

*Excerpted from the book –
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*Interview with Aleta Pippin
By James Leonard-Amodeo*

Can you tell us a bit about your background (where you were born, grew up, etc.)?

I was born in Albion, Michigan, but at the age of six moved to Torrance, California, to be near my paternal grandmother. After a couple of years, we relocated to the desert. I remember the first time we visited the desert, we drove down to my grandmother's small cottage in Cathedral City, near Palm Springs, for the weekend. At the time, the cars weren't air conditioned and I can still remember driving into the desert and thinking that it must be the hottest place I'd ever experienced. Eventually, I grew to appreciate its stark beauty and to this day, prefer living in the desert.

Was anyone in your family an artist?

There aren't any "formal" artists in my family. However, there were many poets on my mother's side. Actually, both my father and mother are artistic. My father used to be the person who bent sheet metal for the most difficult jobs, which I consider to be artistic. Now he's into woodworking. My mother has been painting as a hobby for over 30 years.

What made you decide to become a professional painter?

In 1991, we move to Santa Fe, New Mexico and a year later I spotted an ad in our local newspaper for painting lessons with Roberta Harris, a fellow Houstonian and a long-time artist. I signed up and after a couple of sessions decided that I was going to become a professional painter. This harkened back to my childhood, when I used to draw all of the time. Then I thought I would become a fashion designer. The only reason for that idea was I didn't know anything about the opportunities of becoming an artist, and that field seemed like a practical choice. My parents never entered art galleries or museums, nor did I, so I was quite naïve about the art world.

So you have been painting since 1992, then?

Yes. But although I wanted to become a professional painter, I didn't paint everyday at that point in time. I took many art workshops, and, in 1994, I met Alex Shundi who became a mentor and key individual in helping me move to another level in my painting. Alex has a Masters in Art from Yale and visited Santa Fe every few months, trying to establish a school for an accredited Masters Degree in Art. I attended his advanced critique about every three months over a two-year period.

The first time I met Alex, I was nervous about bringing an offering of paintings for his review. The paintings I'd completed up until that time were mostly portraiture. Though I was nervous, I was still somewhat proud of my work. I took several pieces and laid them out before him. He studied them for a moment, then turned to me and in his Italian accent said, "why are you painting these?" Of course, that comment did much to make me comfortable!! My response was, "I don't know what else to paint." That was the beginning of venturing into the world of abstraction.

I painted and explored that world until 1996, becoming quite prolific, yet I felt something was lacking inside of me. I ended up doing one last painting in 1997, turning my attention toward other preoccupations, such as writing self-help books, which are currently on my website (www.authenticentrepreneur.com). (That website and writings no longer exist.) In the year 2001, I decided to paint again, but I was filled with doubts, asking myself if I could still paint. Of course, I could. Today

there is no place I'd rather be than in my studio.

Do you have any preferred painters? How have they influenced you in what you do?

When I was first learning, I appreciated the representational artists, such as Robert Henri, Monet, Van Gogh, Cezanne, and others. But the artists who made a real difference are Kandinsky, DeKooning, Pollack, and of course, George O'Keeffe.

The influence felt by Robert Henri was through his book, "The Art Spirit." In Monet's work, I appreciate the beautiful color and the thick, luscious paint. With Van Gogh, it is his use of color and brushwork, and with Cezanne—brushwork and design.

When I first began to paint, the idea of becoming an abstract artist never crossed my mind. But as I studied further and deeper I learned to appreciate abstract artists and became more interested in exploring the materials and using my imagination. Eventually I began to experience my "voice" through painting organic images.

I note that most of your artwork is done using acrylics. Why this medium?

My very first lessons were with acrylics. That class was with Roberta Harris and she believed acrylics to be the best paints available. After leaving her classes, I switched to oils. I wanted to find out for myself which medium "spoke" to me. Actually, I've tried pastels, watercolors, oils, and acrylics. I used to refer to acrylics as the "cheap whore" compared to oils.

A couple of years ago, I determined I was going to use acrylics, not so much like oils, but in the unique characteristics they offer. There is so much that one can do with acrylics that cannot be accomplished with oils.

After a few months of using acrylics, I was hooked. I can dilute them and pour over a loose canvas, paint them on over a smooth surface or one that has been highly textured. I can wipe most of the paint off and leave a transparent residue. I can glaze them on just like oils. There are so many new acrylic textural mediums out today, you have the materials at hand to create virtually any type of two dimensional piece you can imagine.

I truly feel that acrylic paints have come into their own as the medium for the 21st century. I've since tried the water-soluble oils and do like them, yet I generally gravitate back to acrylics, I guess mainly because of their transparency.

Do you still use other mediums?

In addition to the acrylics, I will do mixed media using paper, copper, aluminum, gold leaf, etc. Once in a while, I'll use oil sticks and pastels in the painting. I also use large quantities of molding paste and gels.

Your supports vary. You use linen, polyflax, canvas, birch panel, masonite, and probably other supports. Is there a reason for the variety?

I prefer to paint on canvas (here I'm lumping linen, canvas and polyflax together) and boards. Those boards can be birch or masonite. The reason that I've tried so many different supports is that I'm still exploring my new "voice." It seems that I enjoy the exploration of materials, though, and just want to try many different things.

I use linen and polyflax for the poured paintings because it is very white and I can get it in a portrait texture. I've tried canvas and the paint seems to absorb more creating a different result. I used to buy raw canvas and do all of the prep, but it is so time-consuming that of late I've gone to primed canvas. When

I'm doing heavy texture that resembles fresco, I like to use the birch or masonite panels. Another support that I've used quite a bit and really like is Yupo paper, imported from Japan. It is a synthetic, with a velvety surface that feels like plastic. It is non-absorbent, so the paint takes on a different quality — one that I find very appealing.

What about the surface of polyflax? Is it easy to paint over?

Polyflax is a synthetic fabric developed specifically as an artists' canvas. It is supposed to have greater strength as compared to natural fibers. It seems to come mostly in smooth or portrait finishes. I started using it when I was doing the poured paintings. It is a bargain compared to most other canvas and linen, yet has the smooth finish and bright white that I require. The biggest drawback I've found is that it won't tighten up like natural fibers and I end up using corner keys on the stretcher bars.

You've used the word "pour" several times now. Do you mean "pour" as in Jackson Pollock's "drip painting" technique? Tell us more about this.

When I use the term "pour" I'm talking about the process that artists like Paul Jenkins and Morris Louis employed). The reason that I explored this style of painting is it allows the brilliant white of the canvas to show through, and I'm able to achieve a vibrantly colored and multi-layered image. These images remind me of the bright colors of the Western United State. I have never seen a sunset as vibrant as those I've witnessed while living in Santa Fe. This new series is my attempt to communicate that filling of "awe" one has when surrounded by rich vibrant color.

The process goes like this—first an armature (frame, structure, etc.) is constructed based on the channels you want to create considering how the paint will flow. Canvas is draped over the armature and the paint is flowed onto it. This method takes extremely large quantities of paint, even though the paint is diluted 50% with water. Painting in this manner requires that the highest quality of paint be used, like Golden fluids. There is enough pigment in Golden fluids to withstand the high dilution ratio.

Once the colors are selected, a series of pours are done. Pouring creates a spontaneous atmosphere in which I must be flexible and fast in reacting to the paint. Several colors will be poured, at once or one after the other. Water is also used to create diaphanous effects. The canvas is then removed and studied for design and color. As a result, usually another armature is constructed and the canvas again draped from another angle to create a different flow. Once again, paint is poured. This time I may use the same series of colors or add another color or colors, depending on the desired outcome. This process is continued until the painting is complete, usually after three to four different pours.

I enjoy working with paint and color in this manner. It forces me to be flexible and open to the spontaneous incidents that are found to occur. I've found that this flexibility carries over into my approach with the daily issues of life.

One could say, then, that you're a colorist specializing in abstract painting.

I think that is a fair assessment. The use of color has always come naturally for me as I love color. Over the years, I've read a great deal about color theory and have actually limited my palette to purposely tone the work down. Yet, even in the tone-downed effort, the paintings remain vibrant. When people see my work the usual first comment is, "Wow! What beautiful color!" The next comment is that the paintings are different than what they usually see. That comment used to bother me a bit, but now I gladly accept it. In fact I just read a comment from Matisse that said, "It has bothered me all of my life that I do not paint like everybody else." Aren't we glad he didn't!

How would you define a "colorist?"

In my opinion, a colorist is someone who has studied color or has a natural ability in the use of color

and who uses color in such a way that is different from the norm, meaning they may select unusual color combinations, paint consistently high key pieces, etc. Recently (2004) I wrote an article on the vibratory affect of color for *The Fine Arts Magazine*. In that article, I explained how each color has a vibration and how that vibration can actually uplift or depress human physiology, much the same as music does. There is an entire field in psychology dedicated to color therapy.

Are the bright colors you use straight out of a tube or do you do a lot of mixing?

I used to mix most of my colors when I was using oils. However, with the acrylics, I've tended to use them straight out of the container since I frequently don't use a brush, choosing to push the color around with a rag, my fingers, a palette knife, or any other tool that will create the effect I'm after. When using a brush I do mix my colors.

Why do you do abstract painting, exclusively? Is there something about this style that has advantages over, say, figurative or landscape painting?

In my career as a painter I eventually discovered that my interest quickly waned when representational pieces and, as a result, I didn't paint as often as I do now.

There are a couple of reasons that I've chosen to paint abstractly. The main one is that I enjoy working with materials and color. My joy is in learning how the various mediums look on canvas or panel, how many techniques are available to applying color and the different looks that can be achieved by applying these various techniques, the importance of good design, and how the painting seems to create itself when I'm attentive and watching/listening to my intuitive voice for clues.

When the viewer spends time with abstract paintings, they have the opportunity to really connect and to appreciate the painting simply for what it is. They haven't connected it to a time or place, as they may do with a representational piece, rather they may notice the color or texture, or possibly the feeling being related, any number of ideas is available to the viewer of an abstract piece. That is not to say that I like all abstract paintings, which I do not. Also, there are some representational artists whose work I find intriguing. However, the clue for me that I am on track with being an abstract painter is that when I view a representational painting, I'm attracted to the pattern and/or use of color. It's never about the image.

Can you talk to us about your academic background in the arts?

As an artist, I guess I would be considered self-taught in that the images I've evolved to are mine. Along the way, I had several good teachers and studied with some great artists whose idea of learning how to paint meant copying their style. I have an extensive library of art books collected over the last 10 years, which I appreciate immensely and refer to frequently.

Because of my personality and desire to learn, I've explored most mediums. I even sculpted when I first became interested in art. I also spent several years doing life drawing. I believe once you've learned technique, it is important to do the time—painting and discovering your true voice.

I have heard that painters today face great challenges in the market place. Would you say this is true? What challenges have you had to personally face?

I guess the biggest challenge in the current marketplace has been caused by the recession. As a result, many galleries close, as did all sorts of art-related businesses. (As an aside, when the economy is booming, sometimes even a business with poor management practices can stay afloat. However, during recession, those businesses that are poorly managed fail.) Surviving galleries have been able to select their artists from the cream of the crop since more artists are out on the street.

As an artist, we still have responsibility for ensuring that we partner with galleries of substance,

meaning they have a track record, or at least good financial backing. Even then, it is a risk, albeit a necessary one.

My personal challenge is motivating myself to do the marketing which is the key to success. Artists are entrepreneurs with our own little business and we must take responsibility for that business. We cannot spend all of our time in the studio. We cannot assume that the gallery is going to provide enough for support. We have the same responsibility as any other business owner to have a vision and a plan, to do the marketing, to make the calls, to constantly improve our “product” and to believe in ourselves and that we deserve to be successful.

How difficult is it selling a work of art on your own? Would you recommend artists be represented by a gallery rather than going it on their own?

I enjoy selling my art work. I realize many artists have difficulty with this one since to create art is usually done in the quiet by a personality who tends to be an introvert. However, I’ve met many artists who enjoy creating the work in the quiet and selling the work at art festivals. They enjoy the interaction with collectors and believe that personal contact is essential because most collectors usually purchase more than one painting from artists whose work they enjoy.

Another aspect of selling your own work is your enthusiasm. No one can talk about your work with the same passion and knowledge that you have. And there are times when it is that very passion and knowledge that actually sells the work.

I recommend that artists do a little of everything. I realize there are artists who have successful careers, represented by more than one gallery. That’s wonderful and certainly a goal to shoot for. However, for most of us, I think it’s good to be represented by a gallery or galleries in addition to selling your own work. I’m very fortunate living in Santa Fe, New Mexico, reported to be the second or third largest art market. During the summer and into the fall, the Santa Fe Society of Artists, of which I’m a member, sells directly to collectors.

I also have a website which I update frequently. That has been a source of sales and is very useful as an advertising tool. Also, I’m looking for a quality gallery or galleries to represent my work.

How do you price your artwork? Is there a personal formula you follow?

I price my artwork based on the square inch. The reason I do this is because there are some paintings that I absolutely love and I may not be objective and think they are better than others and as a result may price them higher. I’ve learned that the paintings I think are wonderful aren’t always the ones that the collector thinks are wonderful, and so it’s better to be non-objective. A pricing formula keeps me “in line.”

More that even in the history of painting, today the art world is dominated by women painters. Why do you think this is?

First of all, let me say, “hurrah!” Having said that, I’m not sure whether your statement is correct. I agree that it appears the art world has been dominated by men. However, it is certainly true that our historical records have been politically motivated in keeping with a patriarchal society. I think there were probably many women painters who weren’t taken seriously and considered hobbyists. Whether we like it or not, traditionally women were expected to be at home, not out in the world seeking to become “professional” artists.

I just finished an excellent book by Susan Vreeland, called “The Forest Lover,” about Emily Carr, a Canadian artist who began her painting career during the early 1900’s. She traveled to the Native American camps to paint the totem poles and to record a way of life before it was gone. It was very

difficult for her as a woman to travel into those areas unescorted. She was looked down on by many for associating with “those” people. However, she did prevail and we are blessed with a body of wonderful artwork.

Just as women finally won the right to vote, we have been entering the workplace, many since the early 60's. As a result, there are more women in the arts. Also, I've noticed that many women who have retired from other careers have returned to their first love, the one they didn't think they could make a living from.

Another area of growth is emerging countries. As these women gain their rights, there will be more women artists. I think it's a coming of age and I'm glad to be part of it.