

INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH HACK: HOW WE WORK

Elizabeth Hack's art is a paradox. She paints abstracts, but she studies figure drawing and anatomy. When she isn't inspired to work on one of her acrylic abstracts, she records the world in a sketchbook, and her mastery of the observed world informs all the painting she does. Her inspiration comes from the unconscious, she says, but the execution is based on long practice with her medium and careful attention to detail.

For the last ten years, she has been working on her Wave Series, abstracts inspired by the ocean at Sea Ranch. They explore color and texture, but the observer can get glimpses of the natural world in horizon lines, sunlight, sea foam, and rock.

The Wave Series has evolved over the years as Elizabeth explores all the possibilities of the form she has chosen. She started by working on paper with torn edges. Now she paints on wooden panels that are made to her specifications. These paintings are unframed, and the painted edges of the boxlike panel are part of the painting.

Each painting starts with a general plan, but she allows the plan to develop as she goes. The patterns are not random—Elizabeth explored her technique for a long time to discover how to achieve her vision. She squirts acrylic paint directly on the surface, then works it with her palette knife to create the patterns she wants. She applies one color at a time, usually starting with blues and greens, adding accents like yellow or gold after most of the other colors have created the structure of the painting. White is laid on last. After the color for the wave painting is done, she meticulously adds a fine black line to define the areas of color. The casual observer might not notice these outlines, but they enhance the texture of the final work.

After moving to Berkeley in the 1980s Elizabeth studied with art professor Fred Reichman who encouraged her and became her mentor. More recently, she has worked at the Kala Institute studying printmaking. She discovered early that she was allergic to some art materials, so she settled on acrylic paint as her medium.

The earliest examples of her art I saw were pen and ink sketches, often very detailed renderings of natural objects, but veering into pattern and abstraction. Then some began blooming with splashes of color. She experimented with various abstract forms, such as her Jungle Series, bright with color, and the Circle Series, which explored texture, often featuring paint applied from above with a dropper.

Elizabeth's work has reached a wide audience. In 2005, she was artist in residence at the Legion of Honor Museum in San Francisco, working on her Wave Series while museum-goers observed and questioned her. Her paintings have appeared in many galleries and have earned her frequent commissions. Her success, like her art, is not a windfall. It is based on her long and careful exploration of her form.

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