

---

## ELLEN HALLIE SCHIFF: DRAMA, MOOD & INTROSPECTION

Ellen is one of those artists who I met online. Her work <http://www.ellenhallieschiff.com/> is so moody and introspective. I wanted to find out what inspires her and what keeps her painting day in and day out. Read on and find out ...

**“How what is "inside," gets to be on the canvas is part of being in the moment while painting and my essence or "truth" finds its way out if I can get out of my own way. When it works, I feel that I have "said" something through my painting.”**

MICHAEL: Hi Ellen, I love the fact that your work covers both figurative and abstraction. Yet for me, what dominates both is this sense of deep mood and drama. Your work seems very introspective. How do you see it?

ELLEN: Hi Michael. Thanks so much for the opportunity to chat with you and I am so pleased you love my work! Your comment is so very interesting and I think you are right; a sense of deep mood, drama and introspection is right on target.

The figurative work was done about seven years ago. The abstractions or non-objective (to use the technical term, I suppose) works are recent and the black and white works are my current body of work. Although these various bodies of work are in different modes, so to speak, I am comforted by the fact that there really is a strong continuous thread running through all my work - even including the lipsticks and high-heeled shoes done about 10 years ago.

My work IS very dramatic and does get across a deep mood. With each painting, I am really accessing a deep part of myself and placing it on the canvas. I put it out there and when the work is going well, I have the pleasure of a viewer telling me how my work made a connection with them. This is partly why I love speaking with other people - it really helps me articulate various aspects of my work and in many cases, aspects I hadn't really thought much about.

MICHAEL: Very interesting. Ironically, introspection somehow also involves what is outside of us.

ELLEN: My figurative work was very introspective, and mostly due to my embarking on a seven-year career as an unclothed art model at the time. I had realized I should get more experience drawing the figure and at one point, I decided I could pose the same or better than the model. Being 48 at the time made the idea even more intriguing. The theatricality of posing attracted me as well as a way to convey emotions. Hearing that my poses were inspiring, provocative and never-before-seen, only added to my interest in posing.

As a by-product of posing, I found an incredible opportunity to place myself in various situations for my own painting. A fellow painter photographed me. I felt kind of like the “Cindy Sherman of Figurative Painting.” This period gave me the chance to work out various compositional ideas as

well as explore other ideas such as redemption, hope and ambiguity. It was an exceptional time, with lots of positive feedback, raising a few eyebrows and a unique way to connect with other artists.

MICHAEL: Very cool. The black and white canvas works seem reminiscent of Frank Kline and Robert Motherwell, although I know you have your own inspiration. What is it?

ELLEN: Yes, they ARE reminiscent of Kline and Motherwell. Basically they are two of my "art" heroes and I started out thinking of them while painting those works. Of course, as I got more into each painting, what was the essential "me" began to come through loud and clear.

MICHAEL: When you are actually in front of the canvas and painting, what's going through your mind? What are you feeling? How does what's happening inside of you find its way on the canvas?

ELLEN: When I am actually in front of the canvas, I am thinking how will I break up the space on the canvas? Will I use white or black? How much paint will I put on the brush? How will I apply the paint- in a smooth motion or with a more energetic motion? What will I do now?

What I am feeling is how do I feel about how that mark looks or sits on the canvas? Does it take up TOO much space? Am I pleased with the application of the mark? Does it feel forced or like it was there all along? Should I throw or spatter some paint over here now to draw the eye to that area? Does that seem contrived or beautifully accidental? Maybe it really is accidental and that is a gift.

These questions and decisions are going on all the time. At the same time, I am also responding viscerally to what I put down and not thinking at all. It's some kind of combination of intent and response. It's also a dialogue between me and the paint that results in something entirely new that did not exist before. How what is "inside," gets to be on the canvas is part of being in the moment while painting and my essence or "truth" finds its way out if I can get out of my own way. When it works, I feel that I have "said" something through my painting. Without using words, I have communicated some "truth" or something universal and that feels fantastic.

MICHAEL: Isn't it interesting how paint on canvas is not a language and yet there is some sort of communication involved? What is it? Osmosis? Mental telepathy?

ELLEN: Yes, it is SO interesting and I am so blown away when someone comments on my completely abstract painting, "how emotional" it is. That makes me feel that my essence has really come through. How else to explain an "emotional" painting of two black shapes on paper?

The only thing I can think of is that all of me is there in that moment, including my feelings of competition, wanting to be close, yet independent and not suffocated. How close is too close? Translating to the paper/canvas, how can all these shapes co-exist on the same paper/canvas and "make" a painting? All this and more becomes part of the painting and maybe that comes through. Even though I am continually making decisions and asking technical questions throughout making the painting, I am also "living" in the painting.

You know this process usually takes place very quickly. So often after I have worked on a painting for 45 minutes or so, I have to step away for several hours to process exactly what happened. Often I can't even articulate what the work is about right then. I might need time to process what I did and

how it sits with me, how I feel about what I painted and if that is what I wish to get across.

MICHAEL: Is it important to you that people have the same reactions to your work that you have?

ELLEN: No, it's not important that people have the same reactions to my work that I have. What's important to me is that my work somehow affects the viewer. If the viewer has an emotional response to my work, I feel I have done my job as an artist.

MICHAEL: What are your biggest pet peeves about the art world? What needs changing?

ELLEN: I don't consider myself so very involved in the art world that I would even have an idea what to change. I do think that the art world is for the most part a big business and artists really need to get in there and promote themselves and their work. Otherwise, who is going to find out about you and your work? It is so common to hear among my colleagues that someone's work is so much better than that artist who is showing in a gallery. I'm sure it is, but if the Gallery owner isn't aware of you, how will s/he be able to find you and show your work? I think it is just very difficult to make a name for yourself. They are so many excellent artists out there. And even with some exposure, nothing is guaranteed. It is a constant job, every day.

MICHAEL: Do you come from an artistic family? What was your first experience with art? When did you say, "I'm going to be an artist!" What was the moment?

ELLEN: My mother was very artistic. She was very good at the piano and actually gave a concert at Town Hall in NYC as a young woman. Later, she became a psychotherapist and joined my dad in private practice. They both have been very creative in their work.

I was always very creative as a child. I took ballet lessons, viola and sang in the chorus. I believe my first artistic experience might have been in a Saturday enrichment "experience" where we were given pieces of wood to work with. I created a pendant for a necklace. I recall it as a very powerful moment. I could create something that was appearing out of a piece of wood.

When did I say I'm going to become an artist- what was the moment? Let me first back up by saying that although I did some good work in art in school, I never had extra lessons or was in any advanced art class, nor did I even give it a moment's thought. I was too busy with orchestra and choir, etc. It wasn't until my children were 13 and 9 years old that I thought about doing anything creative. I was working two part-time jobs and was not very happy. I sought the counsel of a psychic who said she saw me painting pots, like flower pots. She said I needed a creative outlet. I heard "painting" and signed up for an adult painting class at a nearby museum. The instructor in the class I went to when I started painting is Steve Lampasona. I am still with him and now I am his assistant at his own art school.

Anyway, I had never held a paintbrush nor worked with oil paints. My first painting was a landscape based on a photo of our place in Vermont. I thought it came out great. My girlfriend said it looked like I had found my calling. I guess it was then or certainly as I continued to take classes, I became convinced that the paintings I did were fantastic and that kept me going to increase my skill level. I don't think it was a specific moment, but over time, I realized that this is what I was going to spend the rest of my life pursuing. And the good thing about painting was that no one in my family was an artist, so there were no expectations at all. That was very liberating. Both parents

and one sister are psychologists, another sister is an endocrinologist and one sister works in the computer department at University of Vermont.

MICHAEL: You know Ellen, there's still such a huge gulf that exists between living artists and the general public. People either remain suspicious about contemporary art or they feel they must be rich or cultured to "get it." Thoughts?

ELLEN: That's a really good question, Michael. I think people remain suspicious mostly because they maybe haven't seen enough art and don't trust their initial response to a work. We all know that even if a work of art is deemed wonderful, masterful, etc., it doesn't guarantee being universally loved. I think sometime people think that "getting it" equals having a positive response to the work which, of course, it does not. Also, reading or hearing "art speak" can be very intimidating to the general public. I think some of that is by design. People don't understand what they are reading or hearing and remain suspicious. As far as being rich and cultured, all you have to do is watch popular television for a nanosecond to understand that in our country being rich and cultured is often a sad state. I think basically the answer is to display as much art as possible so the public can become more comfortable viewing it and making up their own minds. Then they can discuss it and hopefully their suspicions will be diminished.

MICHAEL: Finally Ellen, what's the point of art? Why should people care about it? It's not a cure for cancer or end to homelessness or economic turmoil. What purpose does it serve?

ELLEN: I believe the purpose of art is to unite us in the universality of feelings and emotions that defy words. Art transcends us - it brings us to a higher place together. Art can show us as a culture where we are headed, as well as be a reflection of where we are. Art shows us what we are capable of creatively. Art unites us as well as divides us. Art brings tears to our eyes and touches us deeply inside and that experience brings us closer as a culture and as a civilization.

MICHAEL: Thanks Ellen. This has been great.

ELLEN: Thank YOU Michael. This has really been great.

Check out Ellen Hallie Schiff at <http://www.ellenhallieschiff.com/>