

ARTICIPLE

ARTIST INTERVIEWS WITH MARY BURGER. LIKE 'PARTICIPLE' (VERB-NOUN-ADJECTIVE): MAKING-CREATING-GENERATING.

Jul
17

Jamie Brunson



Rajni, 2017
Oil and alkyd on polyester over panel
66 x 66 inches

Painter and mixed-media artist Jamie Brunson is well known in the San Francisco Bay Area, where she lived and worked for many years. Jamie relocated to New Mexico in 2014, but continues to exhibit in the Bay Area. Her current show at [Andrea Schwartz Gallery](#) is on view through July 21.

In our conversation Jamie shares thoughts on the significance of meditation for her art practice, the influence of the New Mexican landscape on her new work, and the pleasure of revisiting earlier investigations.

Articiple: *Your art is closely connected to your practice of Kundalini meditation. You've described your art practice as the process of translating the perceptual states of meditation into a formal visual language. The relationship between meditation and art seems intuitively evident in some ways, but very elusive in others. Could you explain a bit about Kundalini meditation, and how that ancient practice came to have such relevance for your life as a contemporary artist?*

Jamie: The sitting meditation practice I follow is based on a form of controlled, "circular" breathing. It's an active "fire method" practice with a complex esoteric, philosophical, and ideological history. My teacher has written extensively about it, but I might make the analogy that you don't need to know the principles of the combustion engine to know that if you put gas and oil into your car, and turn the key, it will go.

The practice might be seen as a near-cousin to Buddhist mindfulness/breathing meditation: by breathing through a circuit of chakras, you open, expand and link the chakras while burning away accumulated negative energies.

As with Buddhist practice, over time you gain the capacity to put space around certain reflexive reactions as they arise. With continued practice, you eventually enter the Void body, an expansive unbounded state that's hard to describe, except to say that it's a palpable sensory experience with specific qualities that most practitioners collectively agree upon. So it's not arbitrary or imaginary, it's somatic and specific. It has color qualities, spatial qualities, visual attributes, yet those qualities might be regarded simply as indications of having entered a state of being and awareness, which is the true goal. But, I do bring some of the visual and sensate information from the practice into the studio.

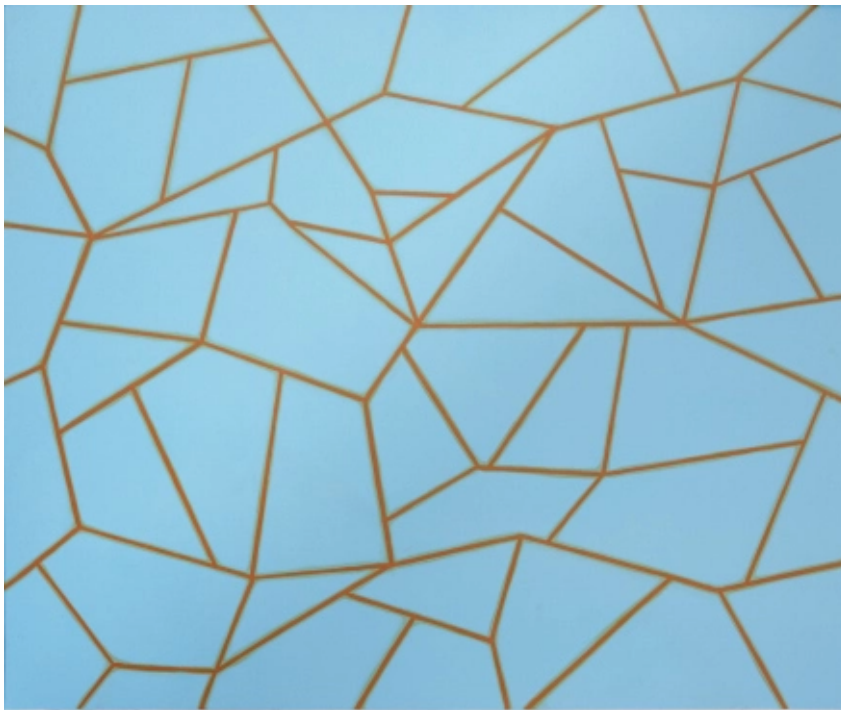
My Kundalini teacher, **Dr. Mark Levy**, is also an art historian who has written extensively about the relationship between metaphysical states and art practice, going back to primary shamanic rituals done for the benefit of healing communities. His research and writing have been a profound influence on my studio work. Perhaps I gravitated to his ideas because I've always intuitively understood the relationship between formalism and physical, sensate experiences? I've always experienced art making as a transcendental process that can lead to altered perceptions of time, deep engagement with the present moment, and a sense of affinity with the materials. **Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi** describes this sense of engagement as a "flow state". I see a strong correspondence between meditation practice and studio practice because they both require full participation and presence to enter that state.

Articiple: *The term "translation" suggest several interesting possibilities: maybe a process of visually rendering perceptions that you've experienced during meditation, or a process of recreating a meditative state of mind as you work on a painting. How do you characterize the process of translation in your work?*

Jamie: I think your question contains the answer—both ideas are true.

I should say that because I'm a formally trained visual artist, of course I learned the academic principles of color, composition and design: contrast, harmony,

rhythm, surface qualities, distribution across a picture plane, the illusion of spatial depth, et cetera. These principles are an important part of my studio work because they're the elements that make any artwork function well.



Long Way Around, 2017
Oil and alkyd on polyester over panel
60 x 72 inches

The boundless qualities of the Void body I mentioned earlier are the qualities I'm working to evoke with formal visual language and with the inherent properties of materials and what they can suggest. My work is partly an attempt to create an image-object that might serve as a threshold, for anyone who sees it. Several artists I know—[Squeak Carnwath](#) and [Tracy Rocca](#), to name just two— have talked about the capacity of art to slow people down, to give them a moment to pause. That's something I intend in my work as well. For me, a big question is: by investing time, presence, craft, and curiosity—can my engagement get embedded into my work? Can I give a viewer a glimpse into the transcendental phenomena I've experienced, both as a painter and as a meditator? Part of the compelling power of formal elements like color and surface rendered in a fluid medium like paint is that they mimic elements in the world that we've experienced bodily, tactilely. That's how I apply the formal aspects of materials to my work.

The *Lattice* paintings lean a little more towards the formal realm—while they're also based on visual experiences in meditation, I'm more conscious of using what I know formally and intellectually when I'm making them. I think of them as a form of improvisational drawing, even a drawing exercise that demands careful decision-making with full attention. While they're completely improvisational, they also incorporate careful evaluation and a kind of courageous decisiveness and immediacy. The end result is a trace of a thought process. Perhaps that could be said of any work of art?

Articiple: *Since your move from the Bay Area to New Mexico several years ago, you've written that your work is increasingly influenced by elements from the environment, including the expansive sky and dramatic atmospheric conditions. I'm interested in the conversation that emerges between an immersive meditation practice and an immersive experience of landscape. What are the confluences or the generative contradictions that happen as you draw from these two phenomena for your work?*

Jamie: That idea of the Void body and spaciousness comes into play—when you're outside here in New Mexico, the sky seems larger. You become physically attuned to the low horizontal band of the ground plane against a vast, animated, celestial backdrop. Seasonal atmospheric phenomena are an insistent part of everyday life and have a kind of *presence*. The land and the seasons penetrate your body and your consciousness. If you've had the interior experience of the Void body in meditation, you can connect immediately to the external phenomenon, because they are such similar somatic experiences. You're both dwarfed by the scale of the environment, and expanding to fill it and participate in it.

Articiple: *In regard to immersion in the landscape, you wrote in a recent Instagram post, "Beginning to understand why Agnes Martin used reduction, vertical lines and the grid to capture the vast space of the New Mexico sky/land." (Pieces of Sky, posted April 9, 2017).*

Martin herself offered intriguing reflections about the place of landscape in her work. From a statement published in 1966:

Nature is like parting a curtain, you go into it. I want to draw a certain response like this...that quality of response from people when they leave themselves behind.

My paintings [are] about merging, about formlessness. A world without objects, without interruption.

Joan Mitchell, roughly a contemporary of Martin, also found impetus in landscape. Critic Irving Sandler wrote of Mitchell in 1957,

...a recollected landscape provided the initial impulse, but the representational image was transformed in the artist's imagination.

The object disappears in the exultation of the act of painting, and Miss Mitchell ends up with almost pure emotion.

This act of creating a work that is in sympathy with landscape, rather than a representation of it, holds so much possibility. What can you tell us about how you experience landscape as part of your process?"

Jamie: Your choice of quotes is very astute—that quality of “formlessness” that Martin cited feels very familiar. Material handling and scale can evoke the qualities of immersive landscapes and atmospheric phenomena. I've started

working larger, on supports that demand full body gestures to draw bands of paint horizontally across the panel surface in some of my work, the *Veil* paintings. That larger scale can become “environmental” so that a viewer might step into it the same way you step into the landscape and become a part of it.



Swirl, 2017
Oil and alkyd on polyester over panel
60 x 60 inches

I can also relate to what Sandler wrote about Mitchell making work that’s sympathetic with landscape, rather than literally representing it. In the work I’m making now, I’m consciously committed to formalism over narrative or representational imagery. I wouldn’t call myself a “landscape painter” by any means—it’s more about an extra-linguistic, physical relationship to the land and to space.

The collage work you mentioned is something new—I’ve been making collages for a long time, but the earlier *Practice* collages were pretty much a series of formal exercises, a kind of game using deconstructed calligraphic letterforms from a language I couldn’t read and could only appreciate as shape and line. I was laying geometric forms on top of grounds made with “deconstructed calligraphy”, to create compositions that were dynamic and driven by movement, using forms that were in part associative or memory-based.



Blackbird, 2011 Collage and mixed media on polyester over panel
14 x 14 inches

I mention this work because I'm curious about all kinds of ideas and sometimes go off on tangents to investigate. Sometimes I lean towards pure geometry and color, but the act of moving an eye through arrangements on a flat plane still has its roots in a physical experience. I feel that exploration and experimentation open the way to new information and new processes. If you look back through my work there are series that shade into other series or arise as offshoots that become their own bodies of work. Sometimes one series falls away and the other takes over, sometimes they merge, sometimes they diverge. To me, this is the beauty of art-making as a tool for consciousness: that "play " can lead to discovery and understanding. The best part is just suspending judgment and observing something as it unfolds.

Articiple: *You've written about how important the physical qualities of materials are in your practice. In paintings of oil, alkyd, and wax, and in collages of vintage paper, sometimes including ink and other media, you explore the sensual and associative properties of the materials. How did you arrive at your choice of materials for these respective practices? What is their significance for you, in terms of the perceptual phenomena you express in the work?*

Jamie: The new found-paper collages are related to work I was making, and ideas I was pursuing, quite a while ago. I love the idea that you can seemingly reach the end of an investigation for a period of time, and suddenly wake up to a new way of working or a way to carry an idea further after having set it aside.



Vecchio Citta, 2017

Vintage found paper collage and acrylic medium on 400 lb. rag Fabriano paper

Paper Size: 15 x 12 inches

Image size: 9.25 x 6.25 inches

I've been collecting vintage paper for many years, in part because, since the 1990s when I worked on pattern-based abstraction, I've been interested in worn physical surfaces marked by the passage of time and history. I had been fortunate to travel in Europe, North Africa, and Asia for most of that decade, visiting historic monuments, churches, shrines and temples. I really responded to the tactile, haptic, patinated surfaces of these ancient places. The ruined beauty enacted by time and the elements added something that was beyond the control of human intent. It was purely phenomenal, time made visible. So portions of my work have always been focused on trying to create/recreate that kind of surface through an almost "devotional", time-based, additive-and-subtractive method. A certain kind of surface is an inevitable product of working that way; I still get a lot of comments about the surfaces of my paintings, which are the direct result of glazing, sanding, layering, and reworking.

That aura of age and wear is another big part of living here in New Mexico—Santa Fe dates back to the 1500's—although even when I had a studio on the Oakland waterfront and lived in Dogpatch in the City, I was always shooting details of “found compositions” on industrial, urban surfaces with my iPhone. So these new horizontally banded found-paper collages come from the synthesis of several ongoing fascinations—my interest in tactile surfaces produced by wear and use; my interest in linear, architectonic structure and in pattern, which came out of travelling to different world cultures; and my interest in getting the greatest impact from the simplest and most direct means. Working with found-paper collage let me reintroduce some of the pattern-based elements that I used in my earlier work, but used differently as rhythmic placement of geometric fragments. *Trove*, one of the collage studies I made from the smallest scraps of found materials, led me to paint one of the very large paintings in the exhibition at [Andrea Schwartz Gallery](#) (*Rajni*, shown at the beginning of the interview). I was surprised to make something that went in that more architectural /patterned direction, but I had to make it in order to know what it would look and feel like.



Trove, 2017

Vintage found paper and block print collage, acrylic medium on 400 lb. rag Fabriano paper

Paper size: 12.25 x 10.25 inches

Image size: 8.25 x 7.25 inches

A lot of it is really about paying attention to what the materials want to be, recognizing them for their innate character, then re-arranging and reconfiguring them until they converge into something greater than the individual parts. This is incidental, but there's also something to be said about making "beauty" from materials that are discarded for being no longer useful. It *is* a metaphor. At the heart of it, this is the gift of being an art-maker: the capacity to find the arresting qualities in anything, through small acts of arrangement, recognition, or juxtaposition.

Article: *You're an active curator and you were an art instructor for many years. I often meet artists in the Bay Area who've studied with you and who name you as an influence (and of course, I was your student). How do your curation and teaching experiences inform your own art practice?*

Jamie: The thing I miss after moving from the Bay Area is teaching. I'm still connected to and correspond with many of the people who took classes with me or worked with me. Some of them have come out to visit—and when they're here, they really understand why Walter and I picked this place to live, as a way to sustain our work.

I feel an almost parental pride in the successes of the artists who've studied with me, or whom I coached—although honestly, I can't take credit for their accomplishments! So many have worked hard and worked fearlessly, and have gone on to develop work that's thoughtful, authentic and skillful. All the printmaking investigations you've done over the past several years are a great case in point—teaching yourself through a process of determined inquiry.

Amanda Williams, who took classes with me at CCA, is opening a solo show at the MCA in Chicago this month. She developed a powerful color-and-materials-based body of work that deals with the Southside community where she grew up, and the relationship between physical structures and cultural value and status.

Adrienne Heloise, who studied with me at UC Berkeley Extension, has her narrative cut-paper pieces installed at the Morris Graves Museum right now.

I love these artists for their passion and determination. There's excitement in helping people develop their vision and technique, and the confidence to trust it and pursue it. And then I just have to stand back and get out of their way!

I believe in the idea of giving service in the community you inhabit, and for me, teaching was a way of doing that. It was also a way of modeling generosity, the idea of sharing information and resources, which I feel is an important part of building community in the arts, when you're so often engaged in a practice that can be isolating.

To become a good teacher, I had to organize what I knew in order to transmit it effectively. And, if I didn't know the answer to something technical, I had to be able to research it and assimilate it for my own understanding so that I could share it and explain it. Through preparation for classes, I built a tremendous

amount of technical knowledge that has served me as much as the people who were taking the classes.

Both the curatorial projects and the ability to give solid critical feedback in classes were informed by the travel I mentioned earlier, and also time I spent writing art criticism and later, writing manuscripts for didactic audio guides for museum exhibitions. Those jobs were exercises in description and analysis, and in contextualizing concepts in the framework of visual and general history. That helped me to develop the ability to do solid research and to explain things to people: in class, I could refer people to historical and contemporary precedents for the work or the ideas that interested them, so they could add to the ongoing dialogue around these ideas and approaches.

Curating has given me the opportunity to do something else that was very important to me—defining developing currents in the local art scene, recognizing ideological connections that drive people's work. That kind of naming or defining, dealing with work taxonomically, was a way of explaining, to myself, the emerging approaches that I was seeing. But curating exhibitions also allowed me to pair established and emerging artists. That was a way of showing affinities as well as equivalencies, of creating opportunities and removing some of the hierarchies in the art world.

I lived in the Bay Area for so long—went to undergraduate and graduate school there, showed at different galleries, taught at different institutions, wrote for different publications, sat on some curatorial boards, had work acquired by some of the museums—that I built connections in the community that allowed me to make curatorial proposals that had some credibility. I'm still interested in curatorial projects; I've been here in New Mexico for three years now, just long enough to start meeting artists and understanding which regional institutions I might approach with a proposal, and where I might apply for funding for proposals.

I'm still very interested in the category that I put my own work in—what I call "Metaphysical Abstraction", formal work that's motivated by encounters with the ineffable.

There are a significant number of artists here, as well as in the Bay Area, whose work moves along those lines, or has been directly informed by meditation practice: [Michelle Theberge](#) in Berkeley and [Lisa Espenmiller](#) in Oakland, who both use a kind of ritual repetition, with form and line respectively, in producing their work. [Pegan Brooke](#) in Bolinas makes beautiful, shimmering paintings of repetitive marks, but natural forces indirectly inform her work, perhaps in the same way Sandler described Joan Mitchell's work. I'd like to combine their work with related work by Southwestern-based artists—like my *Veil* paintings, or [Susan York](#)'s masterful, reductive lead pieces. [Raphaelle Goethals](#) and Tracy Rocca are both making exquisitely crafted, atmospheric paintings that produce that sense of an environment that I talked about earlier. Raphaelle works with encaustic, so the materiality of her work contributes to that sense of depth and mystery.

I think that these artists' work, seen in relationship to each other, will make a persuasive case for a mode of perception, and a way of working, that emphasizes a more thoughtful set of values. The overlay of excess—in media, in consumption, in the political situation where we find ourselves—feels emotionally and psychologically corrosive. We'd all benefit from the presence of a slower, measured, illuminating, and less sensational approach to work.



Prop, 2010
Oil, alkyd and wax on polyester over panel
24 x 24 inches