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CONVERSATIONS WITH CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS: ELYNN KRÖGER, PAINTER LECTURE FINDING AID & TRANSCRIPT

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Video Description

An intimate discussion with Elynn Kröger. From the artist about her work: "I think every artist is born with a vocabulary. Mine includes color, line, and landscape. I grew up sewing and weaving... Consequently, a textile quality can be seen in my work. I also enjoy color juxtaposition and luminosity. Intuitive, abstract, gestural, calligraphic, spatial and organic...I have a broad range. I work primarily with

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water-based media as well as graphite and oil sticks. My supports are canvas, paper, and board. Sometimes, hundreds of layers go into a single work... regardless of size, any given piece can take months, sometimes years, to finish. When I paint, I don't start with a concept or an image (although imagery sometimes creeps in). I am not expressing my feelings. It is a practice in mindfulness' starting with a color and a brush stroke, following each mark as in a conversation."

Subject list

Contemporary art

Abstract landscapes/horizons

Transcription

Courtney Richardson 00:11

Welcome to the Cape Ann Museum. My name is Courtney Richardson. I'm Director of Education and Public Programs. Please turn off your mobile devices. Thank you. The perfect day to be here—dreary outside, and it seems like a really warm room right now. So we're glad you're here. I have a couple of announcements to make. The first is that "Water, Water," that installation that you passed when you first walked in, that actually closes tomorrow. So if you have a chance, or a minute or two, or I think 14 minutes to be exact, you can watch the two films or series of films that were done by Sarah Hollis Perry and Rachel Perry Welty before they leave. And then our other exhibition upstairs, the "Marsden Hartley Soliloquy in Dogtown," will be closing on October 14. So if you haven't had a chance to see that either, please try to do that as well. I just wanted to note our special exhibitions and programs, like today's, are made possible by our members and supporters. So if you are not a member, please consider joining. Thank you. And today, we present "Conversations with Contemporary Artists." I think this is the fifth year we've been doing this. We're happy to have painter Elynn Kröger here today. Elynn will be telling us about her process and her art, but I just wanted to give you a little more background. Elynn has been acknowledged since the start of her career, placing first in painting in a Bayview showing, to receiving a Massachusetts Council for the Arts grant, and achieving Copley Artist status in Boston. She was also selected a member of the New England Watercolor Society, and I think she was the youngest member at the time of her induction. She has exhibited her work for the past 35 years across the United States as well as Canada, Israel, Puerto Rico, and Germany. Locally, she's been featured at West End Studios Gallery, Local Colors Gallery, the Church Gallery, the River Gallery and Passports Restaurant. Or may currently be viewed at her own year-round gallery in Rocky Neck and at the Hourglass Gallery in Melrose. Please join me in welcoming Elynn Kröger.

Elynn Kröger 02:50

Okay, my name is Elynn Kröger, just so there's no... and there it is. I've been a professional artist actually for 40 years now. So it was never a hobby. It's been my career. I arrived in Gloucester in, oh, 15 years ago. And that's what this is, is a survey of my work, the last 15 years. I have to turn something on. I'm going to go right into the slides. This is a conversation; that means that questions are welcomed at any time. So ask away. Before I came to Gloucester I was a watercolorist, and I worked on paper, and very often I would use this water media. When I got to town I changed over to acrylics, and this is on board—I paint on board, canvas, and paper as well. This is called "The Orange Slice." It is... it's a slice of the landscape. So the top part is the top of the sky, and then there's the, perhaps the waterline, and then the bottom is the bottom of the water. Very often I will do a vertical perspective. It's probably like 15 by 15... something like that. It's on the small side. I, you know, I don't paint chronologically. I wanted to do a chronological showing, and I don't paint chronologically. And then I thought, all right, we'll do categories. And I don't paint in categories. So this is kind of categorized. This was probably done 15 years ago, just after I got here. And switching over to acrylic, it was a difficult transition. And this was an early piece. It's the same, a very small five-inch canvas. When I first started getting used to the acrylics, I was using them as watercolor. You could thin them down to watercolor consistency, and you can add medium to stabilize it. And I used to play with high and low horizon lines, I have a fascination of horizon lines. I believe that every artist is born with a vocabulary. And as you paint, that vocabulary comes out. The more you paint, the more vocabulary. And that the painting teaches you about [?]. And you learn by doing challenges. This is on board, and it's probably 18 inches... something like that. This is when I was just learning how to use a camera. I like paint and I like drawing, and I'll often do them together. And I used to love the California scrawl time. I don't know if you're familiar with that, but it's like... I just revel in the California scrawl, and I have a little bit of that. This is the perfect example of California scrawl.

Audience Member 06:45

Are you saying scroll?

Elynn Kröger 06:46

Scrawl. Yeah, it's just, it's just scribbling. It sounds really cool. This is on board. It's a small piece, I think I don't quite remember. At a certain point, I started getting into the gessoing of the board. And there's probably 20 ways to gesso. And I started creating a texture so that I was painting intuitively on a texture. And so all the crisscross lines that you see are gesso. That's gesso.

Audience Member 07:26

Did you scratch it through or something?

Elynn Kröger 07:29

No, it was brush strokes. This is a small canvas piece. It shows my love of color. I love color, line, and gesture, and I have a fascination with horizon lines. I used to think that I didn't do landscapes, that I was just abstract and then someone pointed out, "No, that's a landscape." Sometimes as an artist, you don't know what you're painting. I go back and forth between abstract now. But for years, I was only abstract. I have a very graphic side, which is probably a genetic tug. This is on board. I layer a lot. It might be hundreds of layers of paint on this piece. Sometimes I work in series, but it's not intentional. If I do anything intentional, it comes out stiff. So I often will, I will often work on more than one piece at a time. I'll do a large one and then I'll line up the small ones and sometimes I have a lot of paint, so it swipes the small ones. I end up with a series. And that's what happened here. And you can see my love of line without scratching it out or putting it on with graphite.

Audience Member 08:58

Excuse me? Maybe it's just me, but I'm having a little trouble hearing and I miss the things you say. Could you turn it up a little bit?

Elynn Kröger 09:09

Speak into the microphone more. How's that? I have a soft voice. Thank you. Oh sure, I thought I was going too slow. No problem. I'll try to go slower, I can do that. So these are small, and they were very thick pieces of board. There's something about thick board that makes me flutter and get excited, and I can't wait to paint on it. I don't know why. There are certain things that happen with an artist. I have a German Irish background. I really like things to be logical and makes sense. And being an artist does not make sense to me at all. There is a textile quality to my work. I think it's a genetic tug, I grew up sewing and weaving. I had three grandparents that were sewers, so it's a genetic tug, as well. And the drip lines very often look like threads. And I've been doing them since I was a kid. I prefer to call them drip lines because the second I say "drips," people start to titter. I don't know why. So these are drip lines, as opposed to drips. This piece probably took about three years. There are hundreds of layers of paint. Very often I will reach a point and it's like, this is not gonna work, give it up. And I might have some excess paint, you know, throw it on there, using it up to cover it up. And then I see something and then it happens. And shortly thereafter, it's done. This one was a struggle. This one was a large piece of board, it was one of those alphabet boards... PDF? MEF? The compressed, sawdust-y kind of stuff. And it was about an inch thick and very, very heavy. It was about five feet in length, and about two and a half feet high. And it wasn't working. So you know, people will cut up their pieces and I thought, well, cut it. I cut it in half. And that didn't help. And I just kept painting and painting on both of them as a diptych almost. And finally I gave up and I had all this extra yellow, and I threw the yellow on. And I saw something, and started doing the drip lines. And then I did the light blue at the top. This light blue line is the last part that I did. And it was done. So after three years or whatever, three, 1-2-3 years on that piece, that doesn't always happen actually.

Audience Member 12:20

Are your drip lines water removing material?

Elynn Kröger 12:23

I do both. I will put a drip line on that is paint or I will take paint off as a drip. So I do both, I go back and forth, and it gets confusing. And it confuses the audience, which is nice. I like the mystery of art. What am I looking at? What is it? Is it land, is it sky? Is it abstract? What am I looking at? Love that. I like the mystery of art. Now, sometimes, I will try to paint fabric and actually this is, I was painting on fabric. It's burlap. Don't ever do this. It took me like three months to get the gesso on the bumps and crevasses of burlap were just huge. It was really hard to get everything covered. And then the paint, I couldn't get into the state. I spent at least a year on this piece, over and over and over and then I was done. They tell me when they're done. It's about balance, and it's not taught to me. I had a friend once and I would call him up and I think, "they're talking to me, I can hear the words!" He's like "no, that's your intuition talking." It gets very distinct after a while. This is a little gem. Sometimes it's about necessity. I have a lot of bronze and gold and silver iridescent mica paint. You know, we all go through that period. And then you realize all right. I had a whole drawer full of this stuff. So I was trying to get rid of some of the uglier colors. And, and this is a challenge. I'm always trying to push myself you know, use colors you don't want to use. This is bronze paint. And the rest I'm not sure. There's not much to say about this. Is that good enough? Because I could do numbers but... This is called "The Pink Cloud." It's acrylic on board. There are times when Joni Mitchell sits on my shoulder. And I'm very blessed when that happens. If I had my druthers I would be between, something between de Kooning and Mitchell. But we are who we are. And it's taken me this long to get, come to grips with that. I, my work is my work. But once in a while I get very gestural and loose. I do like weather, and you can see some of the watercolor techniques that I use. That's one of my favorites. Oh, you have good taste too. It's called "The Pink Cloud." How am I doing on volume? This was one of my first pieces on wood and you learn quick, with material. This is a four by four, four feet by four feet, it's on three quarter inch plywood, very heavy. You need to bolt it to the wall. I did two pieces, and when this was too heavy. So once you get over four feet, it should be canvas. This is how I like to do landscapes: loose and free. And what am I looking at, this movement of up. I like that movement that "up" movement. I learned a lot about landscape going cross country and I lived in Alaska for a short while. And you learn about landscape from nature, really. Here's the number one watercolor technique. This took six months, most of the big ones take six months. We're into the large works category, by the way. This is very wonderful, like, this one's four by four.

Audience Member 16:55

What made you switch from watercolor to acrylic? What was watercolor not doing for you?

Elynn Kröger 17:00

It was an economic move. When I came to town, I got accepted into Local Colors. And all of a sudden, instead of a dozen pieces that I always had on hand, I had to fill a whole wall. And that's a lot of framing and it's a lot of money. So I switched over to acrylic, and I use thick

canvas and thick board, and I wrap the imagery around the edges... and it's a finished piece. And people don't—they like it because it's wall ready and I like it because I don't have to come up with the expense of a frame. Framing technically is protective housing. It's not about that decorative edge that we are so in love with. So, and what happened was I didn't realize that, you know, I thought acrylic is just like watercolor, really, especially if you thin it down; but the impasto effect... and watercolor is not water—acrylic is not watercolor. So it took about three to five years for me to get used to it. And in the middle of it, it was like, "oh what have you done to me," because I had reached a level of expertise with the watercolor. But what it made me do was to grow. And that's what I'm... I'm always trying to push myself to grow. And now I'm fairly comfortable with the palette knife or watercolor brush or whatever with acrylics. Good question. This is a canvas piece, probably three by five. And I like to juxtapose opposites such as pats of paint on the top and then the drip lines on the bottom. I like opposites... sometimes it's about color juxtaposition. Sometimes it's about brushstroke juxtaposition. I also like an indistinct horizon line. And I used to think, "oh, I'm making that one up," but it really is in Mother Nature. Some would say that's gorgeous. You have excellent taste. This is a pleasing landscape and I like it because it's common, but the coloration of it, the, in the sky. This is just a little bleach down. But that... it makes a difference and on, and it's so easy to be conservative. I'm always trying to push myself to be about that. There's that indistinct horizon line again. I come from the South Shore. I was born in Boston and I come from the South Shore. Very often my landscape-like paintings have more of a South Shore feel to them. It's a different color down there; there's cranberry bogs, that kind of thing. This is a little bit bluer than you're looking at it, so use your blue eye. When I was doing this, it was like [?]. What is it? What is it? What... oh, maybe it's a tree. Oh, a blue spruce, all right, right hand side. And then on the left-hand side, I started to really loosen up and I'm like, "oh, you know it was... Stop! Stop! Stop!" And this is how you paint; you know, you're talking to yourself... it's talking to you all the time. And I put it away as I thought, "oh you've wrecked it." I put it away, pulled it out, and a couple of months, and I was like, "Oh my god!" I was dancing. I don't have body rhythm, but I can dance with a brush. At times. It's true.

Audience Member 20:48

When you start painting do you have your colors chosen first? Your palette?

Elynn Kröger 20:53

Excellent question. Thank you. This is helping me to talk, by the way. No, I start with a color. This is gonna sound strange, but this is what I do. I have a blank surface. And I talk to it, I live with it for a few days, I'll touch it. I'll stand in front of it. And it starts talking to me. And at a certain point, I'll step up to it and I'll look over to my colors. And I'll say, "who's first?" And someone says, "me first!" And I don't question it, I just do it. And that's my intuitive process. And then with each new color it's like, "Me! Pick me. Pick me." And I just keep on doing that. That's from years of practice. That's not happenstance, it's not accident... it's from years of practicing intuition and painting. I've done thousands of paintings... thousands.

Audience Member 21:48

What do you call this?

Elynn Kröger 21:52

It's probably "Blue Spruce." I'm not big on titles. Sometimes they tell me their title, and sometimes I come up with the title. But it's just words. It's like calling your house a title.

Audience Member 22:05

I think "The Dance" slightly fits better... it's of you dancing, it's like dancing....[?].

Elynn Kröger 22:17

That would have been a good idea. It's gone now, so I can't. Where were you when I needed you? That's an excellent name. Art... come over some time, and we'll go through some of my cases. This is a graphic piece of three by five or something like that. I have a mild form of dyslexia. And I have a hard time with positive negative space, understanding it intellectually. And I can understand inside. I used to go out sketching with a friend of mine. And we spent three years going out and I would, you know, sneak looking at her work. And she did these exquisite, exquisite in-between spaces, as I call them. In between the picket fences, in between the leaves. It was exquisite. And I would go home and I'd try to make my hand do it and it wouldn't do it. I understood what it was; I couldn't make it do it. Three years, and then all of a sudden, it happened. So whenever you see something like this, definitely reveling in positive negative space, blue, purple, blue, purple, green, boom, you're back and forth. I'm going, creating a positive negative space I think... it's a 3-D space. So sometimes in-between is more important than the actual mass. But that's you know, being dyslexic is again... This one's, I don't know, maybe five by six. It took six months, and I did so many drips that I don't know how I made it. I'm sure we'll go up to it, "How did you do this?" "How did...?" I don't know. And you sound like an idiot, but that's the truth. I don't know how I did it. I just did it. This is another five by six, four by five, something like that. This is probably the subtotal of every day that I've ever seen. But at the time that I was painting it in the saltmarsh, but at the time that I was painting it I was planning a camping trip to Acadia and halfway through this piece the trip got canceled. And I was disappointed. I continued on with this piece. And in the end, I looked at it and thought "well, maybe I went to Acadia after all." And that has happened a number of times to pieces where I painted something before I got there.

Audience Member 25:10

Do you ever use, like, visual...something else to do with that while you're painting?

Elynn Kröger 25:16

Excellent question. No. No, I don't use photography. I sometimes wish I could. I go out and I look at things and absorb, but I... it's really an internal process. It's not about specific imagery. I think that I'm actually working with color and line. And everything else is inconsequential. It's not about imagery, really. It's about color and color juxtaposition, and the [?] of the piece.

Audience Member 25:52

And the lights down there, did you do studies to set up the lower portion of that? Or the composition kind of thing?

Elynn Kröger 25:58

No, no, I just do it. I don't do any preliminary work at all, no. It's not, I don't know, composition... it kind of just happens. It's an intuitive process. So obviously, I have a good sense of composition. If I had to think about it, it wouldn't come out right. I have to stop thinking when I paint, it's really frustrating. This one's a little on the weak side, it's a little bit stronger than this in reality. I've had a really hard time understanding this piece. I finished it and was like, "what the hell is that?" And I put it away and famously I pulled it out and I was like, "oh I like this, I don't know what it is." And I've looked at it for a year or two now, and I call it... I now have a firm title. It's called "The transpiration of a Tree." And it is definitely a tree that is going from water to treeness to sky... I think. This is a large piece, something like six by five. This is called "Rising." It's about the upward motion. And this is another one where I'm using my positive negative space up here. The whole piece was discoloration at the top. So it was all like that, it was brown, and white, and bronze. And then I cut in with the gray. And so it pops. And if I had known what I was doing, I wouldn't have known to do that. I can't think when I'm painting; I have to just do it. And I've learned to trust that process and I seem to know early on. This was a recent piece. I'm still fussing with the title; it could be "Rainforest." It could be "Light in the Forest." Once in a while, you know, when you're an artist, people will give these clues. And one clue was if you're having trouble with the piece, turn it upside down and you can see what's wrong. And I do that from time to time. This one, I finished it. They tell me when they're done. I finished it and I was like, "I hate it, I hate it, I hate it." And for some reason I flipped it over and I was like, "oh it's done." So I had painted the whole thing upside down. This is a current piece too. This is a diptych. And, you know, it's really weird being an artist. People will come up to the gallery and they're like, "Oh, are these supposed to be together?" And it's like, yeah, they are together. And then they'll say, "Well, why are they together?" And I'm like... I don't know. It's a diptych. I think what I thought with this specific one—you have to question and teach yourself everything with people, it's really kind of neat. But I think with this one I was thinking a larger piece—I put these two guys together, I had a larger piece. That's probably seven by, I don't know, fifteen. And this is one of those pieces where, what am I looking at? What is it? Is it a fence? Is it the ground? Is it erosion? What am I looking at? And even though it doesn't look like it, de Kooning helped me finish this one. They come to me.

Audience Member 29:45

That's about actual size, you're saying.

Elynn Kröger 29:48

I don't know how big it is. It's big. It's like six by seven. Sometimes... you know, it's never big enough for me. My largest piece to date is a 20 by 40. And I also did a three-sided room up in

Gloucester. I like big, I want to do big. I'm in the smallest studio of my life right now. So it's pretty cool that I can do this bigger. All right, this is the drawing category or works on paper category. I like to draw, I like line. This one's called "The Seine Tree." I did it... I went out sketching with Carol, Carol Harris, Nell Blaine's partner, and we went to the Seine Field. And I don't have an outdoor easel, I haven't found one I like. And so I tape the paper to a board and put the board into the crook of the tree. And the second I did that it was like I was vibrating. And I had to get the pens and I was like, "Oh my god," and it was electric. And it took many sessions to finish this. But that electric beginning made the whole piece electric. So it's called, it's called "The Seine Tree."

Audience Member 31:06

Do you do an eraser?

Elynn Kröger 31:08

No, I don't—you're great. I was told, I was told a few rules growing up, and one was never use an eraser. You always have to have a true line. If you use an eraser, you're busted. So I didn't use an eraser most of my life and just recently started using it as a tool. But this one does not have erasure marks. I like trees. I don't know why. They come out in my work a lot. A little bit of acrylic wash.

Audience Member 31:57

Do you ever use a paper nub bow?

Elynn Kröger 31:57

No, I don't like those. I don't like the messiness of charcoal and I don't like... I don't like switching. I don't know why, that's just who I am. This piece... I tried it, I just don't like it. [?] Is that what it's called? This piece perhaps is about a childhood memory, perhaps I don't know. But I look at it and it's one of those, "What the heck is that?" And when we were kids, we had a summer house and we, we were bad kids. We would sneak out at night. We were so bad. And we would sneak, we'd sit on the picnic table at night. That's what we did. And we would look out over the lake. And one night there was a flickering light. And it's like, "what's that?" And so we go trooping over, and it was a fire. And it was a house on fire. And there were people in the house on fire. And we got them out. We were heroes, and we couldn't tell anyone because we had snuck out. So I wonder if this is what this is about... sneaking out and that house. It was powerful. It was a powerful experience. Here's the erasure lines; I started playing with it. I like weeds and marshes. I get so into the work that when I finished this I thought, "this is odd." And then I proceeded to do two more and each one was slightly different but slightly like it and I thought, "this is odd. This is so different." And the three were very similar. So I block out everything when you're working. This is—these are full sheets of paper. So they're 22 by 30. I like thick paper. I don't care if it's watercolor or not, I just like it thick. You can do more with thick paper. And this took many, many, many, many, many, many hours. And there is an engraved line that goes horizontally. You can't really see it that well but it's there. And it really

feels like a weaving. I like minimalism. I was doing color field before I knew what it was as a kid. This is a current paper piece. I like combining graphite with paint—acrylic. This is acrylic with crayon, maybe, or pastel. I had to give up music in order to concentrate on my painting and some pieces remind me of music. I've had... I can't paint without music.

Audience Member 35:01

Did you give up listening?

Elynn Kröger 35:02

I used to play the piano and the violin and most artists are given multiple artistic gifts. And I know a lot of people are kind of good at everything, but I wanted to... I wanted to be great. And so you have to... one of the success rules is you have to concentrate on one point. This is a little more washed out than it really should be. Almost looks like a sheet of music. I didn't see that before. Sometimes I'll scratch out the line; there are scratched out lines there. I like putting down and taking off. This is an oil stick drawing. I do like oil sticks. I can't use oil paint; I'm allergic to the solvents. But oil sticks, not oil pastels, but oil sticks or oil paint and wax... they're real gooey. They're very expensive. They're hard to use. But when you get the hang of it, oh, it's so nice. And this is that love of the horizon line. It's a small piece. This is called "Red Orchids." I like houses, I don't know why. Trees and houses. I like scratching out the lines when the oil, oil stick dries. I like a primitive look in my drawings if I can do it. I have a dear friend, and she told me about her ancestors in Nova Scotia. And they had gone to a wake, and this was overheard at that wake: "Too bad she died. She made nice donuts." I think that's great. This is the horizontal piece section. I like to paint horizontal pieces. This is probably about four feet long and maybe 18 inches high. It's called "Nightlights, City Lights." People when they're uncomfortable with, with non-representational work will try to identify elements, and you watch them and they like ask you, "This, I see that, and I see this." But there really isn't much to see in there. So don't tell me about it. Because I don't want to hear about it. I will think of it afterwards, and that's all I'll think. That one's like, eight inches high, four feet long, on wood board. I use all kinds of wood, any kind of wood.

Audience Member 38:44

Elynn how do you seal your wood?

Elynn Kröger 38:47

Put gesso on a lot of layers on all six sides. They're talking about [gack?] now, or something. And, I don't know. But I do gesso and then I use so much acrylic paint that nothing's coming out of there. This one's called "From Tuscany to Provence." And it might be like a storyboard format. My father used to do copies of "Ferdinand the Bull," and so he could do comics. And I wonder if my graphic side came directly from him as a genetic pull. This one's called something like "Congregation" or "The Gathering" or "A Cover"... some circular word going around in circles type-thing. It's not a deck of cards. Every once in a while, a piece will say "I need more paintings on top of me," and I've done already six in my life. Someone looked at it the other day

and they said, "Oh, you do collage." And I'm like, "no, that's not collage." But then what is collage? I don't know. It's just three small paintings on top of a larger painting. And it's all about trees. There's rough drawings of trees up here. And these look like tree-ish things. And these are definitely trees. It's a like landscape. It's like landscape. And, you know, putting words to these is really difficult. I do it all the time. But I don't like it because it's a visual. And once I use words, like "women," everything...

Audience Member 40:42

Instead of, like, the process of painting itself, really, that you're looking at it and thinking, oh, there's this grand scene out there. And, oh look, the artist has found three compositions in that space. So, I mean, I enjoy that as a way to conceptualize it. You know how you're out there ... [?].

Elynn Kröger 41:08

Thanks, [Tin?]. Whenever I do a white house, I'm reminded of Cape Cod. Oh, it's not white. All right, this small piece is probably about five inches high and two and a half wide. That took me months and months over and over and over. The peak was really hard, and then the door and the colors. And when it finally came together, it just bounces. I like luminosity, but I can't make it happen. I have to just kind of do things and sometimes it comes.

[Tape abruptly ends]