

How I Do It

Cautionary Advice from a Lesbian Painter

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Making paintings is one of the most illuminating and spiritual ways to focus your life. The following comments, advice, and information about my work process are addressed to lesbians who have made a decision to be painters.

LOOKING

If you look at history you'll find that almost every school of painting and every individual artist has rediscovered artists of the past or discovered new or different aspects of a particular painting or school of painting out of the specific needs of their own work. Need determines invention. The same has to be true of our needs for past art. As my relationship to my subject matter is very personal, so is my relationship to other painting. If an aspect of paint application in a Cezanne interests me, the fact that I may not have responded to the spatial constructs or use of color is of little consequence. At another time, if those things become important to me, I will go back and look for them.

I can dislike a painting but find a small part which engages me, a quality of light or some aspect of the drawing. These are things which usually find their way into my work, often because I was approaching them in some way already. A found connection in another painting can help crystalize my thought.

It is important not to judge our own responses to paintings as inappropriate. Any place we deny the validity of our thoughts or activities is a place that will weaken our relationship to our art.

Try not to cut whole bodies of work out of your vision unless you've looked at them and studied them thoroughly: don't stop looking at El Greco because he's not Jewish, or Chardin because he's not an abstract painter or Matisse because he's not a lesbian. By all means look at Agnes Martin and Georgia O'Keeffe and Eva Hesse. But don't forget Cezanne, Manet and Giotto. If good painting is what you want to do, then good painting is what you must look at. Take what you want and leave the dreck.

DOING

My experience has been that I need to go through ritual events before my mind is clear and focused enough to work. It involves an hour or two, or sometimes a day or two; of sweeping the floor; talking on the phone (not to anyone who could be too distracting or disruptive), keeping a journal, writing a letter, sending off bills, doing some sort of exercise or meditation, sitting quietly and reading or drawing. At certain times music has been very distracting.

You have to learn what is helpful and what begins to jangle your brain.

My experience is that leisure is important to work—so

if I only have a little time to work, I try to compress some ritual loosening up into that time. Without the ritual I sabotage myself. It's important that these activities take place in the studio.

After I've gone through this process, I try to take the painting by surprise. I begin as if accidentally (although all the while I have been sneaking glances at the work). Anything in my vision can be as distracting as noise or an emotional interruption.

Some people say you must have no thoughts about other people or other things while you are working. I often have a rush of imaginary conversations with people, ideas that fill the room. But I don't stop working. They allow me to unhinge my unconscious. I don't look for those conversations, but I let them happen. As I get excited about an image forming, I am often also engaged in what seems to be a totally separate thought.

Once I've started working, the important thing is to keep myself in the studio, despite the fact that I invent lots of reasons why I must leave at that precise moment. When I've set up a day for painting, there is no pressing activity anywhere, unless I construct it on the spot.

Sometimes, leaving the studio has to happen. It's never too clear until later whether I'm coping or copping out. As I'm about to leave the studio, I'm often more able to work than before. The brain gives up hugging itself into nonmovement and I am free to work again for a while. This is often the time when I do my best work. But there are times when that little joy that happens in working disappears for weeks. And I am suffering, making what seems like endlessly boring, ugly, uninspired forms. I can't draw worth shit. Everything has become awkward. I feel like I've made a terrible mistake being a painter. And this goes on for weeks and weeks. The only thing that gets me through is a lot of complaining to a friend or my lover. I need them to encourage me into believing that I really am a painter and my troubles are temporary.

The other thing that helps is knowing from past experience that this is the time of the hardest struggle and is usually the time when I learn the most about painting. And my memory is suddenly very short, like this is the first time this has ever happened to me.

This is the most important time to stay with the work.

Then there's a short time when something changes, a painting or an idea evolves and there is a little relief in the air. The work is not necessarily better than what came before it, but it represents the end of that particular struggle.

At the end of a work day, I usually leave the studio abruptly. I can't seem to even clean my brushes. I sometimes forget to turn off the lights. If I've left a painting that I am particularly excited about, I know to expect

that by the next day I am often terribly disappointed by what had seemed pure genius. I often return to find a finished painting not at all finished, or a group of paintings I liked the day before suddenly repulsive to me, superficial, eclectic, simplistic.

I've learned that a quick look can be very damaging. You often see very little of a painting in a quick look, although sometimes you can find fresh clarity about a work. More often than not, I am simply cutting off myself and several day's work, denying the seriousness of that work and those thoughts.

I can be a much worse audience than anyone I can imagine. I often switch roles on myself without being aware of it. I suddenly have become a person who stepped into my studio from the street, who despises the work because she knows nothing about it and couldn't care less—a subtle bit of self-mutilation.

It's hard to paint, and it can be impossible if you don't recognize your own trickery. Handling your unconscious with firm but caring hands, fully conscious about your work process, is absolutely necessary.

INTEGRITY

I want us to develop a sense of our strength through the integrity of work, to trust the search for honest imagery through a dialogue with the materials and through a work process devoid of shortcuts. We've got to be ready to destroy anything that comes up in our painting which is less than what finally has a degree of clarity which we as artists using our most critical thinking can recognize.

I want to caution against the dangers of purposefully and consciously setting out to make lesbian or feminist imagery or any other imagery which does not emerge honestly from the rigors of work. The chief danger as I see it lies in losing direct touch with the art, risking an involvement with a potentially superficial concern. This is not to say that the question of feminist or lesbian imagery is not a legitimate concern but rather to caution against its forced use.

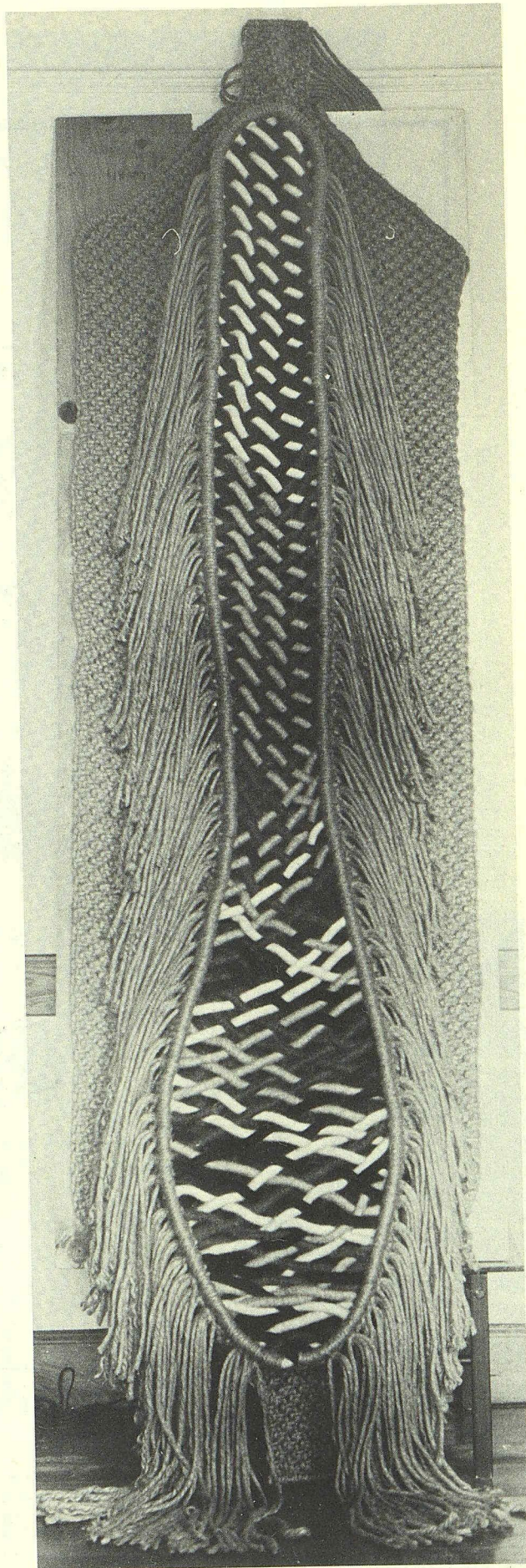
We can't allow anything unworthy to distract us from working as intensely as possible. Distraction can be in the form of pressures about imagery, methods of working or process, anything that is characterized as the "right way" or the "only way." Or it can be in the form of people who are disruptive to our work, our sanity, our clarity, our ability to believe in ourselves.

Get the creeps out of your head and out of your studio.

We must be willing to trust our own impulses about what the source of our work is—and where to go with it. It takes long periods of time, perhaps years, to understand which habits are constructive, to discover what an honest source of inspiration is and to trust that source of inspiration.

Be clear about people's motives in visiting your studio, or wanting to discuss your work. Only let in people that you trust, unless there is something you want from them (a dealer, etc.). Know what you want from them and weigh that against the disruption of your time, your privacy, your space. These things are to be cherished and protected. It's important to be conscious of anything that may build up inside you that could make you feel bad about yourself. Ultimately that takes a masochistic turn and the work suffers.

Care for yourself. Through that caring you can make a commitment to your work.



Leora Stewart. *Wall Form*. 1973. Natural jute, wool in greys. 11' x 3' x 12".