

Navigating the Depths of Personal Expression of Jerry McLaughlin, Through a Fusion of Mediums and Tension

Artistic Statement of Jerry McLaughlin

I am not an abstract expressionist but my work is about personal expression. I am not a color field painter but my work employs the qualities of value and tone to create contemplative forms. I am not a minimalist but simplification and reduced visual language are fundamental to my work. My art is as much an act of self-creation as self-discovery and a declaration of intellectual and individual freedom.

My work embraces the tension between boldly physical textures and smooth surfaces. Smoother surfaces that manipulate light through sheen and reflection and vary with the position of the viewer. My work holds a tension in its shapes and edges, tension between the geometric and the organic, tension between the delimited and the unconfined.

When I build paintings, I am building spaces for the viewer to inhabit. I am building geometry and rooms. The scale and the palette of these paintings gives them weight and mass. They have gravity, gravity in that they have seriousness of mood and gravity in that we feel them pull us. There is the power of mood created by blacks, whites, and grays, the power of color without the use of color, an invitation to the tension of black, white, and gray as both colors and 'non-colors'.

There is also the tension of wanting, and not wanting, to be seen. A tension between feeling, wanting, and not wanting, to be alone. I see now that in my best work there is the tragedy of aloneness, of isolation, that it is to be human.

Interview with Jerry McLaughlin and ARTICULATE
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From where is your drive generated, in regards to your artistic work?

For me it is about choice.

I believe we choose what makes meaning in our lives. I choose art. Making art, among other things, gives my life value and purpose. Perhaps it sounds overblown, but in the most practical and personal sense making art is an act of self-creation and self-discovery and a declaration of intellectual and individual freedom. It is the most powerful way I know to do all of that.

I also believe we choose where and how we show up. When it comes to my artistic work, I choose to show up. I don't wait for inspiration. In fact, I'm not sure I believe in inspiration as an external force. I show up because that's how we make things work and how we make things happen.

How did you develop your artistic vocabulary?

I did not go to art school, and I taught (and continue to teach) myself how to work with the materials I use. For many years I worked in relative isolation. I discovered a vocabulary through trial and error, using my aesthetic compass as a guide. If something was successful and I liked it, I incorporated it into my vocabulary and worked with it, developed it. If something did not work or suit my aesthetic, I moved on from it. Once I became more active in the art world, I started looking at more work, seeing what beautiful, expressive vocabulary others used. If it was something I could personalize and incorporate into my work then that added to my vocabulary as well.

Materiality also contributes a lot to my vocabulary. The materials and tools I work with do certain things. I pay attention to those things. I make deliberate efforts to use some of the natural vocabulary that derives from my materials and tools. I also try to push those things further, push them into areas that test the limits of what my materials and tools can do.

So, as with any language, you study and you practice. My artistic vocabulary is still growing and evolving.

Do you work with a project-minded approach, or do the themes of your work evolve in a more dynamic way?

I am definitely more 'project-minded', but I also believe that approach is (or at least can be) dynamic. I like ideas, so I like to start with an idea. But I think it is impossible to fully explore an artistic idea, at least one where there is material output, without the actual work of that idea participating in the exploration. During and after making a work, there is dialogue between the artist and the work. There might be dialogue between the artist and others. Those discussions invariably impact the project and future works. Questions generate answers, but they also generate more questions, often ones we did not know to ask before starting the project/work. In that way I feel a 'project-minded' approach is inherently dynamic.

What is your preferred media and why?

It's a very interesting question for me to be asked right now. I'm not sure my answer is as interesting for your readers. If you had asked me this question a month or six weeks ago I would have said, 'cold wax and oils'. I wouldn't say that now.

I just finished an incredibly impactful residency at El Sur in Mexico City. My month there was spent exploring materiality and 3-dimensional work through a range of materials, including concrete, ash, tar, polyurethane, plaster, rust, wood, and even plant debris I collected from the property. What I realized working with them was that for a while I have been feeling boxed-in, constrained by cold wax and oils, not just as a medium to work with but as an identity. My artistic identity developed specifically around my work, writing, and teaching of this medium. I have been interested in materials, those I listed and others, since childhood. I have also been interested in 3-dimensional work. This residency laid bare those feelings of constraint. Moving forward I can no longer only work with cold wax and oils. Other materials will have to play a prominent, perhaps dominant role. I'm not sure whether it will be one or two or whether exploring a range of materials will be where I go from here.

Are your works pre-thought or do they emerge on their own?

Nearly all of my work involves some pre-thought. The degree to which I 'pre-think' varies though. My larger monochromatic works with lots of bold texture are the most spontaneous. I let those textural compositions evolve as the work progresses. But I do have some idea going in of the palette and general distribution and ratio of textures. The works where I leave smooth thin areas of paint set back from larger textured areas require the most planning. I have to keep those thin areas protected from thicker layers of paint and texture throughout the process. But even in those, the large textured areas develop quite organically, and I am always open to changing or adjusting a composition if it isn't working...which it often doesn't in the first iteration.

If your works are pre-thought, how do the idea emerge and how do you select which ideas proceed, and which not?

My ideas emerge from the series I am working on. There are emotional and expressive objectives a given series is exploring and that plays a large role. But, I also give myself formal rules, constraints and guidelines I have to follow in a series. Aspects of palette, shape, texture, and edge are led by my 'rules'. The creativity comes from finding ways to make the painting work within those guidelines and still effectively express their content. I suppose it is a bit like structures of lineation, rhyme, and meter in poetry, but not nearly as strict.

What do you believe is a key element in creating a good composition?

Composition is complicated, perhaps the most complicated and important topic in the formal aspects of painting. However, regardless of that complexity, for me, tension and balance are the drivers of good composition. There must be tension, something that gives the painting an internal pull, an energy, a potential for change or movement within the work. But, there must also be balance. Everything must feel right, situated in precarious balance, on the verge of moving or coming apart.

It's a very difficult task to explain this in words. I think one of the best ways is through viewing a Calder mobile or kinetic sculpture. Several shapes might exist on one side of the work, some quite large, but they are perfectly balanced by a small round mass opposite them. There is obvious balance. Both sides sit equally across the fulcrum. But there is tension. How can that small round mass resist the pull of all those other shapes?



If you should mention an artist(s) that influence your work/draws your attention, who would it be and why?

There are many artists whose work draws my attention and influences me in lesser or greater ways. Here I'll list three and bullet some of the aspects of them or their work that is impactful to how I work and/or how I think about art:

Pierre Soulages

- Importance of surface/texture/space in his work
- Importance of and dedication to black/darkness
- Largely self-taught
- Dark moods, dark images
- His sense of composition/structure in his work
- Importance of the paint as a material in the work, thickness and dimensionality of paint surface, 'tactile'; 'relief' on a flat surface
- Importance of space in the painting and the relationship of the shapes to each other and to the space (earlier work)
- Sculptural quality to the work
- Importance of formal structure/balance in the work and a formal approach
- Painter as an individual and his resistance to the social/political aspects of painting/art
- Restraint in his work
- His seriousness about importance/value of painting

Antoni Tapies

- Largely self-taught
- His neutral palette
- His sense of compositions, often quite symmetrical, unlike mine
- Open space in his work
- His use of materials of paint, tar, concrete, urethane, wood, cardboard, marble dust, chalk, clay
- His freedom from rules, restrictions of 'how' you make a painting and the materials/ways you put it together
- Importance of texture, physicality of the surface, 'tactile'; 'relief'
- Sculptural quality of the work
- Informal materials and approach to painting itself
- Deceptive simplicity of composition/structure of his works
- Austerity, restraint in the number/variety of elements in a given work
- His seriousness about importance/value of painting
- His thoughts about deep connections of painting to society, politics, the individual; spiritual/symbolic aspects of his work and about painting itself; transcendence through humble objects/materials
- Our (human) connection with materials, with matter

Robert Rhyman

- Intellectual approach to painting but importance of the human in the action and visual presence of painting
- Self taught
- Use of a variety of media (varying surfaces and painting media)
- Limited palette (neutral/white) and a deep exploration of that palette, not just as a paint/media but as substrate, frame, mat, wall, light itself. (Like Soulages, but white instead of black.)
- Mixing of visible hand/action of the artist with minimalist formalism and focus on the object. However, the presentation/display of the object is (like the work) very visibly engaged by the hand of the artist/gallerist/etc.
- Sculptural quality of the work
- His aesthetic of clean, limited works
- His sense of composition and structure within his works
- Deceptive simplicity of the work
- Importance of and his use of edges of shapes and in the composition
- More importance and use of texture and layering than I think is often realized/noted/talked about

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