

An Artist at the Mercy of Her Subjects

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The East Hampton Star

May 14, 2015

It's a good thing Kathryn Lynch is a committed walker, since she doesn't like to drive, and the subway stop nearest her Red Hook studio is more than a mile away. But there is a more important reason for her perambulations. "I make sure that every day I have to walk everywhere," she said recently at her studio, a relatively small but high-ceilinged space in an industrial building.

"As I'm walking, it tells me what I'm painting next. I never look for it. But once it grabs you, you have to paint it. For me, the motion of walking leads to ideas."

Ms. Lynch paints recognizable things, and she always has. "I never switched styles — I need to hook onto reality. Early on I realized my reality is a little off-center, and it continues to be so." One reason she cites for her style is a limited skill set. "You can tell by the way I paint I'm not a skilled draftsman." Her subjects include buildings, boats, landscapes, people, and flowers, and the locations, in addition to Brooklyn and Manhattan, include Shelter Island, where she has summered for 10 years, and Maine, where she recently spent two weeks.

Her flat, simple forms have a blunt, almost primitive and sometimes unfinished quality that situates them between realism and abstraction and suggests painters as diverse as Milton Avery, Fairfield Porter, and Philip Guston without resembling any of them or even, sometimes, each other.

"I don't set out to paint in a particular way," she explained. "When I switch subjects, the painting might demand different strokes and a different kind of painting. You want to feel you're responding in a fresh way. My subjects are in control of me and I'm at their mercy. I never intend my pictures to look the way they do."

One wall of the studio is covered with small paintings, a response to the size of the space. "It's been really fun painting small, and it's funny that with painting, every restriction grows you. When I was in a really big space I was painting 7-by-12-foot canvases. A big canvas allows for risks because you have so much space to move things around. With small ones, it's hit and miss, but you can hit and miss a lot."

She always sketches outside and paints in the studio. “The more you sketch outside, the more the shapes become yours, and what you’re seeing isn’t dictated to you. You get the idea from nature, but it becomes your nature in the studio, where you simplify the forms. Nature’s forms become your forms.”

In Red Hook since September, she lives in a building a few blocks from her studio with her husband, Peter Moore, an architect, and their children, Graham, 16, and Elizabeth, 14. Of her husband, she said, “He’s an architect who went into development who went into debt. He doesn’t do it for the money, he does it to realize his ideas.” Their living room, which is on the top floor of the building, affords a panoramic view of the Upper Bay and the Hudson River from the Statue of Liberty to Lower Manhattan.

Propped against the studio walls were several paintings of the Queen Mary, which she can see from her living room as it glides into and out of Manhattan. In each, only the massive prow of the ship is visible, slicing across the canvas like a blade, with different bits of the city and the river in the foreground or background. “It’s a visual event when she comes and goes. She usually comes in at night, so it’s all lights and whistles.”

Through a mutual friend, she met Maria Andreano of MGA Media Group, a public relations firm whose clients include Cunard. After seeing some of Ms. Lynch’s paintings, Ms. Andreano invited the artist to visit the Queen Mary for a tour next month.

Ms. Lynch also brought out several paintings of the F train and the Smith Street subway stop. “It’s a new stop,” she said, “and it’s like walking up to an industrial cathedral because it’s elevated. You can see all of Gowanus, which is a trash heap. But it’s fascinating because of that.” Like the Queen Mary, a portion of a single subway car represents the train. Its shape, doors, and windows are rounded, abstracted, and almost cartoon-like.

Ms. Lynch was born and raised in Philadelphia in a home where art was appreciated. “We went on house tours. We could skip school when we were in grade school if we went to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and my mother took us to the Fleisher School of Art for classes. In 11th grade I knew I was a painter. The need for a creative outlet was always with me, and I knew I had to address it.”

She attended Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, N.Y., where “I had the entire art department to myself, because nobody took art. After college I went to New York because I didn’t have any money and I needed to figure out what to do for a living. After an incredible number of low-paying jobs, I decided I’d be poor working, so I might as well be poor loving my work.”

She returned to school, receiving an M.F.A. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1990. “At first I

was really bummed out because Neil Welliver was the professor, but he turned out to be the most gifted painting teacher. He would come into your studio and say a couple of things, and they were completely right. He somehow taught without teaching.”

After graduation she moved to Greenpoint with some of her friends. “We found a building that somebody kind of claimed and we built out an entire floor. I had a roll-up door looking at Manhattan for \$500 a month. Of course at the time I wanted to be in Manhattan. We didn’t realize how good we had it.”

She has lived in many places, but Brooklyn, and Red Hook in particular, seem to suit her. “Philadelphia was a fabulous place to grow up because of the architecture and the history. It was visually rich. Brooklyn reminds me a lot of Philadelphia, and Red Hook reminds me of the Philadelphia waterfront.”

On a walking tour, the neighborhood felt like a throwback in time, before gentrification, although Ms. Lynch said that rents are skyrocketing as they are everywhere else in the city. Meanwhile, industry mixes comfortably with unpretentious restaurants, shops, and brownstones. There was no traffic, no strollers, no tourists.

A few blocks from her studio sits Pioneer Works, a sprawling factory building dating from 1866 that is now a center for educational programming, exhibitions, publications, residencies, lectures, and performances. Pioneer Works was founded by Dustin Yellin, an artist whose admittedly utopian dream was to “bridge the chasm between disparate disciplines.”

Ms. Lynch first came to the East End around 1983 to visit friends from college. She rented in Montauk in the early 1990s, and then met her husband, who was living in an Airstream trailer in Wainscott. “He had land, but didn’t have the money to build on it.” They bought a house on Shelter Island 10 years ago.

“It’s wonderful because it’s low density. The prettiest parts are all hidden. If you just drive around you don’t really see it. The light is very different from the light on the ocean side. My preference is the ocean side, but my pocketbook is the bay side. You make it work. It’s gorgeous light, but you have to catch it at sunrise or late evening.”