means to Me." He said many things, but what stuck with me was this hysterical story about a man he knew in Europe who had been hungry most of his life and who, after coming to the States, would buy old bread and let it get good and stale and then crumble it up and spread it out like a carpet. De Kooning said he could never figure him out, but he remembered that he always had an abstract expression on his face.

MT: I love that.

MA: With my work, I think about making something that is energetically real and energetically alive. There's a quote from a poem by Anne-Marie Albiach that I've had on my wall for a long time:

Light will gather
in the awakening
of memory put to death
and in this array of colors.

I think everything already exists and we don't need to make anything up, it is all here. My work is more about conjuring, making it visible again.

What's abstraction for you?

MT: For me, abstraction is a little bit like the dream that you just can't remember. It's at the edge of your brain, and while you can get such a strong sense that something has occurred, you can't quite articulate it. Another example is feeling several emotions at once, or experiencing the exact moment when the weather changes—things we don't necessarily have a precise vocabulary for. They may not fall into delineated form, but they are real.

The abstract paintings of yours that I'm particularly interested in depict something that's very real but doesn't necessarily fall into this space of delineated or describable symbolic form.

MA: Or maybe known imagery too.

MT: Totally. A while back, I realized that many of my favorite novels engage with a ghost or spirit realm. I suspect it's because the way ghost realms are often described aligns with my interest in abstraction. Specifically, how ghost stories propose a shift from visual and sensorial norms.

I believe there are forces surrounding us that we are aware of but that perhaps our senses have not developed enough to see in the same way as we see a chair or something nameable. I see it as one of the roles for nonfigurative works to describe those spaces—make visible, as you say. Of course, figurative paintings can do this as well ...

MA: Early on, I came to a basic understanding, even an epiphany: that what we call abstract painting is about creating a space for thought, a way to open the mind up and allow space for the other senses. We talk about painting in terms of touch, but we don't touch paintings literally. I mean, when you look at them, you absorb an experience. I think of your work as very tactile. It relies on the transitions between different materials and how porous or nonporous something is, these subtle shifts. It's interesting to talk about the edge of a dream or something you can't quite remember that is still very real. But how do we acknowledge it? A lot of the time, we just don't know how to acknowledge things that aren't black-and-white.

MT: I don't know if we need to go there yet, but I feel this relates to the political or social sphere—how do we receive and express ideas without polarizing them? Or, how can we see people in their full complexity?

MA: The nature of any group or society is to close around themselves, which turns anyone outside the group into the other, allowing for a justification of prejudice or violence. Artists—by embracing the art of other cultures and allowing it into their work—bring fresh blood, new perspectives, and new ways of being in society, and this adds to the health of the whole, which is essential for survival and longevity. It's how things change. Change is really slow, like in a tree. And the subtleties of what a human being is cannot be clearly delineated among the categories we put ourselves and others into.

MT: I think the subtleties of what a human being can be are almost aggressively denied in a lot of public—especially virtual—spaces. That's why sometimes looking at a painting can be like, "Wow, what a profound relief. The world is as complex as I had hoped it was."

I heard on the radio the other day that kids who read fiction apparently grow up to be more empathetic adults. I don't know how one measures empathy exactly, but it makes sense to me that artworks, at their best, can show us many-sided visions of the world. I have learned so much of what I know about being human from paintings—from artists in general, really.

MA: It's funny, when I think about all the paintings I studied, probably ninety percent had figures and they were mostly paintings depicting women done by men. At the time, I was just involved with the painting—how to make a painting, how to construct a painting, what space was, what touch was, how color could move, and all the essential abstract elements of what a painting is. Whether there was a figure in it or not was never the issue for me. I think of Velázquez painting portraits of royalty—the subjects were awful people but the way he painted them was astounding and that is the reason we continue to look at them.

But I moved away from anything that I felt was too illustrative, that was

opposite: Martha Tuttle, *Grey stallion stomping his feet*, 2021, wool, silk, graphite, and dye, 72 × 48 inches.

just too much about a story because that didn't activate my brain and open the kind of space that we're talking about.

Right now, we see a lot of figuration in contemporary painting, and a certain percentage of it is very illustrative. Which is fine, because people need to see all kinds of things and need the inclusiveness, finally, of images of African Americans and other people who were denied representation in the world of art. On the one hand, something very important is going on; on the other hand, that is just part of it. Recent exhibitions, such as the Alice Neel shows at Zwirner and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, or the Beauford Delaney show at Michael Rosenfeld, have given us the images that we need to see and the emotional depth and abstract space that great painters offer us in their work.

MT: Yes. that's an important point.

Simultaneously though, it feels important to offer space to the many different artists who have and are working within nonfigurative painting as well. This is also starting to happen I think, maybe a bit slower. The most limited way of thinking about abstract paintings is that they are unconnected to a political life, to identity, or to being a person in our world. Obviously, that isn't true, or not true for everyone.

MA: There were always artists working abstractly, but many weren't given exhibitions. You see some of them now in retrospect—Carmen Herrera, Leon Polk Smith, Ed Clark, Jack Whitten, Stanley Whitney, to name just a few whose work is finally well known. What you bring up was happening—the different sensibility, culture, experience, DNA we have, and how that affects what we do. You can even think of what music artists listen to and how that affects the work in terms of rhythm and color, so that is another way culture gets into abstract painting and how other arts feed into paintings.

MT: Do you think getting to see more of this work is impacting, for instance, what students are making today? How will this affect future waves of abstraction?

MA: We just have to wait and see. At the same time, it's one of the reasons we're having this conversation.

MT: Are working and thinking abstractly the same thing? How does one have an abstract thought?

MA: I have no idea! (*laughter*) I just finally realized I could go where I loved with my work. It took me a long time personally to pull the threads from all my experiences and from the artists I loved—Matisse, Alma Thomas, Hilma af Klint, Agnes Martin and the Navajo blankets she was looking at, Joan Mitchell, de Kooning, and many more. And now we can see Carmen Herrera. What would that have done to see her work in my twenties? That gets back into why noninclusive structures are unhealthy for everyone. They're bad and stunt our growth.

MT: I completely agree. Culture only suffers from exclusion. I've often wondered, especially in teaching, what I might unwittingly be cutting out.

I'm curious about the term "abstract thought," because I don't know if I have ever fully understood what it is to think abstractly, probably because I'm not particularly cerebral. If I have any natural talents, they are mostly in my body, which is why my work is so tactile. It is my experience that my body puts together things that my brain is a little slower with—things that are less delineated, which I would consider to be within the realm or the definition of abstraction that I'm interested in. Now that I think of it, it's sort of lovely that my nonfigurative thoughts come from my figure.

MA: For me, the canvas size affects how much of my body I use. That's why I like working with different sizes. With a twelve-inch square canvas, you have a very different kind of control and touch than when you work larger. When I work in formats that are even larger than myself, well, then it gets very physical. I agree with what you're saying in terms of just letting the body have its say and move, trusting in that part of the practice.

Leslie Scalapino, who was a great poet, and a friend of your family as well, introduced me to the notion of the ontological, seeing life as an object of categorical analysis and the ontic, seeing life as it exists. Poetry and certainly Leslie's work, is not about analysis of something. If I think about any kind of abstract thought, it is more in that realm. It's intrinsic, like being a bird and flying.

MT: I was rereading your and Leslie's wonderful book *The Tango* last night, and I was struck again by how the marks you made look like language. They facilitated the imaginary experience of the social and emotional interchange between the photographed monks, but also of the surrounding space of the monastery.

MA: I had a lot of fun doing that. The book was published almost twenty years ago. Leslie basically gave me a finished layout, with her text and photos placed, and asked me to fill up the space that she had left. I thought, Well, you didn't leave me much space. (*laughter*)

But I remember making connections with my fabrics and ink to her language and the color and light in her photographs of Tibetan monks, many of whom were debating. Their practice of having debates using both language and clapping sounds, struck me as a brilliant way of allowing the young males' need for a kind of combat, but structuring it in a nonviolent manner.

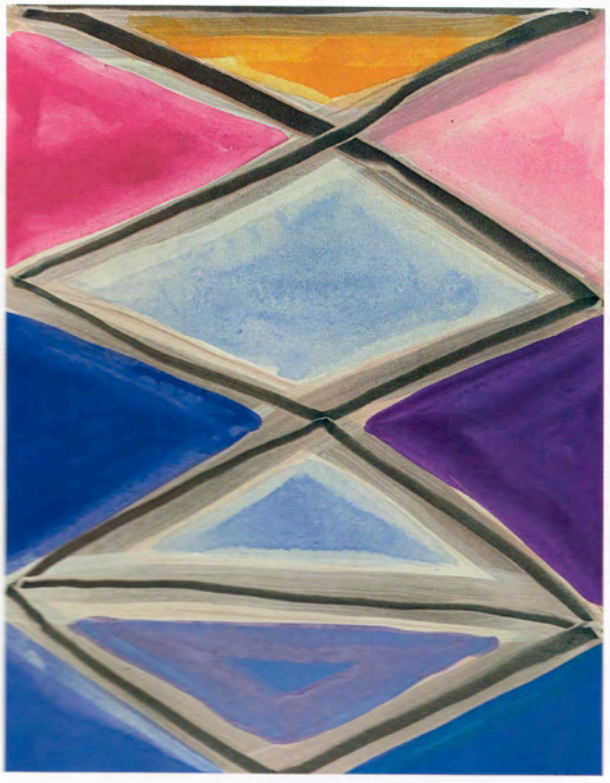
opposite, clockwise from top left:

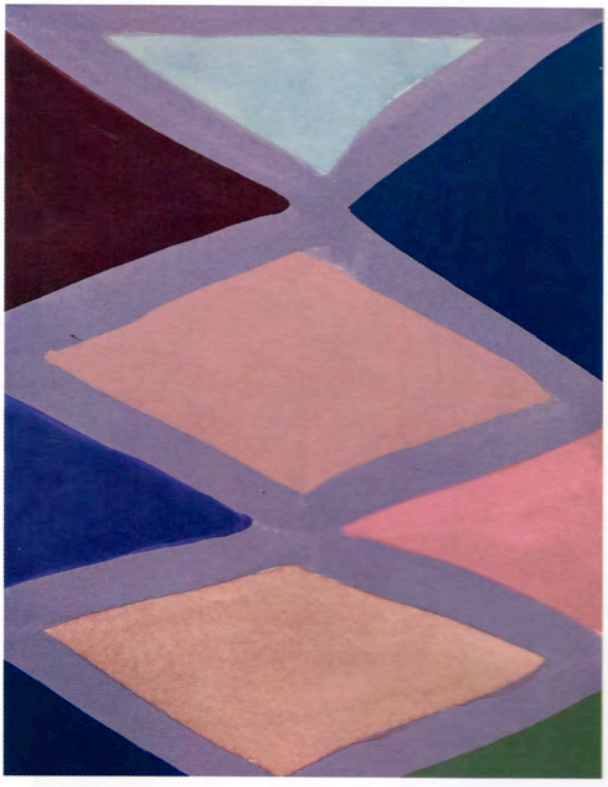
Marina Adams, 12x9_265, 2021, gouache and crayon on Arches Aquarelle paper, 12 × 9 inches.

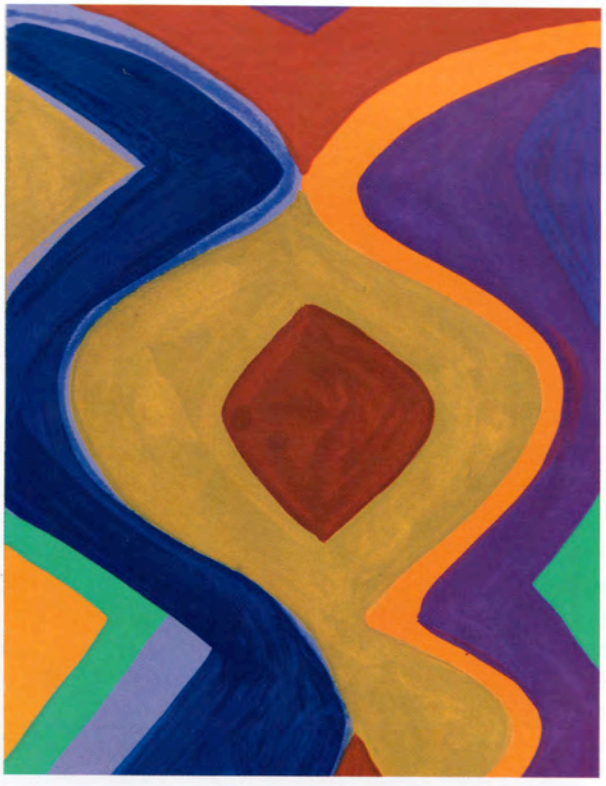
Marina Adams, 12x9_255, 2021, gouache and crayon on Arches Aquarelle paper, 12 × 9 inches.

Marina Adams, 12x9_240, 2018, gouache on Arches Aquarelle paper, 12 × 9 inches.

Marina Adams, 12x9_274, 2021, gouache on Arches Aquarelle paper, 12 × 9 inches.







Marina Adams, *Les Demoiselles*, 2019, acrylic on linen, 98 × 78 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York.

I used to love hearing Leslie read. She started coming to my studio in the '90s and we developed this fabulous conversation. Listening to her was like being on the edge of a dream; you just relax and let it come to you. I get my best work done when I'm in that space.

MT: Probably without fully being in that space of relaxed receptivity, the painting cannot demonstrate openness either. Do you know the work of Thomas Merton by any chance?

MA: No, I don't.

MT: He was a scholar and writer who went to Columbia University in the 1930s. He later converted to Catholicism and became a Trappist monk, but he maintained profound correspondences with Ad Reinhardt, Georgia O'Keeffe, Thich Nhat Hanh, and others. I think artists liked him because he had come from a literary world but wrote from the perspective of having left it. In his cell at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, he apparently had a cross and a small Ad Reinhardt painting opposite one another.

MA: Oh my God. (*laughter*)

MT: I just read one of his texts about meditation where he says—and this is the '50s—if artists are able to support themselves with their work, then the pressure to keep this up can be so great that the demands of production can overcome what drew them to make their art in the first place. They lose the receptive thinking space you described, and their work suffers.

Merton is using the artist as metaphor for young priests in their prayer to God—that without the space of sincere emotion and connection, neither art nor prayer can be fully expressed. Nor can art or prayer be fully expressed if it is performed in reaction to wanting to maintain one's status or reputation. Merton writes, "God doesn't need your work; he needs your love." I have been thinking about that in terms of being in the studio: the world probably doesn't need thousands of paintings from me, but a few paintings made sincerely—that might be useful.

MA: That is beautiful.

MT: What have you been reading lately that most affects you?

MA: I am halfway through *The German Lesson* by Siegfried Lenz. It's a good story but I don't know yet how it's affecting me.

MT: What is the book about?

MA: It's about the rise of fascism from the perspective of a young man in a juvenile penitentiary who is writing an essay on "the joys of duty." He recounts the story of his father, who was a policeman during World War II and was given the task by the higher-ups to prohibit a local painter from making paintings. The story is about his father, who believes in doing his duty but also about resistance and refusal. It's funny, I don't want stories in my paintings. But I do like reading stories, especially when they have a complexity.

MT: What some artists must go through to continue making or to preserve art, reminds me to never take art for granted or to speak of it in vain. I heard a story on the radio many years ago about an Afghani man named Dr. Muhammad Yousef Asefi, who, when the Taliban came to power in 1996, painted over as many figures in Kabul's National Gallery as he could with watercolor, to save them. When this story came out, in 2002, he was spending his days washing the surface of the paintings, revealing the figures again. This story really moved me—it filled me with a lot of faith—same as reading about the Russian poets writing under Stalin. But the bravery in these stories of artists and culture workers resisting fascism should not eclipse the horror, loss, and pain many experienced.

Even though we don't live under comparable restriction, I still believe that every artist, even the ones who aren't in the public eye, is adding to this human statement of being alive by making their work. I believe this is, as you say, energetically moving life forward. In harder political times, demonstrating vital, creative life is even more necessary. To create worlds that offer an alternative. I think in this context abstraction can be particularly meaningful, because of its ability to hold multiplicity. I don't want to imply that figurative work is reactive, but I've had some of my greatest experiences with abstraction because it's creating worlds.

MA: For me the best figurative work is abstract, and the best abstract work is in the realm of realism. Looking at a painting by Jackson Pollock, I'm thinking about the heavens—not just stars, but about space. Maybe he didn't intend that, but he must have felt space through his body. Painters are very physical people. That's a generalization, but I think you can say that. There's so much body language that happens, including body knowledge and body memory. You can relax the mind above the neck and give the body's intelligence some room.

MT: Do you have a body practice?

MA: Absolutely, years of yoga and swimming. Both things you can do alone, which suits me.

MT: I've always been a runner. I really love that active part of my life and I see how it affects my work on a very basic level. My endurance in the studio is much better, and my ability to still my mind has developed from running long distances. I wish this was emphasized in art schools—the link between the body and making. I used to joke about opening a school of art and athletics.

MA: It takes endurance and strength to make the work. We need practice to maintain that. Tell me about how nature has come into your work and your experiments with dyes and natural colors.

MT: My work is always asking how we, as human beings, can encourage intimacy with the nonhuman world that surrounds us. My most recent show at Tilton Gallery here in New York is called *Wild irises grow in the mountains*, which is a line from a video in which I interviewed my mom [the poet Mei-mei Berssenbrugge] about her memories of the drought in the Southwest over the last fifty years. I'm interested in asking people about their emotional memory

opposite: Martha Tuttle, *A spot of sunlight dancing*, 2021, wool, silk, dye, graphite, and pigment, 72 × 48 inches.

Martha Tuttle, installation view of *Drought*, 2019–2021, single-channel video with sound, 21 minutes and 42 seconds.

and relationship with the climate shift. Alongside legislative action and scientific response, I think our emotional reckoning plays an important role in imagining a more balanced future.

The video is installed alongside paintings made of spun and woven wool sewn together with painted and dyed silk. I think of textiles as my painting palette. Over the years, I've gotten deeply into the different colors and textures of wool for instance. It's so fascinating to see the variety of physical qualities, depending on the different breeds of sheep, what they eat, and where they're located in the world.

My new thing is including plant dyes, which in the past I've been discouraged from using because of concerns about the longevity of the work. Eventually, this discouragement felt specious, in part because it's a perception, not reality, that synthetic dyes last longer. I also started thinking: how long is a painting supposed to last anyway, or remain unchanged? Five, ten, a hundred years? If a color absorbs the light of the sun and shifts, does that make it less beautiful? It struck me that by wanting artworks to outlast us in a frozen state, it is almost as if we are trying to deny our own mortality.

And it occurred to me that this fear of change, healthy dissolution, is not limited to how we think about paintings. For instance, I often feel that the dialogue around climate change is still striving for solutions that restore our ability to live in the same destructive ways, with minor adjustments. Instead of recognizing the reality—or at least the reality in my lifetime—that change has already occurred and many losses are irrevocable. There is deep grief in this but the world is still this extraordinary, rare existence. I'm more interested in how we create new, breathing, and practical definitions of health and caretaking that work with, or at least accept, the inevitability of change, while also pushing back against active destruction and exploitation.

MA: I love that. That's beautifully said.

MT: To me, your paintings have such a strong sense of themselves. The best way I can describe it is that they feel that they are entities that you have shepherded into this world, rather than products of your own will. If you relate to this, how do you grow in your practice? Or do you let the work find its own growth in its own time frame?

MA: I've always let the work lead me. It wasn't a great career plan, but it has served me well in the long run because now I've got deep roots. My next show will be in New York at Salon 94's new building on Eighty-Ninth Street in spring 2022. I had thought it was going to be in the fall and I would have lots of time. But I'll have to get working now. So I'll just start painting, and the work will inform me. I believe when you put out strong work, those questions tend to become unimportant. Then you can just experience the work as the magic and the power that it can have. It's like a life force. As an artist, you throw the stone and your voice will be like ripples in a pond. You don't know how people will view the work or how they will be affected.

My first show with Salon 94 opened right after the inauguration of Donald Trump. In my world, people were devastated, thrown off course and emotionally destabilized. I got emails and responses from people thanking me, saying the work helped them to feel much better. I thought that was my success.

You put something out in the world in difficult times and it's appreciated. We thank the Russian poets for what they gave us while enduring a much bigger devastation than what we have experienced. We are all emotional beings, and we artists have to feed people with our work. I need to eat, I need to grow, and for artists, art is like a garden. You plant seeds, and they grow. And as you develop as a human being and as an artist, that's what you're doing in your work and it grows.

I just watched this movie called *Fantastic Fungi*—

MT: I love that movie—so hopeful.

MA: You asked before where I still want to grow in my work. Honestly, I have no idea where the work will go. In the movie, it shows how the mycelia grows and expands, and that is how I work. I come to the studio and I grow and connect.

I often think that we just need to get out of our own way. And when people say to me, "I'm not sure I understand your paintings," I tell them, "Don't even bother. Just enjoy them."

MT: This relates to the beginning of our conversation—cognition or understanding as they are usually defined can be limiting, in terms of what may be absorbed by a viewer.

MA: As Barnett Newman said: "Aesthetics is to artists as ornithology is to birds." As artists, we don't have to know how we got there.

MT: It's a job of spacemaking, rather than space-defining.

MA: I think the role of art in society is opening the doors of the mind and getting people to breathe. Breathing is a key to life and great art has great breath.