

ARTNEWS

Pour Forth: Pat Steir on Her Latest Paintings

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Installation view of “Pat Steir: Kairos” at Lévy Gorvy, with *Tundra* (2016–17) and *Morning with Red Line in the Middle* (2015–16).

When the artist Pat Steir was growing up in New Jersey, she’d often head over to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. “I would sit on the floor with my coat and my books and an apple, and then I’d get chased out,” Steir said in a recent interview on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. “The guard would always say, ‘You’ve got to go,’ but then I’d go back.”

Were the guards upset because she was cutting class?

“No—they didn’t want somebody sitting on the floor with all that stuff!” she said.

Steir went on to make her art in much that same style: doing pretty much what she wanted, relentlessly. She began painting her first mature works in the 1970s—a time when the New York scene was not necessarily kind to painters, much less painters that happened to be women. And around that same time she decided to revise her 1938 birth year, she [told the Archives of American Art](#) about 10 years ago. “I changed my birth date to 1940 so I wouldn’t be expected to be a minimalist or a conceptualist,” she said, laughing, and added later, “Joan Snyder was born in 1940. Lynda Benglis was 1940. They were all 1940. And here I was 1938. I said, ‘I’m not part of that other generation. I’m part of this generation.’ So I changed it.” As Steir sees it, she is 77.

And as almost everyone sees it these days, her career is soaring. Her current show at Lévy Gorvy gallery in New York, on view through Saturday, has been warmly welcomed by critics and fellow artists, and she has solo exhibitions on deck next year at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. Her work looks fresh—joyous and free and almost classical. It exudes both a seriousness and a zest that was missing from so much of the market-hot art made by young artists over the past decade.

On a recent weekday afternoon, when we met, Steir was standing inside the first-floor gallery of Lévy Gorvy, surrounded by five of her resplendent new paintings—shimmering, radiant canvases, each about eleven feet tall, variously lilac, gold, mint green, gray, and a feint baby blue, almost all flowing into a whiter hue in some stretches.

“Just ask me anything, and I’ll answer it,” Steir said with a pleasant New York directness.



Installation view of “Pat Steir: Kairos” at Lévy Gorvy, with *Golden* (2016–17) and *Angel* (2016–17).

PHOTO: TOM POWEL/COURTESY LEVY GORVY

A thin, scintillating vertical line runs down the center of each canvas, and so it was impossible not to ask a question about Barnett Newman.

“Newman made zips, but these are unzips,” Steir said. “My intention is like when a bra strap shows—to show the underwear, what put it together.” Like a sliced onion, that line reveals all the layers that have been built up. The sides of the canvases do this too, to a degree, offering up tastes of what is out of sight on the surface. How does she make them?

“For each painting I decide which colors I’ll use, and then I pick out the moves I’m going to make, and then I pour the paint,” Steir said. “I pour it in layers so the under layers have to dry before I do the next—it takes days, many weeks, really.”

Steir works from atop a cherry picker in her studio in far West Chelsea in New York, in the Starrett-Lehigh building, moving along one half of the canvas at a time, letting paint flow down the canvas, spreading apart as it goes. “It’s the weight of the pigment that makes them separate, nothing else,” she said. “I don’t mix colors.” The layers build up over time, one color affecting the previous one, growing into something new. “White over pink over green makes orange,” Steir said as she touched one canvas with her hand. “The green makes it

pink, because what you see is being mixed in your eye, not on the palette. You see one color through another.” She almost always begins with a green that “sends out light.”

An affable-seeming man who turned out to be the graphic designer Joost Elffers walked up to say hello. “This is my husband Joost, who wants to be sure that I say something nice,” Steir deadpanned as he and I shook hands, and then she moved us close to another painting, walking quickly even as she mentioned a past injury. “A few years ago, I was leaving the Met and I fell and broke my foot and my ankle and a big bone in the front of your leg, and that’s why I’m limping still. That was three years ago,” she said. After something like that, some would not rush to get back atop a cherry picker. “I was never afraid of heights, so I stood on a ladder for 25 or 30 years, a 12-foot ladder,” she said. “And I always say that my paintings got good because I wasn’t worrying about the painting. I was worrying about: don’t fall, don’t fall, don’t fall!”



Steir may not, strictly speaking, be a conceptualist, but her work thrives on a productive tension between clear rules (that hallmark of conceptual art) and the frenetic, unashamedly beautiful results they engender—expressionism conjured by chance. One might say that she is having her cake and eating it too. (Nothing wrong with that.) “It’s about non-intention and non-intervention,” she said, adding that those were ideas she picked up from her old friend John Cage. “I never throw anything away. Because years later I may wonder why I made the decision. So I just don’t exhibit it if I don’t like it. But I might take it out every few years and reevaluate.”

There are about 20 paintings in the limbo state right now, she said. “This was a very intense installation. When I rest a few days, I’m going to look at those paintings.”

One work on that first floor feels a bit different than the rest, with a careful, crisp tangerine line at its center that offers up no under layers, the result of Steir taping it off while working. She said that the same color appears in a painting by Agnes Martin, who has been an enduring inspiration for her. “I was so surprised that she used that in a painting. I thought I’d use it again.” She thought for a moment.

“I have limitations like a conceptual artist, but rules are made to be broken,” she said. “So if you tape it, that’s OK too.”