

Bad Water Knoxville, TN

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Flying by the seat of your pants is an idiom that comes from early days of aviation to describe flight when instruments were not working, when weather interfered with visibility, when flying was less about mechanical navigation aids and entirely dependent on navigating a plane guided by instinct. Eleanor's paintings have less to do with aviation, but everything to do with painting from experience, feeling, and intuition over a set in stone method. It's an ironic endeavor to talk about her work this way. For as many instinctual decisions made in the paintings there is a lifetime of close looking, learning, of literature, of art, of archives. These paintings hold file folders worth of information, yes, but to limit them to their cultural references would be to reduce them to their image, to history, when they're very much about processing material, understanding space, about learning as she goes. Flying by the seat of your pants in an exercise in both learning and new ways of knowing.

Intuition is often referred to as "gut feeling" as it seems to arise fully formed from some deep part of us. Not magical, but rather a faculty in which hunches are generated by our mind sifting through past experience and cumulative knowledge. Materially, the paintings are light but they hold a weighty gut. I know this is something Eleanor thinks about. A Virgo, her bodily rule is over the digestive system. She writes in an email:

When I am painting now, I am always thinking of the relationship of oil paint, dye, bleach, and acrylic paint to weight, and the heaviness and lightness of objects, colors, materials. I have also incorporated some writing or notation of meter into the paintings, for example, the U / marks reference an iamb of poetic meter. So painting as a mark-making or sign-making exercise is, I think, related to writing and words and the construction of speech. When we talk about poetic meter we talk about stressed and unstressed syllables, which have a kind of "weight," too. By extension this also involves the space between letters, the pause between speaking, the space in between the tree branches, the shapes created in the negative space of the stretcher bar designs. The collapse of the metaphor of weight with the real weight of stones and the displacement of natural objects is something I'm thinking about right now. Susan Howe writes about crossing the land bridge from Asia to the Americas: "in its first dumb form / language was gesture / technique of traveling over sea ice silent/ before great landscapes and glittering procession"

Eleanor Conover is an artist whose work engages with the physical and material conditions of painting as a metaphor for environmental time and space. Born in Hartford, CT in 1988, she received her MFA at Tyler School of Art, Temple University (2018) and her BA from Harvard College (2010). Most recently, her work has been shown at Ortega Y Gasset Projects (Brooklyn, NY) and through the Center for Maine Contemporary Art (Rockland, ME). Her work has been supported at artist residencies including Vermont Studio Center, Cow House Studios, and the Joseph A. Fiore Art Center, and she is the recipient of the 2020 Alice C. Cole Fellowship at Wellesley College. She lives in Knoxville, TN, where she teaches Painting and Drawing at the University of Tennessee.