



Amy Dryer Traces of Memory

Interview by Jaspreet Singh



Amy Dryer attended the Alberta College of Art and Design, the Glasgow School of Art (Scotland) and the Fine Art program at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, to receive her Bachelor of Fine Arts. She completed an artist residency at Emma Lake, Saskatchewan in 2009.

In 2008, Avenue Magazine featured her as 'Calgary's Best,' and more recently Essential Magazine and Galleries West have featured her as a 'Profiled Artist.' Amy's paintings are in a number of collections throughout Canada, and the US, including the Alberta Foundation for the Arts public art collection. Amy is based in Calgary.

JS: It is the last day, the 31st of December, 2013. You are in Calgary, and I am in Banff. So how shall we begin? Perhaps with your most recent work...

AD: In the past few years, I have been exploring ideas surrounding both internal and external landscapes – landscapes relating to the body, to architecture and most recently, to the natural landscape.

My current project deals directly with the idea of memory – personal memory – and the its loss through the process of dementia. I have created a body of paintings and sounds that move from the 'representational' landscape to the 'abstract' landscape, stripping down a space that is comprehensive and moving it towards an unknown and unconscious place. My aim, in this series of paintings and accompanying sounds, is to capture the inner workings of my grandfather's dementia mind.

When the viewer/ listener enters the gallery space, he is first met with the series of paintings. He then further enters the space and sits at a table at the centre of the room, where there are three distinct ear phones on three different chairs. The ear phones hold particular sounds, and the chairs face specific paintings. The listener/ viewer, then, begins to associate certain sounds with the paintings, and the paintings with the sounds.

The sounds and paintings are both decipherable, in the literal narrative sense, and unknown. The final version of my repeated verbal narrative, for example, is so layered that the listener may not be able to decipher its meaning. Rather, the listener begins to pick up certain words, rhythms and sounds without understanding the meaning of the whole. This movement between resolution/ understanding and forgotten memories is the basis of the show.

As I look back and reflect on the body of work I have made over the past ten years, I see that that memory, impression, gesture, and the role of everyday vulnerability has played a large role in the meaning of my paintings. My work is both inward and outward, full of life folding, unfolding, and refolding.

JS: Your work has a life and ruins of its own. Inwardness. Architecture and flash and flicker of unresolved past. Misfoldings of landscape and memory?

AD: Architecture, flash, flicker. Your words reminded me of a passage from Anne Michaels, *The Winter Vault*.

...”there are choices that strike me as so achingly personal, and they are in stone and glass, for anyone to see...a man’s mind laid bare in the positioning of each doorway and window, in the geometric relationship between windows and walls, in the relation between the musculature of a building to its skeleton, the consideration of how a man might feel, placing his chair here or there in a room following the light. I’m convinced we feel the stresses of a building when we’re inside.” Pg 83, *The Winter Vault*, Anne Michaels

When I read this passage, I am struck by the idea that a structure is so ‘achingly personal’, vulnerable, laid bare, it’s muscles built onto its skeleton. The writing reminds me that the body is built from the inside-out and the outside-in. When one is inside the building, sitting in a chair, in the light, one is aware of the outside structure; when one is outside the structure, one is, in turn, aware of the details and vulnerabilities of the inner rooms. As a whole, I interpret Michaels words to be about knowing a structure/ a building/ a body as a whole.

My Grandfather, in his process of dementia, has lost his structure; he has lost the musculature of the building – and the skeleton. He has misplaced the chair inside the room – his own stories – and all that is left is the light coming in the window.

In this way, my grandfather has forgotten his logical, sequential memories; they have become flickers and flashes of images and ideas without context or resolution.

I still remember my grandfather’s life as a whole – I remember both the details and overall structure. I remember my grandfathers’ house in the woods; I remember sitting with my grandparents in the morning, eating toast and jam; I remember when my grumpy visited my studio at Mount Allison; I remember my grandfather sitting and talking to me for hours about his ideas and his faith. The intricate details of my grandfathers life are now held by others – my grandmother, my dad, me...

While his own life may be unresolved and unknown to him, the act of remembering who he is and was – maintaining the building – is now passed on. In this, my art has come to be, gathering up my grandfathers’ unravelled life and re-meeting him in a new light.

JS: Why use sound, voice (your own) and narrative (or the impossibility of narrative) in your last work?

AD: In the early stages of my grandfathers’ dementia, when he knew he was starting to lose his memory, he started telling me his stories over and over, as if to cement them into both his memory and mine. I had the idea to tape him talking, telling the stories of his pastor days; the house he and my grandmother returned to in Saint John; the Brooklyn technical Institute he attended as a young man; how he felt ‘rich’ regardless of his financial position. Because I lived across Canada from my grandparents, I didn’t get the chance to tape him speaking, and as his dementia progressed, I lost the opportunity to capture his coherent narrative. In the attempt to hold my grandfathers’ stories, I decided to tape my own voice – mixing our narratives.

Grumpy had a deep voice that could fill a room with its presence; my own voice is soft and I am known for being a

quiet person. However, when my grandfather would speak or pray, people would listen fully; likewise, when I speak, people listen to my soft voice. In this, our voices become similar.

My grandfather also loved to tell his stories; he would leave bits of his stories wherever he went – the grocery store, the video store, church. He liked interacting with people, meeting them, finding out about them. His voice was a place of connection, introduction, and community.

Now, he is much quieter. I wish to give him his voice back through my own speech. My aim, in recording my words, is to hold his memories, his stories, even his voice, through my own voice. In this, his life is not silenced, but rather understood in its structure, its confusion and its light. Our voices become a shared consciousness.

JS: *Have you ever abandoned and/or destroyed your own work?*

AD: At an artist residency several years ago, I destroyed a painting that I very much liked. I brought the painting to a point that I loved its combination of shapes and melancholy. However, after several days of looking and obsessing over the piece, I felt doubtful of the paintings' success. I decided to push the work, further layering it. Once I started with a few changes, everything had to be changed. The figure drowned under the over-worked layers of paint and I felt heart-broken for destroying both the painting and the quiet woman underneath it. Upon talking to a fellow artist, lamenting my ruined painting, he said that one of his profs suggested that one must always be open to destroying one's own work, in the attempt to find and better it. Maybe it was over-dramatic, but I felt some grief about ruining this piece. I still remember the blue woman sitting in the window that was this painting. I threw it out in the end.

“Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” – Samuel Beckett.

JS: *When no one is around, when there are no OPEN STUDIOS – What does your studio space look like? For instance, what is the difference between your kitchen and studio?*

In my studio, I have long white curtains that hang over north facing windows. In the spring, the curtains move slightly in the soft wind of the season. In the fall, yellow light pours through the windows and moves across my paintings slowly.

I am on the top floor of an old warehouse building, in downtown Calgary. When it rains hard, I can hear the pounding of the weather on the roof of the building.

The ceilings are high – at least fifteen feet. The walls are grey, exposed brick and I have drawn sketches on them, here and there. Vine charcoal faces, and drawings of umbrellas. I have written some words from songs on the walls of my studio.

In the summer, the heat rises off of the downtown cement and the studio is sweltering. When I paint, I wear jean shorts and crocks. A fan blows constantly around the room and I sometimes stand before it, my brushes in hand.

My studio is cluttered. Brushes, decorative papers, canvas, stretcher frames, Holbein paints, containers, wood, stacks of paper and pictures, pencil crayons, pencil shavings, photos and vine charcoal are around the space, filling it.

I listen to music and CDs while I paint; I sometimes hear pigeons walking on the roof of the building; I pin pictures on the massive wooden pillars and stack egg-carton painting palettes on shelves. I stand while I paint. I stand for hours at a time.

The studio is in flux, moving between a chaotic, organized mess of many paintings and tools, to a stacked, clean, and empty space. My paintings are close in proximity, so they sometimes look like one massive painting. When creating a show, the work becomes a single cohesive body, developing under a loose theme and taking over my space.

JS: *Do you paint differently when you are being observed?*

AD: I remember a changing point between childhood and adolescence was an awareness of being observed. If I turned my head or hand in such a way while sitting in class in Junior High, this would be perceived as attractive.

If I am being observed while painting, I am more aware of my body and where I am in space. My brain wants to create interesting images for people and I become part of the image that I am creating. I also worry, somewhere at the back of my mind, that I don't actually know what I'm doing and now everyone will see it in my process.

In its vulnerability, painting in front of people can be exhilarating – an unpredictable and personal performance of sorts. At some points, I can forget where I am and lose myself in the painting itself.

In my studio, alone, I usually forget where my body is, as I am very focused on my work. I also listen to book CDs to help me get out of my 'conscious, rational, self-evaluative and self critical' mind.

JS: Let us assume a camera as an observer...

AD: While at the Banff Centre, I took a series of 'stop motion photos' of my painting process. At first, every time the camera would make a certain 'whirring' noise before taking the photo, I would try to place myself in an interesting position before the camera. In other words, I felt self aware of the photo process at the beginning. However, as the projects and paintings progressed throughout the weeks at the centre, I begin to ignore the camera altogether. Of course I knew of its presence; I just stopped fretting about it.

I wore my mask while painting; I walked in and out of the camera's view finder. I thought more about the paintings themselves than what was being seen by the eye of the camera.

I chose to take these photos as a way of documenting the memories of the paintings themselves. When I work, I often paint over and over pieces; one painting becomes another which becomes yet another. The narrative is in constant flux, building on itself and being wiped away. The paintings, therefore, become stories and memories and losses and gains in and of themselves. I wanted to capture their lives as works in process, in relation to memory and the loss thereof.

I was also fascinated and surprised to see myself moving across the works. When putting together the video at the end of my five weeks at the Banff Centre, I watched myself having a dialogue with the paintings, scratching, layering, looking, wiping and moving with the works. In this, my own presence with the work could be documented and remembered. I had not seen myself paint before (a sort of out-of-body experience to witness) and felt pleased to see the elegance of the process.

JS: While doing portraits, do you talk to the sitters?

AD: I feel privileged when a person allows him or herself to be painted. There is a vulnerability to putting oneself before another, being scrutinized, observed and visually articulated by that person. As a result, I try to make my sitter feel as comfortable as possible. I aim to help the person forget that I am painting them even though I am standing before the model with an easel and canvas. I try to talk and chat with the person and can often see their body reacting and responding into relaxation: A slight slouch, a waving of the hand, a turn of the head, a response of the mouth. From this point of comfort, I am able to capture the essence of the person. I also look for the moments in between the modeling, glimpses of natural body gestures that are not deliberate or self-conscious.

JS: How long does it take to finish a portrait?

AD: The time length for a portrait does depend on the portrait, and sometimes the urgency of the buyer. Usually, I like to have a couple months at least to work and re-work the piece. With commissions, I often send the client an initial sketch of the piece I am planning to do. That way, both the client and I know that we are on the same page with the work. The sketch is just an initial impression – it mainly indicates the orientation of the painting (vertical or horizontal) and the size of the head or heads in the piece. From the initial sketch, I ask for feedback, but also let the client know that with the layering of color, the painting will transform over time. I am open to feedback with portraits because they are so personal. I like to know everything that I can about the person I am painting so that I can capture a personal and private essence.

I do a self portrait almost every year, following in the tradition of such artists as Kathe Kolvitz and Frida Kahlo.

JS: Do you ever experience anxieties that you might one day stop being a painter?

AD: Sometimes I worry about getting arthritis in my hands and not being able to maneuver them in a way that would allow me to paint; other times, I worry that I will simply lose the mystery that is creativity; still other times, I fret that if I have children, I won't have any time or space left in my life to paint. All of these are my fears, but they haven't gotten the best of me yet.

JS: What was it like doing the portrait of a dying man?

AD: When I did Billy's portrait, I was part of a sacred experience. I felt humbled to be invited to sit with the family while they sat with Billy. This was a young man, in his early 50s, who had developed an aggressive brain tumour which took less than a year to dissolve his life.

When he was sick, he was brought into the centre of the home – a space just off of the kitchen. His bed was set up there and the busyness and life of the home and the people in it revolved around him; Billy remained part of everyday details, part of the community.

I was young at this point – in my mid-twenties – and I visited as much as possible, sitting with other family members beside Billy's bed. I sketched Billy's mom, her eyes captured in the white light of mid day. Natural light poured in from large West facing windows. I sketched Billy, sitting in bed, his head propped up against a pillow. I watched his wife smooth his hair, and I knew I was in the presence of something unnameable.

Bonnie gave me a series of photos of Billy over the years, and the consistent features that stood out were a dazzling smile and a pair of twinkling, laugh-wrinkled eyes. I collaged these pictures into my journal and continued to visit.

At some point between the visits, and Billy's loss of language (he was no longer able to string words together towards the end), I started the portrait in my studio.

I couldn't quite get it at first, as is the way with many portraits for me. I started to doubt whether I could paint him the way I intended to, and then I just kept going and layering and thinking about him and his family...and how we die the way we live.

The painting seemed to come into itself almost magically. I don't really remember how it came together, just that it did. My dad visited me in my studio, and started nodding, as Billy was a good friend of his.

I brought the portrait to the family home, to Billy's bedside. I presented Billy with the piece as his wife and a few others stood by; he held his own portrait and looked at it. Then he looked over at me, half grinning, and gave me the thumbs up. Everyone in the room cried.

JS: Who has most influenced your work?

AD: The artists influencing my work change, depending on what I am trying to accomplish in my paintings. For example, last year, I was creating a series of paintings called 'Urban Blueprints.' I was looking at blueprints and city plans and doing a series of urban landscapes around the city of Calgary that would incorporate both the dimensionality of space and the flatness of a blueprint. At this time, I was looking at Henri Matisse's paintings as they seemed to bring both flatness (in his reference to textiles) and dimensional space together.

I was also thinking about the Marquette of friend and colleague Heather Huston, and the architectural portraits of Eric Olson. I have found inspiration in the way both of these contemporary artists explore space, flatness, dimension, and the breakdown of structure in their work.

More recently, as I abstract my landscapes, I have been referencing the work of Henri Michaux. I am interested the way Michaux explores the unconscious mind through his calligraphic paintings. In my effort to break down my landscapes, I have stripped them to the bare bone of their essence, and have found that what remains looks like unconscious writings.

JS: What makes you move to the next painting and the next?

AD: When I paint, I set up my canvases all over my studio. I work on them as a body of paintings. For example, I will layer one canvas, then leave it to dry; I will work on another canvas hanging beside it, then leave it to dry and go back to the first piece. Through this process, I create a body of cohesive paintings that live and breath together. They capture a dialogue, a feeling, a time and a place, and I aim to show them together as a body of work.

JS: Do you ever fear you will stop being a painter?

AD: Sometimes I worry about getting arthritis in my hands and not being able to manoeuvre them in a way that would allow me to paint; other times, I worry that I will simply lose the mystery that is creativity; still other times, I fret that if I have children, I won't have any time or space left in my life to paint. All of these are my fears, but they haven't gotten the best of me yet.

JS: Are Lucien Freud and Francis Bacon meaningful?

AD: When I think of Lucien Freud's work, I feel an almost tactile response. I think of the heavy quality of paint, the harshness and unforgiving light on the figures, the application of yellows and browns and pinks – a sense that the figures have been turned inside out and all of their inner qualities have been revealed. The faces he paints are intricately distorted and are mesmerizing what they seem to reveal and conceal about both the sitters and the artist.

Likewise, Frances Bacon's work brings out an inner anxiety – a pulsing, aggressive, bodily vulnerability that seems to tear through his figures and self portraits. When I think of Bacon, I imagine him moving through the chaos of his studio with a sort of creative desperation unparallel to most people.

JS: Favourite visual artists (across time and space)? Why?

AD: My top favourite artists (for varied reasons) are: Henry Matisse, Richard Diebenkorn, Peter Doig, Egon Scheile, Kees Van Dungen, Kathe Kolvitz, Frida Kahlo, Emily Carr, Lee Krasner and (most recently) Henri Michaux. If I could meet any of them, travel around with them as they work, and talk to them about their work and process, I would.

I will mention Richard Diebenkorn and Peter Doig, as I filled my Banff Centre studio walls with pictures of their work. Diebenkorn is a favourite because his landscapes, figures and abstractions are articulated with the most skilful and expressive draftsmanship. He is simply an amazing drawer and painter; he moves paint and combines color in a way that hurts my heart!

Peter Doig is receiving the same recognition as Jackson Pollock, though Doig is still living. His use of thick and thin paint, his layering, his combination of abstraction and representation, figures and lines and buildings is fresh, free, and both child-like and sophisticated. His paintings reveal themselves a bit at a time.

JS: Where are you headed next?

AD: My studio is very full at the moment. My aim is to show the body of work I just created at the Banff Centre, so my next step will be to put together some proposals to make that happen. There are several public galleries that I would like to approach; I am also moving to a new gallery in Calgary as my commercial gallery here has recently closed. New possibilities will open up this year I think. I feel a sense of brewing potential as 2013 comes to a close and 2014 opens her doors.

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Interview Bio:

Jaspreet Singh's latest novel, *Helium*, was published recently by Bloomsbury
www.JaspreetSinghAuthor.Com