



Edith Beaucage, a Quebec native, is a Los Angeles based painter, and a recent MFA grad from Otis College of Art and Design. Beaucage creates playful paintings that juxtapose pictographic characters with abstract geometric form. Sharon Mizota describes her recent work for the *Los Angeles Times Culture Monster*:

"Usually isolated on plain white grounds, Beaucage's characters — and they are characters, not just figures — emerge from strikingly economical means. "Monster With Blue Eyes" is a Muppet-like figure whose "fur" has been quickly delineated in a fan of broad, blue-green brushstrokes. In the diptych "Hexagon" a brushy sketch of a woman on one canvas calmly looks at another, hexagonally shaped canvas painted in thick concentric stripes. It's a succinct commentary on viewership that makes us aware of our own position in a network of gazes."

Her paintings exhibit cartoon logic – reductionistic environments within which simplified relational interaction is dramatized. One thing versus another plays out, not, necessarily, with conflict at the fore but an odd otherworldly negotiation. They are paintings that narrate a certain kind of being in the world. Perhaps they describe the feeling one might have witnessing a little one lock their barely focused eyes onto a gently floating mobile. Discovery, play, magic.

The following is the beginning of a conversation that doesn't quite reach into the value of childlike – something our painting practices share – but reflects instead a span of in-common generalities and geographical curiosities.

Jeff Tutt Interviews Edith Beaucage

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JT

It is difficult to be seriously painting today without bumping up against all the inherent clichés – either on the canvas itself or in the expectations of audience. A Brush stroke equals expression is one example. How do you avoid the tropes and/or is authenticity an issue for you?

EB

By choosing to paint today, an artist must accept that within this particular medium there already exists an abundant amount of “coded” information in the mind of the makers as well as their viewers. This cannot be avoided. It comes with the practice of painting. Thus, painting is even more of a serious endeavor. There is a tremendous amount of preconceived and historical dictum involved. The choice to paint should be handled with care.

The sign of a brushstroke has been codified as representing “emotion”. I cannot ignore these perceptions. For me, the preconceived assumptions are cumulative and the challenge is to actually reposition, rearrange, invent and organize the work so they do not fall into these “categories” or, at least, to be aware of them and use them for a purpose. I insist on using the “visible” brush stroke because there are many exciting unexplored ways to organize and investigate it. When I am painting using the language and code of paint in my particular system, I consciously avoid these painting stereotypes. It is like walking on a tight wire.

You speak of painting in terms of language – signs of abstraction or portraiture – and of the characters that inhabit your paintings as narrative ‘types’. Do you see painting as a literary or theatrical operation?

The paintings are just images, but the process that takes place in my mind while I am painting is closer to a literary composition. I built the sign of a figure that is next of kin to a character. I use the character as a way to make the image more interesting to me and to the viewer. The abstractions are also signs and characters. I am not using photographs or models to build the figures. They

come from my mind: a memory image repertoire. I consider the image development as a similar exercise as if I was building a character for a literary text.

The Canadian context offers few opportunities to study the historical cannon first hand, so we often rely on reproduction and text. How did your study in Europe change you?

Your question relates to the difference in perception of an art work in regards to its location - a painting in an institution (a museum or a church), the image of a painting in a book (reduced without any sense of scale or relationship to an architecture), the image of a painting projected on a wall in a class room or an image on a computer screen.

Prior to going in Europe I had studied mainly through text books and slide presentations in school. It was very effective and proved to be important for my understanding of art history. I was also fortunate to have regularly attended the Museum of Contemporary Art in Montreal from a very young age. I was exposed to contemporary American and Canadian art in the 70's and 80's. How great is that! The artists exhibited there were cannons for sure. However, they were not presented as such by my parents. We were simply visiting for pleasure.

This is an important factor because it represents a "light hearted" approach to viewing artwork versus viewing art work in European Museums... the cannon presented in "heavy" institutions. When you are looking at a painting at the Louvre which was previously a palace or The Musee d'Orsay which is a reconstructed train station; there is a definite sensation that the artwork is effected by the physical architecture as well. The grandiose structures and scale of the rooms filled with art work a very imposing.

In contrast, The Museum of Contemporary Art in Montreal was a small modernist building on the grounds of Expo 67'. The museum was always empty yet the art was so intriguing and like nothing I had ever seen before. It was fun to go and experience art in such a context. It was the white cube with wild art pieces. The experience of Expo 67' also had a major influence on me because it gave me the opportunity to interact with modernism at a very young age. I will never forget going on the monorail through Buckminster Fuller American Pavilion, it was a truly memorable experience for the young girl I was. I thought it was the real world, it turned out to be part of a utopian discourse which, today, still works for me.

A major change took place for me when I was living in Italy to study painting for a year. I lived in a small town named Vicchio Di Mugello, the birth place of Giotto. Each day I traveled to school by

train and would pass the beautiful sculpture of Giotto in the main square of Vicchio. He was a larger than life size figure humbly standing in the middle of the Piazza. The fact that the main hero of this town was not a general on a horse but a painter with a long robe and paint brushes was distinctly representative of the Italians connection to art and its importance to them. It ignited an interest in me to research Giotto and study his work. I made it my mission to visit every location possible with Giotto's artwork from the Middle Ages. I discovered an incredible artist that I previously knew nothing about.

The numerous murals and large wood panels were impressive in scale as well as in relationship to the architecture. I felt that I was relating to and connecting with the work in the room physically, it was not just an intellectual connection. I remember the building as much as the paintings on the walls in Assisi. I recall the light that day, the groups of tourists, the priests and nuns walking about, the beautiful colors on the walls, the narrative of these gigantic storyboards and the view from the hotel room I was staying in. This was all part of experiencing the work. Following Giotto's work in this manner helped me understand the practice of this painter in his time. As I learned of his commissions and travels, I really began to feel his presence as a painter that was real and alive. An equally important fact is that it moved me out of books into the field.

I now realize that the European experience had multiple effects on my practice. Firstly, by visiting the museums (Uffizi, Academia etc...) and seeing the tremendous amount of work to be found in Italy alone I was able to learn the old-style techniques of drawing and painting that are no longer taught in Canada. It was an extremely rich experience. However, the experience did not provide any outlook on "contemporary" practice at all. It was a time warp. I was living in the past. The experience was magical, however I did not learn what was needed to function today in art "production". It was a "romantic" vision of art making which I began to question when I moved to the United States.

I am straying even further from your original question but I feel that my response would be incomplete if I did not add the following information.

My "European Experience" has to be contextualized with the American one I am living today. Living in the United States has had the greatest influence on me in terms of contemporary art versus living in Europe simply because the European and American art schools I attended had different focuses. In Italy the school taught traditional techniques of drawing and painting. In Los Angeles the MFA program was about critical thinking in making art.

My travel experiences as a student are like chapters in a bigger book. So yes – seeing and studying the work in person has one effect and studying from a reproduction of an artwork has a different effect. I think for an artist all these experiences are very important, especially when you start to engage with art making. A work of art is “itself” when you see it with your own eyes and when there is no literal translation (no camera, no publication choices, etc) but ultimately we have to consider that our mind will read what it wants to see in the work, that is yet another layer to interpretation.

Could you describe the painting conversation/situation in LA? Is there any specificity to the American west coast?

The west coast is now being discovered as a hub of production. The Los Angeles art scene, in particular, has been increasingly publicized in the media since the early 1990's. San Francisco also has a very active production town for art. There are so many art graduates coming out of art schools every year that there has been a constant influx of new ideas and new work. I don't see a unity in the work because the style of painting varies greatly. It is not uniform but demonstrates more of a state of being in flux. Artists are trying to invent or question something through painting and about painting.

L.A.'s art scene is very dynamic and lively and the “conversation” about art is going strong here. It is very exciting that so many artists follow each other's work and converse about what they see and hear in Gallery and Museum exhibitions and numerous artist lectures.

Why paint? Why Now?

This is the question that took the most time for me to answer. The question itself is a sign of the time. I am wondering if it is not reaching its end as a “question”. Maybe we are at a point now where we don't need to ask this question anymore and, yet it positions the discussion in the here and now as a reminder that painting “has been” re-evaluated and is still being scrutinized. It is as if the ability of painting to sustain a critical discourse has not really found its footing yet. At the same time this question is a form of passive repression. It implies the exile of painting and maybe that is not necessary anymore.

I will venture to explain here why I think we are facing this question. I do not wish to pretend that I know all the factors as I am not an art historian, but for the purpose of conversation I will give you

my opinion. First of all, I believe that anything that becomes too dogmatic, organized and agreed upon, especially in visual art, will eventually be countered.

Mr. Greenberg is a perfect example. Although he was instrumental in defining modernist painting he inadvertently created a space where painting got “labeled”. He claimed, with a very good argument, “This type of painting and only these painters are modern”. Well, simply put, that did not sit well with everybody. Concurrently, there was an explosion of medium in the 60’s that fought to get recognition. Painting was found in the middle of a thunderstorm and painting, ultimately, had to be dethroned as the primary approach to creating art. I believe painting lost its monopoly to art-making and it is a welcome change considering the postmodern conversation we are in.

Since the 60’s the conceptual explosion of new medium mixed with post structuralism thinking definitely made painting look pale. If you also realize that the most active art makers spend most of their energy outside of their studio rather than painting. A painter then finds himself or herself having to address the question..... Why painting? Why now?

Now in 2011, fifty years after the beginning of the storm, I find myself still wanting to paint. And, for that matter, I can. Painting is now one choice amongst many other approaches to address art making. The conversation continues with paint and all the other media. Painting might not be for everybody but it is definitely here to stay. Children continue to be taught traditional art alongside video and photography and artists will continue to choose their practice as they see fit.

There is such strength in the rapidity and the directness of the material (the paint medium) to make images. Painting is its own technology and it functions on its own. I think it engages the technological discourse in a dialectical way. I see painting as a “different” image in comparison to the printed or photographic image. We are so used to seeing such a variety of images in advertising, magazines, moving pictures and photography that what characterizes the “difference” of “how” a painted image is built is fundamental to my practice.

I think there is room for every type of production. While I was doing my MFA the Conceptualist teachers continually questioned “painting” and demonstrated cynicism toward students that did not give up their paint brushes for installation or multi-media as a means to create work. This could be, in part, for their survival. The question at hand was, “What are you trying to convey with your work and what is the best medium to do so?” That is a crucial question and it does open up a world of possibilities as we can see in art shows everywhere. My answer was, “My best tool is paint and I

will work through it". This reply demonstrated a reverse approach to art production. I am looking at this as a form of resistance (Reverse/resistance = dialectic=good).

Through conversations with many students I observed that they wished to address painting using a poststructuralist approach. It is not a simple equation, but we agreed that there was no need to throw the baby out with the bath water at this point in time.

In asking all these questions, it proves to be an excellent arena to challenge the mind. This is where renewed practices come from. Painting, for me, is a low-tech image activator which has its place in a high-tech active image world and meaning can be generated from that interaction.

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