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Interview With Anne Neely



Anne Neely, *Conflagration*, 56 x 72", oil on linen, 2019



Anne Neely Biography

As a painter and printmaker **Anne Neely** spends her time between Boston, Massachusetts and a rural town called Jonesport, in Maine. Neely has won awards for painting and, most notably, was a finalist for the Prix de Rome and a twice finalist for the MASS Cultural Council Fellowship. She has been awarded residencies at the Edna Saint Vincent Millay Colony, Austerlitz, NY and abroad in Ireland. Her work has been shown in New York City, Boston, San Francisco and County Cork, Ireland in galleries and in museums such as the De Cordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln MA, and recently, in 2020, at the Maine Center for Contemporary Art, Rockland, ME.

For many years she taught Drawing and Painting at Milton Academy, Milton MA and was the director of their Nesto Gallery while pursuing her own career. Recently Neely made her concerns about water issues and climate change into an exhibit of paintings with accompanying stories in a 35minute audio from people all over the States. This solo exhibition opened in 2014 at the Museum of Science, Boston and was titled "Water Stories: A Conversation in Paint and Sound." Over 200,000 people visited these paintings that explored the beauty and foreboding related to central themes about water, mostly manmade and thru Climate Change.

Neely's work can be found in the collections of Arman Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA, The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY, The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Boston, MA, The National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, The Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art, Washington DC, The Whitney Museum, New York, NY., and other institutions. A book has been published on her Water Stories Exhibition at the Museum of Science, Boston.

In your painting "Conflagration" there appears to be a tension between rectilinear forms and amorphousness. Can you describe the thinking behind this painting and the process you embraced along the journey towards its realization?

The tension between rectilinear forms (I am assuming you mean the shape of the canvas) and the amorphousness in my recent painting "Conflagration" belongs to a family of opposites. In recent years as a painter, I have thrown out all reason, logic and sensibility when I begin a painting. It is no longer a pre-meditated idea about where to put the paint, but a response to the experience that has provoked my imagination in the first place. I don't follow directions when I cook either. Here is an excerpt from my journal: The fires erupting in California in the summer of 2018 riveted my imagination. It made me feel as though there was no air left, that it had been sucked out of that part of the world. (The same was true of the Australian fires the following fall).

I had never used red before in a pour but it seemed like the only color that could capture the tightness I had in my throat, the suffocation. The pour itself took about 10 to 12 hours before I could stop. It was such an intense experience, I went to bed for a day before I could look at what I had done. Somehow, I knew what to do next: the chair in the lower left corner as the watchful observer, the distant colored houses, the impossible heat expanding towards them.

You write of your strong bond with Jonesport, Maine and the people and landscape of the area. How does life there impact your work and your development as an artist and a person?

I am a creature of habit and familiarity. Having spent my childhood in the country, I bonded immediately with the landscape in Jonesport, Maine these last 27 years. Traditionally I spend my time between Boston and Jonesport with often the latter being an escape from the former. When here, I am a loner. My life is filled up with the gardens to tend to, writing, walking, reading and, of course my studio practice. There is a wonderful line in a letter between poet Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell, that applies to my lifestyle here. She says, (and I paraphrase), " I like birds, animals, flowers and maps and sometimes, I like people too."

Although concerned with local news, the inclusive presence of nature is so compelling that it satisfies my need for others. With the Pandemic, my husband and I are living here indefinitely which has made me feel a bit lopsided but that's a small price to pay for safety.

In titles of your paintings terms like "elegy" and "ode" are often utilized. How does language affect your thinking as an artist and what is your relationship to the pictorial image versus its title as you paint?

I like words very much and I use them to act as a conduit to further understand my paintings. Titles underscore intention and hopefully lead the viewer into the heart of the painting. When a painting is finished I try to find a balance between the language of the paint and the message of the title. I give each painting control over its own destiny by letting the paint be wordless until it can be matched with a similar verbal energy. In the end, finding a word/title for a painting becomes an equally exciting endeavor.

What artist was your greatest inspiration when you were a child?

When I looked at Nature, I saw the rhythms of color and form which naturally drew me to the "usual suspects", the European painters like Van Gogh, Cezanne, and Matisse. I think it was because I could understand what they were trying to do with paint intuitively, albeit innocently, and the way they perceived the world. As I got older I revered many artists, so many, that my appreciation was more about expanding a visual language.

Your most recent work appears to be a bit more minimalist and fluid when compared to work from five or six years ago like Backwater. Is this a conscious development or some more intuitive?

Over time my work evolves without my permission. I give myself the freedom to be fascinated by and respond to being "in the moment". It keeps the element of surprise alive in my work. Forward movement is key in life and in art. All acts of painting ultimately fall under a larger category of scratching away at the surface of life in an attempt to dig deep enough to find meaning. The vehicle that remains a constant in my work is beauty on the edge of foreboding. I believe that, where ever you see beauty in my paintings, there are layers coexisting and immersed in the dung of ugliness. Both are paired irrevocably to life.



Anne Neely working on a painting pour in the loading dock of the Boston Studio.

What does the term "environmental art" mean to you? Can a painter be an environmental artist?

Can artists label themselves "environmental" when so many different cultural, social, political issues are intertwined, at stake, and flung at their sensibilities? Yes. When there were actual movements in art, life seemed simpler. It was a time that didn't include a future which, now, seems so persistent in the present. I think we are just artists responding to our time in life. Henri Matisse, once said, "Exaggerate in the direction of truth." That assumes you know it. It is viscerally clear to me that, as our human time is limited on the planet, so our planet is changing, evolving in reaction to what we do to it. The planet is responding faster than we expected into a new version of itself which might not include us.

I think of my paintings as walking a delicate line of being about something and being just about painting. The environmental issues are a subjective platform from which I dive into my paintings. However once in my work, my mark making flows unconsciously, creating a subconscious joinery between one layer of paint with the next and, consequently, from one idea to another. The initial motivation for the painting has moved into an embedded place where it can be reconstituted into color and form.

Finally, I am a painter first and, among various different threads of thought, I am an environmentalist painter. Recent autobiographical portraits include *CUE FDT NYC*, from a recent Solo Exhibition, "Hiding in Plain Sight" in November of 2017



Anne Neely, *Burn Over* 47" x 60", oil on linen, 2020

How have your travels to places like Ireland and Japan impacted your approach to painting?

The years I spent doing residencies along Ireland's coast in remote places were wonderful. It removed some of the daily domestic obligations I had and forced me to only think about my work. It was an informative and extraordinarily productive time.

The recent trip to Japan was brief, only three weeks, and filled with taking in the culture and the sites. I soon discovered it was a very complicated culture and what I came away with was a deep underlying respect and appreciation of that culture and specifically the incredibly flawless sense of design that I saw everywhere and that I originally had adored from afar in books.

If you could own one painting which one would it be?

Well, that depends on what day and time you are talking about! At early dusk I might recall the moment I first saw Cimabue's "Santa Trinita Maesta in Florence.", or when I was 19 and saw Velasquez's *La Meninas*, in the Prado Museum in Madrid and then back to it again, several times in my adult life. It was the "go to" painting every time I went to Spain. Over the years, travelling for art's sake on my sabbaticals, I looked for Cezanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire* paintings (he painted over 60?). Henri Matisse's, "The Red Room" was a poster in my dorm room when I was 17. I was amazed how he made the red become both a tablecloth and the wallpaper.

If you had asked me in December 2017 about my favorite painting, I was on my way to the Louis Vuitton Foundation in Paris to see the paintings of Russian Collector Shchukin (brought from the Hermitage) which included "The Red Room" and other amazing Matisse paintings never seen before in the flesh. At the MFA, Boston's "Matisse In the Studio" exhibition earlier that year where I saw for the first time, "The Safrano Roses at the Window", (Truly a knock out painting and one where Matisse is in his highest moment of play with the space of the painting). Then there are the artists whose books lie on the floor of my studio like Giorgio Morandi's still lifes, Anselm Kiefer's daring huge landscape paintings, or Gerard Richter's use of a silk screen scraper for his paintings or recalling Howard Hodgkin's use of color or the electric power of Frank Auerbach's directional forces along with the power of Joan Mitchell whose wild turn of the brush matched those mammoth men surrounding her in NYC and at times went beyond.

Clearly, I stand on the shoulders of so many artists who have come before me, been my mentors and guided me with their paintings, as a reminder that it takes many visions to make one.



Anne Neely, *Remains of a Pour*

Your work appears to be centered around water. How has your work as an artist evolved over the years as climate change has become more and more prominent in both ecological and artistic discourse?

There is an increasing sense that time is running out and if I allow myself to think that way, a fear consumes me and makes it difficult to pick up a brush or even go into the studio. I have decided to hope for small things that matter. If I can bring awareness to others if only for the 5 seconds they cast their eyes on my painting that will be something. The process of how I approach my paintings remains the same.

After reading about climate change, water issues, the environment, I put aside all these thoughts, and all the ideas about the "ecological discourse" in order to follow a painting's meandering. This is the most insistent and important thing I feel a painter can do, and in doing so, it allows a painting to express itself with raw, visceral energy that digs out a meaningful experience. This expression allows for an articulation of the unknowable that invariably emerges in the wake of observed events. There is a kind of consciousness in this question that I personally don't experience because I don't think of my work of being defined or placed in only one category.

What are your thoughts about SFMOCA's deaccessioning one of their Mark Rothko paintings?

It is a fact that so many museums have a heavy base of white male artists in their permanent collections. SFMOCA recognized it was time to make room for women artists, artists of color, native American artists, and for young artists introducing new ideas and materials as a mirror to our time and our current history. A museum must be consciously fluid in its endeavor to represent the contemporary in Art. This is what a museum does. It is the intellectual, emotional, sociological and cultural pulse of where we are now and where we have been.

In 2019 the SFMOCA deaccessioned a Mark Rothko painting in order to set up a program to acquisition new artist's works. In this way SFMOCA began to address contemporary life, issues and represent Art that is a response to our times. Although Rothko is one of my favorite painters, I know that SFMOCA has on view another Rothko, No #14, in their permanent collection. Gary Garrels, then director of Painting and Sculpture, sanctioned this action for the overall good of SFMOCA Collection. It was a move to embrace the future. It was too bad that, in the flurry of political frenzy, he was misunderstood and subsequently resigned from his post as director of Painting and Sculpture.

Where would you place yourself as an artist, the 20th or 21st Century?

It's interesting that you ask me the question, where do I place myself in history. I have built my life as an artist embracing both centuries. My hope is that what I do as an artist will move forward the idea that art has, can, and will continue to speak about what matters. Currently, for me, what matters is Nature and the survival of our planet. Historically artists have made Art for Art's sake as well as responding to the political, sociological or human issues of the time. I would like to think both ways of working are friendly to one another and in fact a critical part of the human creative psyche, an integral part of an artist's DNA. Hopefully my work will survive and live as a conscious memory of the beauty and the privilege we have, to live on the planet. That said, I place myself in the future.



Anne Neely, *Air*, 60 x 52", oil on linen, 2019