

OPAA column, ARTwalks, October, Suzan Noyes

“Every artist was first an amateur.” Ralph Waldo Emerson

Thanks Ralph. It’s no fun being proved a senior amateur over abstract art. My brain is not abstract, okay? It responds in traditional ways to verifiable scenery – trees, nature, picturesque villages, human beings and beasts.

‘Abstract’ suggests formulas and equations not easily deciphered. I don’t dig Picasso. Matisse leaves me cold. Pollock was at least fun. Calder was amazing. German Abstract Expressionism was downright scary... a direct response to chaos. What will world-wide Covid-19 hatch? You can bet artists everywhere are busy over this one. Waves of frustration, so many negatives: don’t, can’t, *stop*. Family takes first place, we all cope - but it seems like every artist I know has found a class or lesson online, tapping into *something* to help stay sane.

I hit a stone wall in my own work, ruining paintings. Realism could throttle me. An alternative presented itself. Among many fine abstract works at the Blue Whole Gallery, Terry Grasteit’s paintings have long engaged my interest. What is it about them? How dare they intrigue me in this manner?!

He offers classes so I called him about a Covid-proper art class for one. I visited his outdoor studio masked up, unsure if it would be a talk or work session. Both! After initial discussion about each artist’s set way of approach, Terry told me to pencil marks on paper with my User hand. Happy curves and loops appeared. He switched me to Lefty the Anarchist, which stabbed crabby scrawls, ruining my comfort zone – his entire point. We laughed a lot.



I shared photographs that might complement an abstract but not a traditional composition, as I liked the color, light and shapes. Terry agreed and produced a sanded/scraped canvas for our use. His underpainting was great. Ruin all that lovely texture? Terry does it all the time. Used canvas shape-shifts and returns to life, no waste. Yikes. He sees his process as three-phase, with a painting in one phase while he works on another. Or three or four. He paints randomly on one and moves to others, back and forth as changes or additions suggest themselves.

Scanning his 4,000 jars, tubes and tubs of paint, Terry chose similar colors to my photographs and tossed me a utilitarian paint scraper. I requested demonstration; it's not my typical tool. Paint dripped, he wielded his wicked palette knife, and I added more greens and blues to it, scraping away. Terry sent this home with me to play. I tried. Interrupted by spoiled cats and a husband, I ruined all the good parts and painted over them twice. Finally sanded it down, gessoed the whole thing out of pique and began something else, ignoring my photographs. It obsessed me enough to paint in my dreams. By daylight I also resurrected a pastel I considered dead in the water... My internal artist was busy.

A week later Terry revisited my initial canvas and new result. We spent much of the session yakking about art theory; I asked about his early schooling and interests. "I wasn't influenced by any painter until later in school," he said, "then I became interested in the New York Expressionists, two favorites being Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning." Terry wanted to join that movement but this was never realized.

Despite missed opportunities he has developed his own personal goal. "Basically, I want to create new realities, a story composed of shape, color and images that evoke and engage a person's imagination." I realize these factors attract me to Terry's work, especially one canvas that floats me along a river I definitely *see*. Now I ask when/how he knows a painting is finished. "When the painting and I agree no more is necessary. It speaks to me and shows me the story. The painting *makes me happy* and I want to show it to everyone."

Mulling this over, I thought more about my own approach, shapes and images. I considered weather patterns; he pulled up pictures on his phone. Free-form clouds and topographical maps on my next canvas turned out interesting but still too figurative for me despite a layered design.



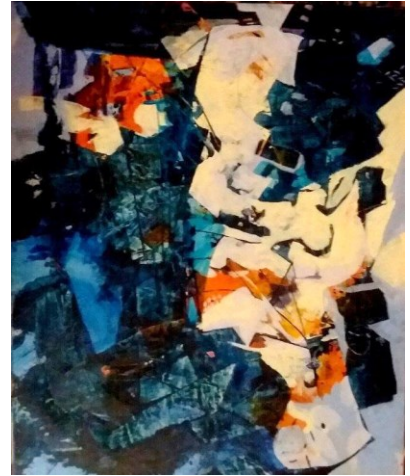
Fourth session in, Terry said, "We're painting," and grabbed a canvas. We chose colors as we went. (*Brush* and knife this time!) After alternating swipes, we turned the painting around to check balance and flow, discussed where to add more of what. Time flew.

I've been sent home with this. Will I have to match paint? Oh, to be divinely inspired and cut a magnificent swath. "Arghh," says Lefty.

Lately, I look more attentively at this style of art. In a magazine I spy work based on realism but primarily color, light and shape, much as I'd envisioned for my initial effort.

Maybe give it another shot? My goal is a large square canvas bought at the last OPAA Art Supply Sale. After all, I can't ruin it. Scrape and sand and start over, right?

To sum up: *"In abstraction the artist is expressing his/her emotion and point of view in images, shape and colors that are imagined. A viewer cannot use their usual imaging processes which are based on their version of reality. The viewer must release judgment and spend time viewing the work and letting the painting influence their imagination. Bottom line is that the viewer must enter into the painting if they can and feel what the artist is trying to express. Not everyone can 'get' abstraction for a number of reasons – and that's okay!"* **Terry Grasteit**



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See **OPAA Newsletter** for Terry's class availability.

Photos:

4917 - First try/abstract (painted twice)

4928 - Weather patterns

4918 - Abstract-in-the-works

Untitled 6 - Terry Grasteit