

Pat Steir Paints a Painting

The visceral process of pouring, dripping, pushing, squirting, and shooting from the hip



Pat Steir pauses on the ladder after applying a first layer of silver paint over an underpainting of green and Payne's Gray.

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Pat Steir likes to think her paintings make themselves. In 1988, she began to experiment with pouring diaphanous layers of white paint onto canvas. With the first of these “Waterfall” paintings, she liberated herself almost overnight from decisions about imagery and let the record of the process become the image itself.

Ever since, Steir has embraced the incident and accident of working in this mode. “It’s chance within limitations. I decide the colors and make simple divisions to the canvas, and then basically the pouring of the paint paints the painting,” she says. Steir’s close relationships with John Cage and Sol LeWitt influenced her search for a system that was painterly and conceptual at the same time. “It changes as it pours down,” she says. “Gravity becomes my collaborator. The way the thing works is always in part a surprise.”

In her luminous 12th-floor studio overlooking Chelsea and the Hudson River, the 73-year-old artist is flanked by monumental 11-by-11-foot canvases tacked floor to ceiling at regular intervals down two facing walls. She points to one painting divided into three vertical bands: a dark, off-center passage with a narrower golden strip to the left and dense, mottled, silvery tones streaking down the right half.

Steir says she hated the first pouring of gold and silver paint on the right. She had mixed the colors in the bucket rather than pouring one color and letting it dry before pouring the next, which is her usual method. “Then I threw this dark indigo at it and then more of this brass and aluminum. It looked hideous,” she says. She went home despondent, thinking she had lost the painting. “I came back, and it had integrated the black spots in a really nice way. It painted itself. I love how it is now.”

Today, Steir is planning to start a mirror image of this painting. While Indian music played at low volume fills the studio, the diminutive artist wearing black work clothes, her shoulder-length auburn hair in a loose ponytail, stands before a towering “blank canvas,” as she calls it, although she has already poured a thin scrim of light green as an underpainting and, after that dried, an all-over wash of Payne’s Gray, her favorite color. “If you put it over light green it looks red,” she says. “Over other colors it looks blue. It’s an incredible color.”

Next, she poured indigo over the canvas and then had her longtime assistant, Shaun Acton, measure off six equal vertical bands with red-chalk snap lines. She has been making such basic divisions in her paintings for several years. “I don’t have to design anything,” says Steir. “It’s just mechanical.”

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Yet within such minimal parameters, meaning can insinuate itself. Referring to a painting divided into two halves, one red and one blue, which was included in her show last year at Cheim & Read, she says: “The way that the red and the blue vibrate when they touch each other—that to me explains the whole universe. It means everything to me.”

Work starts today with Steir and Acton stirring buckets of paint: silver, gold, and white pigments mixed with oil and thinned with turpentine to varying degrees of viscosity. Steir takes a loaded brush of the thinner silver and presses it on the wall against a messy field of previous test marks. She gets a shower of silver drops without much adherence. She repeats the test with the thicker silver, and this time much more of the paint sticks. “Oh, that’s nice,” she says to herself.

She snaps on black rubber gloves to protect her hands and stares down the canvas. Finally she makes a move. Climbing a ten-foot ladder positioned on the right edge of the canvas, she makes several passes with a brush, loaded with thick silver, across the top of the first division, creating a screen of drips falling in a diagonal. “Need thinner one,” she calls to Acton, who hands her a bucket that she proceeds to dump over the silver drips. As gravity takes over, the screen of silver morphs into something like a delicate linear drawing. “It’s the interaction with the black, the weave of the canvas, and how much oil there is or isn’t in the paint,” she says.

Steir stands back again, studying the canvas, before moving to the left side with the ladder. From her perch, she pushes gobs of gold pigment from the brush across the top of the canvas to the middle dividing line, then pours more gold straight from the bucket over it. From another bucket, she throws straight turpentine, which eats a couple of dark openings into the opacity of the gold. Then with the brush, midair on the ladder, she shoots from

the hip, flicking calligraphic arcs of golden spatter onto the canvas, over the dense, metallic tendrils.

Steir is done with her work on the piece until it dries. She sits down, watching its molting surface. “I find the process so enchanting, I can just calm down,” she says. She started showing canvases with figurative and symbolic elements beginning in the early 1970s, but she had always felt the burden and responsibility of “trying to say something.” In this painting and its companion, each with a dark band between the metallic pours, she says she is interested in creating the sense of a shadowy tunneling space inside. She recounts a recent experience: driving in Tuscany, she and her husband saw a sign for ancient Etruscan tunnels. “We followed the arrow into a tunnel, and it was terrifying,” she says. “We thought we’d never get to the end and were going to be trapped in there. Finally, it opened up into a meadow. It was a sacred tunnel. I’m still caught in that memory with this painting.” She adds, “I’m sure Richard Serra saw those tunnels.”

A few weeks later, Steir, who is in her studios in New York or in Vermont every day, returns to work on the now dry painting. Asked if she is pleased with it so far, she says, “I reserve judgment while I’m doing it, so I have a free rein to make mistakes. I go back to them and back to them.”

Today, she concentrates on the left half the painting, first pouring Payne’s Gray, thick as motor oil, over the gold. She then sprays water from a squirt bottle to thin the dark pigment in areas. From the floor, armed with bucket and brush, she flings more Payne’s Gray from the brush in quick slices, underhand and overhand, up at the canvas. A flock of dark seagulls seems to coalesce over the downpour. “At camp I was good at archery and shooting,” she says over her shoulder.

Without letting this darkened field dry, she climbs the ladder to pour silver over it, followed by water

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from the squirt bottle. Standing back as beads of silver roll down the surface, leaving transparent trails, she says, “I’m trying to make a curtain and a wall at the same time. I’m also looking for a contrast of the two sides with the empty space. To make that contrast, it needs a lot of layers.”

A few days later, the “curtain” on the left half of the canvas has set. It evokes a dazzling forest, with the sense of snowy trees and vines, heavy boughs, and dark openings leading the eye in. The metallic paint reflects the moody light coming through the studio windows as a storm rolls in over the Hudson. Today, Steir is working on the dark empty space on the right. With thunder crashing, she climbs the ladder and pours Payne’s Gray over the dark underpainting, followed by her repertoire of moves pouring turpentine and spraying water. The result is subtle, shifting degrees of black.

She returns on another day to the dark strip, pouring a mix of ultramarine blue and ivory black. Layering “gives it depth and heart,” she says. Once dry, what had read before as only black now shows streaks of reddish gray and green gray. Steir at last feels the painting is resolved. She compares her process to that of Japanese poet-calligraphers.

“They spent a lot of time physically and emotionally preparing to work, and then they got up and just did anything,” she says. “I plan, and then I get up, and I’m so surprised I do something else completely.”

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