

CHALDA MALOFF: Working Options

Some artists cultivate secrecy. They say little-to-nothing. Even when pressed, what they finally divulge is cryptic. It's good for business, obviously. But isn't it also true that too much information could in fact mar the delicate interplay between the viewer and a work of art.

Chalda Maloff, an artist with much experience professionally and personally, is more straightforward. She is happy to describe her rationale, her working method and her preferences. But otherwise, she's discreet, leaving observers to find their own way through her densely orchestrated digital paintings.

In a Q & A with Brooklyn-based arts writer Michael J. Fressola, Maloff cites a time when she was less happy with her work than she is now, and describes how she came to befriend contemporary technology. And, here's a highly unusual opportunity: in a realm where there are few guarantees, she's willing to offer one.

MJF: Your paintings begin as drawings made with a stylus and an electronic tablet, using computer software. Doesn't the tablet function like an empty sheet or a prepped canvas, as a vehicle for ideas that begin as images in the mind's eye?

CM: Yes, exactly. My Wacom tablet, together with a computer file, functions as a blank backdrop. My stroke by stroke procedure of composing a digital painting bears similarities to the creation of a traditional media artwork. In fact, my years of experience with oils, acrylics, pottery, and etching, prepared me well for the work I do today.

MJF: You've said your method offers access to textures and aesthetic effects that would be unavailable otherwise. Are there additional advantages to your medium?

CM: When I was working in oils or acrylics, upon bringing a painting to completion, I would often look at it and say, "I can do better." I would review the creation process in my mind, analyzing my zigging where I should have zagged, and would sometimes start over with a second version.

The usual outcome was that this second work was superior in some respects but had suffered in the qualities of passion and authenticity.

In contrast, digital art provides options such as intermediate saves and multiple undo's, which allow me to explore more extensively the countless visual possibilities at every stage of the process.

As a result I am producing stronger compositions, more stimulating visual effects, and more precise detail. It is deeply gratifying.

MJF: Are there drawbacks?

CM: For an artwork being created with a computer and monitor, and ultimately to be viewed in some other way, potential drawbacks or pitfalls lie in the conversion process. Pixels on a screen will never be exactly the same color as physical ink on a piece of paper. It falls upon the digital artist to understand and anticipate a result that will be subtly different from what is appearing on the screen.

MJF: Is it difficult to explain the procedure? Do viewers ever murmur: "Why not just draw or paint right on the paper?"

CM: Actually I would get that question more in the 80's when I was working in etching and aquatint. People wondered why an artist would go through the labor-intensive process of working an image into a metal plate with tools and successive acid baths, then inking the plate and running it through the press to transfer it to paper. "Why not just apply the ink directly to the paper? Wouldn't that be easier? Haven't you seen Phantom of the Opera?"

There was no quick answer, of course. The viewer would need to invest the time into developing an appreciation for the medium.

I don't hear that question much today. Even the casual viewer will look at my current work and know it could not have been created with ordinary pens or brushes.

MJF: It took photography many years to be taken seriously as fine art. Similarly digital painting is still suspect in some quarters. When will that change, do you think?

CM: Almost every modern gallery visitor has held a camera, but few have wielded a stylus. Distrust may arise when the viewer, unacquainted with the process, is unsure to what degree the artwork actually represents human skill, effort, and aesthetic sensibility.

No one wants to become the butt of a joke, such as those who bought abstract paintings in the 50's which turned out to be painted by a monkey. This distrust is based on unfamiliarity, and as such, it is dissipating rapidly, especially with younger people.

MJF: The best artists thrive on challenges. They're happiest when the going gets rough and there are problems to solve and difficulties to conquer. What are yours?

CM: I've had challenges, though I wouldn't necessarily say I thrived on them. My first major solo exhibit of my digital art (at the Morris Graves Museum of Art in California) was entitled "Dancing in the Rain," from the Eastern European proverb, "Whoever thinks sunshine is necessary for happiness, has never danced in the rain."

I had chronic pain at that time, something that it was hard to put a positive spin on. While working on that series of artworks I was reflecting on ways in which the bitter parts of life might bring the sweet parts into high relief.

My challenges these days are of a different scale entirely, like not enough foam in my cappuccino this morning.

MJF: Artists often have a hero, a role model or a beloved predecessor, someone whose work they hold in high regard. Who would you put on your list and why?

I am moved and inspired by Emil Nolde's "unpainted pictures." Prohibited by the Nazis from practicing his art, Nolde painted these diminutive, fantastic works in secret. He used watercolors, which had no odor and thus carried less risk of discovery. Already of an advanced age, he supposedly planned to translate these "unpainted" works to "real" oil paintings at some later date. This was dedication.

MJF: If you could trade your life and times for some other setting, which timeframe appeals to you: Ancient Egypt in the 18th Dynasty (an era of unusual freedom), the early Renaissance in Italy, or Impressionist Paris?

CM: I spent time in Egypt in 2010 just before the upheaval (friends accuse me of disturbing the force field wherever I go), and I felt intensely attracted to the styles of artistic expression in the Amarna period.

Nonetheless if I had my choice, I would choose the early Renaissance in Italy. I did a semester in Florence as an undergrad, and the city was so steeped in history that the Trecento felt a breath away. I was drawn to the pervasive spirit of humanism, a celebration of the expression of human potential.

MJF: Television, computers and phones bombard us with fast-moving imagery. Some observers worry that the onslaught is so pervasive that it will mar our appreciation of fine art. What do you think?

CM: That has already happened, of course. Viewers stroll through a gallery, and they expect to absorb in a moment an artwork that has taken hours or weeks to create. Rather than rail against this reality, I incorporate it into my thought process. I understand that a viewer's first encounter with one of my works will likely be brief and casual. I strive to create artworks that will give an immediate pay-off under those conditions.

But these works will reveal more of themselves over time. I guarantee it. Case in point: one day my husband was looking at one of my pieces that had been hanging in our dining room. He backed away from it, then drew closer, puzzled, and finally said, "Was that face always there?"

Michael J. Fressola was the arts editor, writing about visual art, contemporary performance, music and dance in New York City, for the Staten Island Advance for more than 35 years.