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THE ARTFUL MIND

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Artist Katrin Waite
Photography by Tasja Keetman



Artist **KATRIN WAITE**

INTERVIEW BY HARRYET CANDEE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TASJA KEETMAN

Harryet Candee: Let me ask you Katrin, since I see such high levels of energy in your artwork, how would you explain the piece that I am drawn to, titled: *I feel You Walking Through My Mind*. There is a conversation going on that on this canvas that I want to be a part of!

Katrin Waite: I was thinking about an appropriate title for a while, to be honest. I forgot which title I had first, but it must have been so wrong that I even lost it. Once I noticed how important the theme of memory is for my art, it came fast. I developed a concept how our human memory works and manifests patterns in the art as well as in the reception of the world. The composition of the painting is defined by scattered smaller color fields and fields of texture. As scattered memories trigger moments of reconnection and recognition, visuals, sounds and other impacts walk through our minds. They are remnants of our experiences. I found it interesting to make the painting sound like a person who walks through my mind. It minimizes the distance with the viewer and makes it personal. And I see it obviously spoke to you!

You cannot put a price on art, they say... So I am wondering, how do you figure out the pricing of your work? This may actually be an an-

swer that a lot of artists would be interested in, since it is difficult for some to do. Can you put some light on this subject?

We are living in an interesting time for asking this question, to put it mildly. Even before the covid-19 pandemic, it was hard for artists to develop a price concept in a permanently and rapidly changing art market. I am no exception. As many other artists, I of course weigh the material and time factor as well as the size of the painting. However, the process is essential as well. The making of the artwork is key. And the question whether and how the painting can be reproduced. Some paintings have the potential to surprise even me in the making. They are unique and I often develop a deeper personal connection with them. Others I can vary but keep the general patterns. They are unique as well as any artwork but offer motifs for similar paintings. Does a painting have the potential to develop into a series or is it a distinctive piece, a one of a kind? I am a collector too and I try to place myself into the role of the buyer. That helps to find a better balance between my expectations and the other side. And of course, often I am overthinking (and laughing). The art market keeps changing permanently.

Ever-changing, yes! I'm curious in knowing about the adventure you went on going from historian to visual artist? What were the key points in your life that took you from one world in art to another? Also, how do they now possibly overlap?

That was even more interesting than your question. Before I learned to read and write I started to paint or rather to draw. That was my very first expression. Then school started, and my analytical side began to get to work. Basically, I found both worlds and professions separately. Now, being a historian and an artist is still the expression of that constellation: on the one side painting, on the other side research, reading and writing. I am very careful to keep the balance between these two fields. I am often asked whether I want to be a full-time artist. But I love my work as a scholar, as a researcher and writer. I really do! Honestly, I love science, too, but unfortunately never had the capability of abstract mathematical imagination. However, without this cognitive impact, my art might lose its balance and structure. The methodological approach of an analysis based on facts and empiric research is the other side of the coin. The side that I visualize is in the art. For instance, I learned as a histo-



Katrin Waite *I Feel You Walking Through My Mind*
Mixed Media and Oxidized Copper on Canvas 2020

rian how human memory permanently transforms. I cannot point out enough how much that influences my artwork.

Katrin, can you go into explaining more about human memory?

As human memory is in a constant transformation process, my art is changing as well. If I take a year to work and rework an artwork, my individual changing process becomes part of the evolvement of the artwork. I am an artist who overpaints. It happens that I find an older artwork that does not quite match anymore either my contemporary situation nor my memory of it. In that case I have no hesitations to radically overwork it. However, the old artwork is not lost. The now invisible and over-painted layers are still there and they speak to the senses of the viewer. Make the invisible layers speaks – I learned that in Finland as well.

How do you land on a subject to paint? What takes shape in terms of your immediate interest in something? Does it come from your emotions, does it come from a physical need to get a certain energy flowing and out onto a canvas?

I have my general themes, but I am always open

for unexpected new moments and triggers. Actually, I count on them! I get my ideas from basically everything! From music, film fragments, poetry, light shapes, moments that I experience in my own life. Conversations and encounters I have— color and texture combinations I observe in nature— its endless. And yes, there is a physical need to get at least the essence of that momentary inspiration down to keep it for the future artwork that I am intending to turn it into. I do the usual classic move. I get up late at night to draw a sketch, take a quick photo, write down some keywords that I do not want to lose. True, in these moments there is an immense energy flow that I can feel physically. Once I am in the position to bring it down on a canvas and start the actual working process, this energy flow has transformed already into something calmer and sustainable.

How is your art making / process scientific?

I am a historian. Science for me is understanding our universe with the means of natural science. Unfortunately, I have absolutely no abstract mathematic imagination. I look at the fascinating world of astro-physics with the eyes of an innocent and astonished artist. The newest findings of the scien-

tists are not only mind-blowing, they show our limits as humans. The universe shows us how limited our perspectives are. For me, following new findings that show that up to 10 dimensions are possible is a way to extend my mind as an artist. Thinking outside the usual patterns. As I use the historic term of memory based on my work as a historian, I also use the findings of the sciences to play with ideas and to cross limits in my art.

Our mind can really become a visual movie screen, camera, worksheet tool for planning out art and how we communicate. How do you decide on the medium you are going to use? What predicts the use of mixed media versus pure paint?

For long years I have worked with acrylics exclusively, using their ability to bring out transparency to a maximum. Then I included oil, then mixed media, metal and rust. Now, I am grateful to have the skills of combining them and to take decisions what medium is required by which theme and artwork. My first decision when starting an artwork is balance and composition. How can I turn an empty field into a complex of shapes, lines and
Continued on next page...



Katrin in her studio Photograph by Tasja Keetman

space with colors and texture? How large is the canvas, the wood panel. What does the chemistry of the medium allow? A smaller wood panel with a fine surface mostly invites for subtle delicate and even colors, acrylics or oil. The effect of calamity is beautiful. Larger size canvas gives more freedom in choice of theme and composition. They can become great playgrounds for rough materials and contrasts. I call it playing with the mud!

Which brings me to asking you about the backgrounds and the textures you use throughout your work. Are the backgrounds a separate world you enter, like a backdrop to a stage? What is in the planning phase that gives you your texture, color and momentum?

The background! Oh yes! How often did I face the situation that I planned a solid background and ended up turning the background into a painting that was ready in itself? It often left me speechless. Like the artwork laughing in my face saying it is accomplished and ready. My brain however was yet behind and not prepared for that outcome. After a number of these experiences I learned to accept it. Then I learned to laugh about it. Now I can control it better. Not fully. Art and control don't go well together! But I take myself back and keep some certain colors or media for later, after the background dried and I can use them for the middle or final touch with mixed or other media. This is pure experience that gives confidence and knowing the medium as I know my changing skills.

The Ellenbogen Gallery in Manchester, Vermont has given you a one-woman exhibition. Tell us about your show, please. As an artist, what work aside from creating art was involved and probably time consuming for you?

The Ellenbogen Gallery has become a very special place for me. We took it very slowly. After the first contact I took a full year to prepare my cooperation with these two gallerists/artists. I noticed from the beginning how much of an artistic vision Carolina and Michael Ellenbogen are developing. The gallery has a huge space that the gallerists turned into a magical energy field. They are not only excellent artists, but masters in hanging the artworks to perfection. We are going through the covid-19 crisis together and are learning a lot from each other. Initially, the idea was a solo show for me. During the process it developed into the beautiful concept you can see in the exhibition until the beginning of October 2020: a retrospective! I cannot deny how proud I am; and also, thankful!

I went to the gallery to see your show, and as you say, it is a beautiful space and your art work really looks amazing. I was drawn right to it. Can you tell us what you may have done different, or kept the same for this show? The impact of Corona must have made things more challenging?

It is strange. Covid-19 did not have the impact on me to do my art differently. On the contrary, I felt provoked to strengthen my concept of memory. But

then... may be this is the impact that you are talking about, then yes, of course. After I saw the space of the Ellenbogen Gallery the first time, I definitely did my "homework" and created a number of large size paintings. At the same time, I gained the opportunity to rent a larger studio at the Copper Trout Gallery. That gave me the space to do that, to do big work. Coincidence? Corona? The biggest challenge that we all face during the covid-19 crisis is not different for the arts: uncertainty. We decided to use it for our learning and changing. Artists and gallerists fortunately are in the position to do so. However, we visual artists are in a much better position than performing artists who have to deal with a much more challenging situation. Art is always connected with the changing world. Change is key. In the case of the Ellenbogen Gallery the result is an online concept that Michael Ellenbogen developed as an e-commerce site. The gallery has become a hybrid with both physical and online representation.

Where are you off to next for showing your artwork?

It is hard to top a retrospective show of the size that I am having the privilege to present now at Ellenbogen Gallery, even under covid-19 ordained conditions. The gallery has an online presence that allows my artwork to stay, to remain available even after the end of the physical exhibition. I am also a member of the Southern Vermont Arts Center in Manchester, Vermont and the LARAC in Glens



Katrin Waite Ghost Ship
Acrylic on Paper 2020

Falls, New York. These galleries give me every year the possibilities to participate in group shows. At the end of the year I might become part of the DaVallia Gallery in Chester, Vermont. Those are the plans for now, if covid-19 does not interfere. Plus, when I began to write the short essays for the last issues of *The Artful Mind*, I noticed how much fun I have doing them. I will soon include an art blog on my website. Who knows where this path leads me to eventually.

Oh, yes! Do you have a group like yourself, artist friends that you spend time with shooting the breeze? Or are you a solitary individual liking not to share so much with others? Are there a few artists out there that you admire and want to hang out with?

I am both. As much as I like company, the creation of an artwork is a lonely and solitary process by its nature. It is very much a dialogue between artist and evolving artwork. That must happen without an audience or other company, at least in my case. For me, this solitude and independence are extremely important. But I am as well a person who really enjoys contact and interaction with people. I try to learn from other artists. I like to listen to their experiences, to swap stories, tales of little accidents (so, who else mixed up a water and a coffee cup when painting and putting the brush into the coffee mug instead of the water cup?). I learn a lot from other creative individuals, from friends who are not painters. I believe that performing arts and music

are key for my concepts and ideas. Another great inspiration is knowing we are not alone and we can laugh together. Humor is so important!

Humor is vital. Is there any glamour now a days, or over past five years to the art world, you think? How, and where does it exist?

Certainly, there is glamour. Art is a luxury product if we see it as an object of consumption. The art world did its own part to create myths about being avant-garde and a luxury playground at once. Basically, these are the extremes between the “starving artist” and the “celebrity artist”. In reality, most artists never worked in any of these worlds. There always was glamour in the art scene, especially in a big city such as my other home, Berlin, Germany. This city is a great experimental place. But as every big city, art is abused as a vanity object. I am very careful in looking at this world from my outside position. It is like a circus. My philosophy as an artist is that I just do my work, as everyone else. Mostly it works, sometimes the artist has to play by the rules.

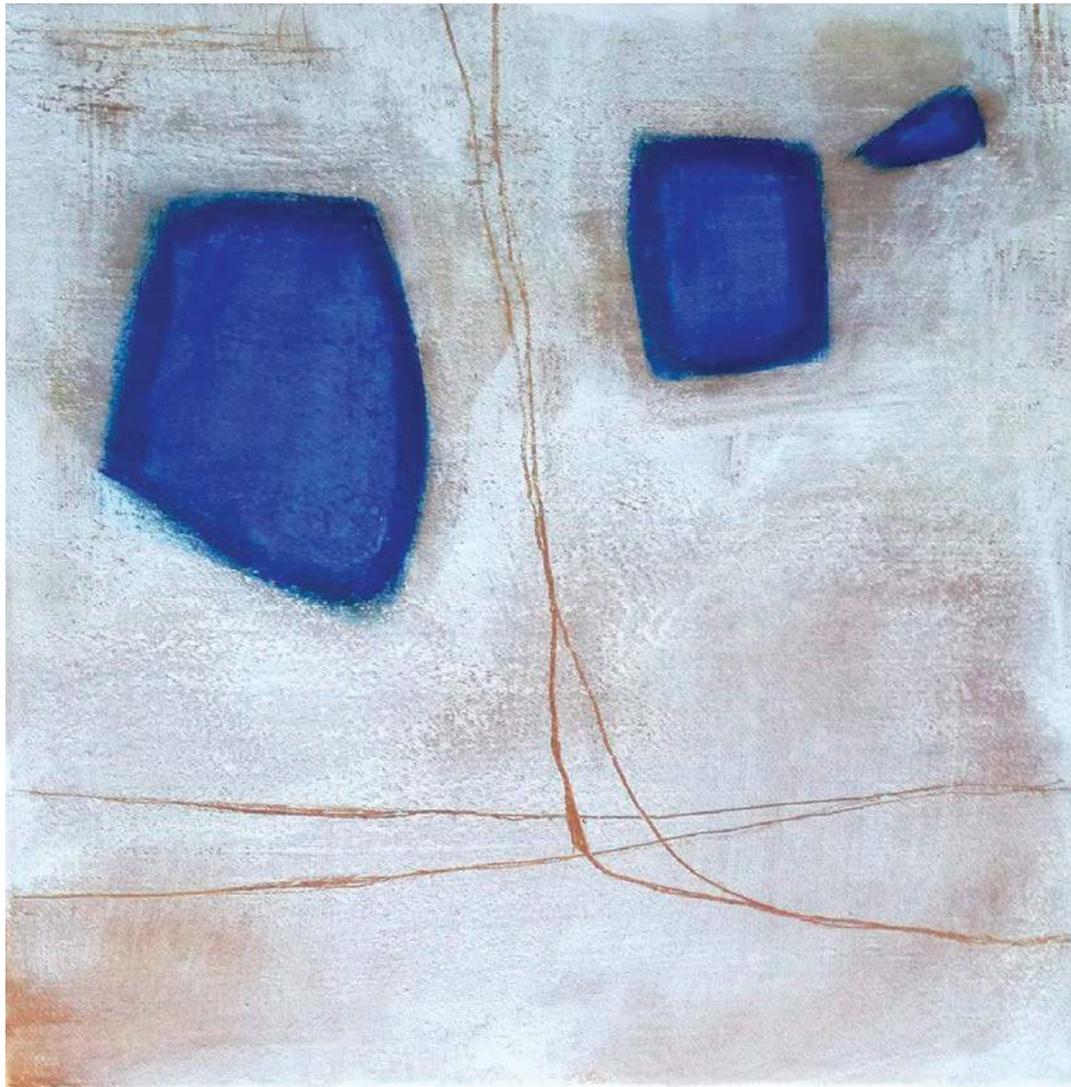
Roots!... I wonder, why you decided to live in the United States? That must be an interesting story I hope you can share.

I did not decide, life decided for me. I met my husband and we wanted to live together. Yes, and I did decide. I did not ask him to come with me to Europe. I moved to the US in January 2000. I had never been here before, and it was a great challenge

and learning experience. The first years I spent in the D.C. area. Soon we found our home in upstate New York. About 10 years ago we decided to split time between Shushan, New York and Berlin, Germany. That reconnected me with Europe. My roots...in the last years I noticed that my life in East Germany, behind the Iron Curtain, shaped me more than I was willing to admit for a long time. Meissen, my hometown has a long tradition. Soon, my research in a number of countries of Eastern Europe shaped my thinking and decision-making further. I was always drawn to the East. During these years, I focused exclusively on my research work. Coming to the US, especially travelling to the Southwest, to see Native places, art and culture, reconnected me with art. I started painting again. Finally, living in upstate New York I connected with the North country.

What was your life like behind the Iron Curtain?

This short question can fill books. My experience is similar to the life that I shared with altogether 16 million others. It was my childhood. My family was divided between East and West Germany as was the case in many families. The system of injustice and a really poor economy shaped our lives, but it provoked us to develop a sense for alternative thinking. I was surrounded by very creative people who had a good sense of humor. However, it did not have the initial impact for me to become an artist. *Continued on next page...*



Katrin Waite *White Night* Mixed Media

Art would have found me in any system.

How does your personal life intertwine with your art creating and thinking?

I have the tendency to put personal experience and ideas into a general context. I cannot help that. Maybe this is the historian's disease...always attempting to put the contemporary moment into perspective. In a short term, it makes life heavy and it is sometimes very tiring. In long term, it is very, very rewarding! I give my brain some analytical stimulation and sometimes it feels like I have a short circuit in my head. Then I let it be and distance myself from overthinking. I know I can rely on my subconscious to work. And suddenly, I come up with new ideas for my art. I guess this procedure is not for everyone. But it always works for me. My life put me where I am, between two worlds. It's a lifestyle that demands some effort, but it is so inspiring! It forces me to think in terms of changes.

To you, what do you keep in your life that would be considered "trendy" and what do you keep in your life that you consider traditional?

Trendy is a word that I don't like. I prefer change. Change is key. It is impossible to say what change I decide to keep in my life. Change – as we see now – has the tendency to come into our lives and it dictates to us. It forces us to adjust. Tradition. As both, an artist and historian, I do make a big difference between paralyzing nostalgia aka living in a frozen past and valuable memories, experiences that shape

us for the future. The key to finding out how much of both worlds is helpful, is again, balance. Everybody has to find this balance for him/herself.

What music do you favor?

There is a huge difference between the music that inspires me for my art. That can be anything: Bach (remember, I am German), Finnish Tango, some very beautiful soundtrack music, especially composed for science fiction films, experimental music of all kind, African music, especially Kora music from Mali. However, when I am in the process of painting I prefer noisy loud and metal sounds. Under the headphones. That gives me the noise chamber that I need to get into a dialogue with my work.

Do you play any musical instruments?

No. Not at all. Believe me, I have tried. I feel a deep respect and admiration for artists who master an instrument. But this door remained closed for me. As a student I got a guitar from a friend. When I tried to learn to play this instrument, my teacher smiled at me and asked whether I knew someone who really could use this nice guitar. And that after only 2 classes. I know that I can really enjoy music, that has to be enough.

Katrin, to keep educating yourself, what do you engage in? What is the latest of learning you have taken on?

My magic word again: balance! Two years ago, I

started to take calligraphy classes with a Chinese master in Berlin. That process is now interrupted due to covid-19, but I definitely will continue. I learned so much patience. I learned to let go and to understand medium. The rules that define calligraphy in terms of holding the brush and the usage of ink and water go for every medium. But the most important process is what I am learning about what to do with the empty space. By creating and recreating ink interpretations of Chinese symbols, I learn about the endless variety how to turn lines and dots and shapes into a space. The work with lines in my art has definitely altered since I have taken these classes.

Do you have a favorite Chinese symbol?

I actually do not have a favorite symbol. My master uses the Chinese symbol to train me the usage of brush and ink and to turn the space into a field of art. It is all about composition. Sometimes I am confronted with up to 15 symbols within one session. I cannot remember them all. But one basic symbol that is the source for a big variety of dynamics in calligraphy is the symbol "ren", meaning person or individual. The next level, after or beside the symbols, is the drawing of bamboo. We started to work with symbols and objects. It's an entire world!

Please unfold the painting's meaning of "Encounter".

The titles I am giving my paintings are often sug-



Katrin Waite *The Forbidden City* Acrylic and Silver on Paper 2020

gestions. I am aware of the fact that it is very different how I see my art and what I see in it from the way others see it. I want to give an impulse to the other person, to unfold their own interpretation. I want to trigger a story without forcing the other person to feel obliged to what he or she is supposed to think or something like that. "Encounter" finds its origin in the shapes of the color fields in the painting, the contrasts and also the diptych character of the artwork. The rest is the imagination of the viewer. In that particular case the title "Encounter" also plays with the process of viewing the artwork. It is the first encounter between the painting and its viewer. It is a possible metaphor because this painting has a size that makes it possible (22+28 inches).

Do you often look at your earlier work to base your new work on?

I am one of the artists who overpaints or adds or alters older artwork. I very seldom use older artwork to find new inspiration. I don't say that it does not happen or is not possible. I just do not look for it that way. But indeed, sometimes an older artwork falls again into my hands. I take a breath and am astonished how I look at it now, after several years and what an impact it has on me now. These are moments I really treasure.

Do you create your works of art and make them into a 'series'?

This is a procedure I started only within the last two years. For long years I felt kind of restless. Always

chasing new ideas. I guess I was still more in an experimental mode. Now, while answering this question, I am realizing that – getting back to a previous question – it was two years ago, when calligraphy classes started to teach me patience. Maybe there is a connection. I am still in the process of learning how powerful a series can be and how innovative for unfolding a story texture. Actually, I just started a series that will keep me busy for the next months. Maybe even longer. It is a path that I am turning more and more into a conscious process.

How do you know when you are finished with a painting?

Often I don't. I am not afraid of an empty white canvas. I never was. But knowing when a painting is ready is very challenging for me. When I paint I am in a dialogue, an interaction with the artwork. The more it is shaping and evolving the stronger its charisma becomes. It's voice gets louder. To know when to let go is sometimes not easy.

Tell us what artists that exist that you have direct influence with in your work? How?

Among the large number of artists that I do admire there are some individuals who had and continue to have a deep inspirational impact on me. First, the works of Max Ernst and Lyonel Feininger are key for me to understand the path of art in the 20th century. I admire the elegance of the shapes and colors these great artists left to us. And the philosophical

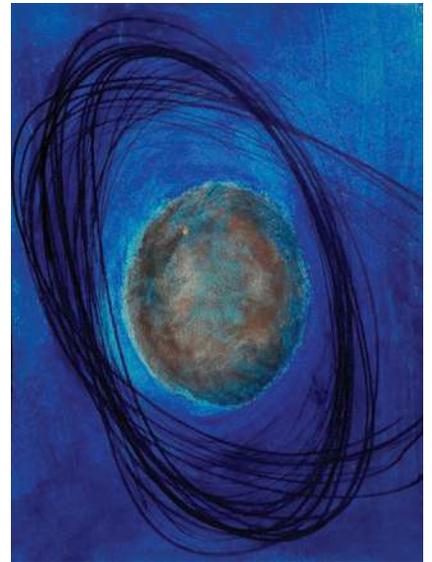
beauty: both, Ernst and Feininger were objects of the abysses of a very problematic century and both absorbed these cathartic experiences into their works. Among contemporary artists, Julie Mehretu and El Anatsui are essential for me. And a large number of Native American artists. There are big names as Dan, Arlo and Michael Namingha (Hopi-Tewa), but also artists as Sheldon Harvey and Antoinette Thompson (both Diné), just to mention some names. But as everything else, this too is a process.

Do you believe imitation is a form of flattery? Have we created everything and now we are working off of already done ideas? Thoughts?

Imitation. Is that possible? Sure, one can try, but even the best imitation is an imitation. Flattery? It rather is disturbing. But we all are exchanging ideas and interpretation whether we do it on purpose or not. My focus on lines is partially based on the beautiful landscapes in Finnish Lapland that went to artistic transformations numerous times before. I am not the only artist who got inspired by the shapes of Northern landscapes. One visit to the National Art Museum in Helsinki made that unmistakably clear. What matters is the handprint and the individual mental processing the artist gives the source of inspiration. It is impossible to have created everything. If an endpoint would be possible, mankind would have reached it already a long time ago. Picasso would have become an engineer or a scientist. *Continued on next page...*



Portrait of Katrin Waite by Tasja Keetman



Katrin Waite Gravity
Acrylic, Ink and Oxidized Copper on Paper
2019



Katrin Waite Solar - Moon - Constellation
Ink and Gold Leaf on Paper 2020

Where have you traveled to that has brought you to inspiring people, and expansion of your imagination?

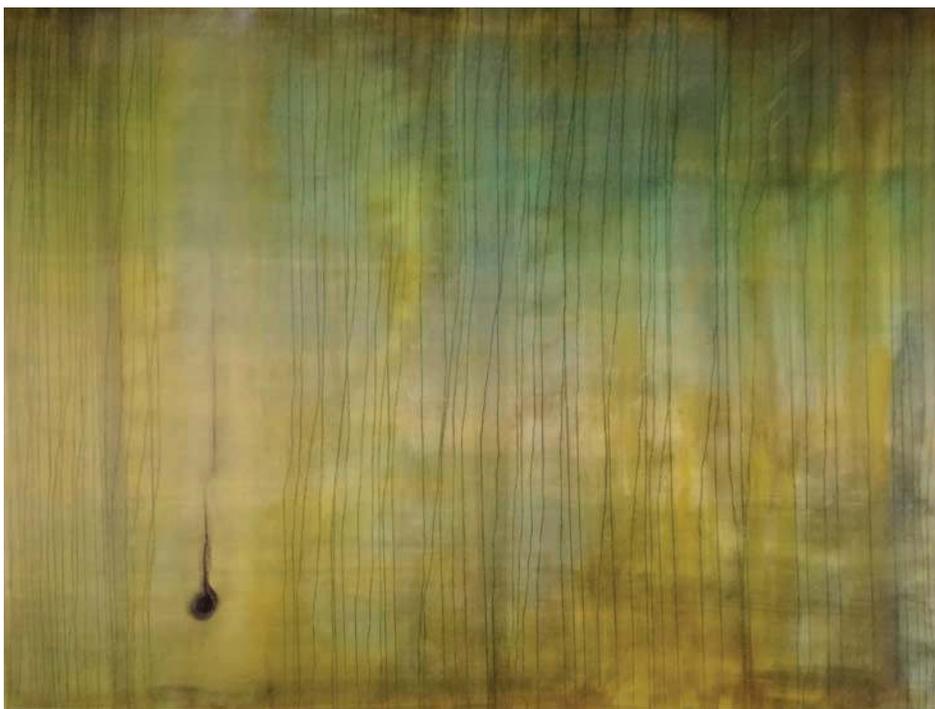
Travelling was always key. I don't have to mention all the art museums that triggered city trips. Landscapes and cultural territories were more important than doing the "home-work" of training the mind with art history. Now, sitting back and feasting upon the memories of travels I am processing and reprocessing these landscapes, patterns, colors again. The most inspirations I felt in the Southwest of the US, namely in Native Territories (A:Shiwi/Zuni, Hopi, Diné/Navjo, Háák' u/Acoma). And the journey to Finland was eye opening in many respects.

In what ways was Finland an eye opener for you? How does it influence your work, and can you refer to a specific painting that really shows this?

Finland was an eye opener in many respects. The landscape of the North is connected to a minimalistic approach to life and it found an expression in the arts and architecture that astonished me. I have never seen such beautiful straight birch tree forests covered in the light of the short summers. After that journey I definitely intensified the work with lines in my art. I also modified the color range. I stepped back from the bright colors and screaming contrasts and considered so-called moderate colors. If used in a minimalistic way, they can be as loud as any bright color. (see attachment). It sounds like a cliché, but less can be more. I am still learning to respect the empty space on the canvas and to let it speak.



Katrin Waite *Communication* Mixed Media and Oxidized Copper on Canvas 2019



Katrin Waite *Silence II* 2019

At the end of the day, what is one of your rituals? Do you think you are a creature of habit or total spontaneity?

I am both. Habits are getting more important when facing a crisis such as covid-19. The outside world is changing so fast. Politics are so challenged. We are inside our isolation while big changes and transformations are happening in the outside world. Many of us feel helpless or thrown back to the position of passive observers. That creates a need for habits to have some certainty. But the urge for change needs to find channels as well. I guess we all have good and bad days in the moment when dealing to sustain a certain amount of stability. I tried to reduce the impact of my spontaneous activities, mostly for the sake of not endangering others. We have to be very careful not to harm each other.

Katrin, what heart-felt message do you have to share with us, maybe our eyes will open yet wider thanks to you.

Who am I to give answers? Or to offer a message? I feel we are living in a time that demands us to admit that we do not have things under control. And that we admit how much we are failing. I can share experiences. Or observations. Yes, and I see myself mostly as an observer. Only that much: having friends in Belarus I am following closely the horrible events in the country, the brutal and blind terror of a dictator against peaceful civilian and the bravery of the Belarussian people, and so many women! It is amazing how much creativity pours into this protest that has already developed into an uprising. These new protest patterns seem to be part of a changing global communication. One thing is for sure, even if it sounds like a Chinese fortune

cookie: we are always stronger than we think we are. As ugly as the world looks like now, there is beauty. As an artist, I see myself a messenger of showing beauty. We never should forget how beautiful our planet is.

The layers in your art are like layers to our life that deepens as we grow. Can you expand your thoughts on this by using the painting named: Communication.

You chose one of the rare pieces that has a very personal meaning for me. Communication! The layers are so complex! Acrylic, mixed media, more acrylic, scratches, abuse of the surface and oxidized copper. Once finished, the title hammered my head like an imperative: Communication. I believe that one of our largest problems is broken or disturbed human communication. With the internet and social media, communication has changed its previous functions and shapes. And it definitely gained in speed. The global online communication runs so much faster than our physical face to face communication and the political communication that we almost physically feel this imbalance. Communication fields and chambers are fighting each other. I even feel it in my personal life. We are changing our capability to be attentive. I am constantly working on being a good listener and talker. But with communication running faster every day I have to find a mode and time for processing. I feel privileged that I can retire to my art studio and limit myself to hours of slow motion communication with an artwork. And noisy metal music for my ears.

How can we follow you?

I am on facebook and on Instagram, under my artist name: Katrin Waite
My website: www.katrinwaite.com
My e-mail address: rigasvelns@gmail.com

Thank you!