

Outside it's dark. Still.
Morning light not yet arrived
Bedcovers keeping me comfortably in slumber
But, when consciousness returns, I remember
"I GET TO PAINT!!"

Since I can recall, I've been drawing...on whatever paper I could find, even in the margins of magazines, newspapers...no whitespace was safe.



Me, circa 1957

My high school art teachers maneuvered to get me into special summer workshops as well as the Art Institute of Chicago. I took the practical approach and got a degree in Art Education, though I didn't have the desire or enthusiasm for classroom teaching. Mercifully, I was able to get a master's in Journalism. I thought marrying words with images would lead to something interesting. The good news is that I managed to have an engaging, rewarding career that was intellectually, emotionally fulfilling. The other news is that I wasn't painting...until recent years. So, after almost a 40-year, career-induced hiatus, I've returned to my first love.

I've been all over the place with my art. I've painted abstracts, figures, landscapes, seascapes, and tablescapes; crafted and demonstrated assemblages; and beaded and embellished necklaces, earrings, bracelets, and brooches. When I lived in Kenya, I created calligraphy to write the names of local diploma recipients. And, yes, I've even done windows—producing window displays for a dress shop and a health food store.

Now, I paint with oils almost every day. I was 16 when I received a paint box, filled with fresh tubes of oils, small bottles of medium and long-handled brushes. Like a kid's security blanket, the box has been with me ever since.

For me, art happens somewhere between the eyes and the heart, the hands merely facilitate the forms and feelings. If the subject resonates deeply with me, I stare it to bits. The crevasses of a cabbage or the folds in the face of an aging farmer can gain my almost endless attention.



“Roots” Oil, 16 x 20”

Transforming this seeing / feeling energy onto a canvas is the stuff of textbooks. With the patient assistance of several workshop instructors and a painting mentor, I continue to develop my painting skills and processes. I’m trying not to mirror the style of artists that I admire, but find my own style... still elusive to me at this point.

I enjoy painting portraits best. [Gavin Glakas](#) must bleed portraiture; his workshops unleashed my love of painting faces...and, of course the design principles and painting techniques he teaches apply to all subjects...be it a mole or a mountain. It’s a rewarding challenge for me to transform a blank canvas into a space that hosts a personality to which we can relate.

I dive into the canvas, feeling what the subject feels, hearing what the subject hears. I listened to The Neville Brothers and Rag’n’Bone Man crooning while painting “Door

Man.” I heard the flute of Carlos Nakai and vocals from Shaman’s Way while painting “Quilting by Lamplight.” Freedom songs from Sweet Honey and the Rock and spirituals from Sounds of Blackness accompanied me as I painted, “Farmer Brown, after Gordon Parks.”



“Farmer Brown, after Gordon Parks” Oil, 11x14”

My paintings tell stories. If a theme is intriguing to me, perhaps I can engage an onlooker to ponder the theme as well. Some of my paintings are sheer fantasy, like “Woman in Red” with her gravity defying auburn hair. The unbounded freedom it conveys resonates broadly with onlookers and gave me a sense of freedom when I painted it. I am similarly moved by the conditions of our world; in “Cattle Call” the Ethiopian shepherd watches over his livestock in a land ravaged by encroaching desertification.



INSERT: “Woman in Red, 2” Oil, 48x24”

It’s no surprise: the people that populate these paintings are parts of me. They tell my story, what I care about, what I find important. They may have cultural boundaries and discrete histories, but they are unified by common claims to peace, freedom, and creativity.

Inspiration can come from any direction: the sight of light hitting a forehead; cool skin meeting a worn, warm blanket; a toddler’s hands holding an oozing berry pie. I follow the inspiration and allow it to take me further down the road.



INSERT: “My Pie” Oil, 12x16”

Each painting instructs, if I’m open to it. [Sara Poly](#), landscape painter and instructor, offers a batch of questions to enable her workshop participants to do self-assessments. Among them:

- Do I really love the subject? Would it make a good series?
- How strong is my composition? Too many horizontals? Enough verticals?
- Is my “story” clear? Is it too complicated? Understandable?
- What pulls me in?
- Is the color harmonious? Enough grays? Too many “loud” colors...
- Could I take something out to make it stronger?
- Would I do it again but differently?

My continuing quest is to loosen up; paint strong, decisive strokes; compose convincing scenes to carry the story. Like an ant, I spend too much time on minutia; like an eagle I was to soar and see/paint the bigger picture. I was the child that stayed with the lines, colored within the bold black shapes, never straying outside boundaries.

This summer I took a workshop with [Qiang Huang](#), an optical engineer turned artist. (Strange, no one retires to become an accountant or an engineer...hmmmmm.) I’m drawn to his works because they convey a sense of accuracy without forfeiting energy,

dynamism even playfulness. In my quest to loosen up, he recommends that I take small steps...perhaps have just one brush stroke cross a boundary; as my confidence grows, perhaps cross more boundaries, blur more borders.

I am grateful for each day that grants me time and space to paint.
I am grateful for the people that inspire and support my creativity.
I hope my art serves to connect me to you.

Paula Cleggett