

Interview Leo Gallery Shanghai and artist Doris Ernst March 2020

Question 1:

You used to live and work in many cities. We are curious about in what conditions that you have been to so many places. Could you please describe it?

I come from a small town in rural Germany near the Dutch border. My father worked in a factory and we did not have enough money to travel when I was young. So when I started to earn my own money I was very eager to see the world. That's also why I started in a special studying program that included law, politics and languages and also working abroad. During my training I did internships abroad in Marseille, Vancouver and Moscow in the Gorbachev era. Then at the beginning of the 1990th I moved to New York City where I worked mostly dealing with questions of international law but also restitution to mostly people from the large Jewish community who had been to send to concentration camps and people who had claims to property that was taken away from them by the Nazis in the eastern part of Germany. While living in this great wonderful "world city" New York I was at the same time directly confronted with German history. Which was no longer just a textbook in history lessons at school and my fathers's stories but real. On the other hand New York was like a revelation and the place where I discovered the art world.

After this I basically moved to another country every 3-5 years, working either in law or also in cultural exchange in cities like Amsterdam, Stockholm, Houston (Texas) plus some short term assignments in Jakarta and New Delhi.

Before coming to Shanghai my work in Berlin brought me a complete new inside which was the field of humanitarian assistance. Evaluating and organizing help projects after the earthquake in Haiti as well as attending conferences in Africa and visiting refugee camps in Ethiopia/Somalia, being the liaison for UNWRA and visiting aid projects in the Palestinian parts of Israel gave me a whole new understanding of priorities in life. It was also most impressive to meet so many engaged and idealistic people working for NGOs and the United Nations and other international agencies. Working the Syria desk for 2 year and meeting displaced people in Jordan and Lebanon, hearing their stories made and seeing how traumatizing war is made me re-evaluate my own look at the world.

Finally, I came to China which meant to me living in a country where I have almost no common means of communication with most people due to the fact that I failed to learn the language properly.

I started on this long journey because I was curious, and I wanted to learn but also in the hope that I would find the place where I would really like to settle. To date however I am still a traveler and seeker.

Question 2:

What experiences would be the stimulus and motivation of your artistic creation while you were roving around different cities?

What do I see as an artist when I travel?

The most obvious is my direct surrounding. That is nature, the light, architecture, colors and lines. It can be the shiny glass facades and regular shapes of skyscrapers but also the giant trees taking back the ruins in the jungle of Cambodia. It's the red of China and the bright colors of India versus the black and white of the "cool" and hipster world of mega cities.

Secondly, I look at the old, traditional art and handy craft which to me tells you a lot about the soul of a country and its people. Here you find shapes and patterns but also history, believe and meaning.

Modern and contemporary art is the third pillar. What is important to the people right now and how is it reflected in contemporary artworks. How does the contemporary art reflect upon the origin of the artist and maybe his heritage. We are all influenced by the world we live in but particularly by our own personal experiences that are strongly tied to the places where we live or visit.

Question 3:

What is the relationship between traveling and art in your opinion?

In order to experience something new I love to use all my senses. Today I can “travel” to almost every country in the world by just clicking with my fingertip on my computer or phone. But webcams, reading and looking at photos is not the same as the real immersion into a new world.

To me personally however it is often not the big highlights and most popular sight of countries and cities that I find most attractive when I travel. Well o.k., almost to my surprise touching the marble of Taj Mahal felt actually more stimulating than I thought (even being surrounded by hundreds of people) but the real stimulation comes from experiencing the everyday normal life in a place you visit. Driving with my wonderful talkative Indian taxi driver, listening to his Sigh prayer music and seeing a new world pass by (and smelling it through the open windows in the hot air of India) brought up a ton of thoughts. Travelling stirs up emotions and that is what inspires me to new art works.

Travelling also means leaving your routine and comfort zone behind. It has a feeling of embarking to something new, let yourself be surprised and feeling free and loose, leaving behind the burdens and responsibilities that limit our thoughts. Feeling free from all the “must do” things in order to also free the mind. Once you let go of the “normality” that’s when creativity has more room.

Question 4:

What is the origin of the colors and shapes in your paintings? Where does it come from? Is it the abstraction in your mind or the concrete shadows in the cities?

Thinking of the colors and shapes in my paintings I must admit that they are very intuitive.

They just somehow happen. But looking at them after I finish a work actually makes me understand where they come from - it is like looking into my soul.

I love black. But black for me does not necessarily have a negative, dark and sinister connotation. Growing up in the 1980th in a quite catholic, conservative and suburban surrounding in rural Germany made me rebel against the norms by listening to punk and new wave music and wearing black clothes. Black is so clear and pure like there are no real shades of it and if you mix it basically stays black.

I also love the straight lines and forms of Bauhaus. It gives me a feeling of clarity, efficiency, it is very organised, rational and there is a logic to it. I love if you find this quality in the architecture of a city or the map of Manhattan for example or in clothing or for example in Swedish design. Sometimes find that buildings, sculptures or clothes with lots of ornaments, unnecessary/fuzzy features make me nervous and distracting.

The repetitiveness of shapes in my paintings has a meditative aspect not only when I apply the paint but also while looking at it you can find a structure or sometimes a scratched grid. There is an order

in the chaos. The lines are applied by spatula-so they are always straight. The colors are applied one after the other, so they do not mix.

Question 5:

There are plenty of accidental and unintentional details in your works, but there is an order in the chaos overall. Could you give some opinions on order and chaos?

When I first started with creating my own artworks, I tried different brushes but somehow could not relate to them. Making strokes and actually “painting” to me had this element of pressure that you needed a clear image of what you were painting otherwise it would be like scribble scribble-you get rid of your feelings/aggression but without a plan. For me brushes did not work for abstract paintings. Soon I switched to using knives to apply paint and then I turned to spatulas from the hardware store. What I like about them is the randomness of the result when you apply the paint with them. But you don’t lose the form, direction – no complete chaos. To me that was exactly what I wanted to express.

You think you have a fixed plan (your life, next year, for tomorrow..), you have it all figured out and then something comes up and nothing is like you planned. That is what happens when you put the spatula into the paint. You have an idea as to what it will look like when you scratch it over the canvas or paper but you can never be completely sure.

In a lot of my works you can see a certain regularity and repetitiveness. Which is like our life. There are days, hours, seasons. But then again, they are all different and they are never exactly like we expected or planned. We cannot foresee what will happen. When I put my spatula in the paint and create stripes it is this “intentional randomness” that I love. The repetition is calming the thoughts and gives me the sometimes much needed peace of mind and a sense of order and regularity.

But it is the randomness – no stripe looks like the other, they are all different – that is what makes the stripes interesting. It’s the unpredictability, the element of surprise that make out the essence of the painting and creates the necessary tension. How boring would it be if we could foresee everything and all would always go according to plan. At the same time, we love and need a certain order. In complete chaos it is hard to find the way.

Giving the painting an order or putting a sort of grid on top of the painting that is what gives us hold or security, but at the same time we need differences and individuality to thrive and have room to evolve and to be innovative.

Question 6:

How do artistic creation and your concern for social, environmental and political issues complement each other?

If we look at our own private life – at work, in the relationship to friends and family - even if we feel privileged and have wonderful people around us and we live comfortably the overall state of the world we live in also affects us.

In an age of climate change, diminishing resources, political turmoil in many regions of the world and huge differences in living conditions it is hard to feel happy just for yourself and forget about the rest – in particular if you have children and think about their future.

It is hard to make sense of it all and very easy nowadays to get lost in depressing thoughts.

That is one of the reasons why I called my series of works “trying to make sense”. The world seems to be more chaotic every day and I am looking for an order/ a bigger picture that gives me because living an egocentric live, just looking at self-interest like many people do is no solution for me.

Living together respectfully, tolerant and caring for each other’s concerns that is what some might see in my paintings where every stripe and stroke is different but they coexist on the canvas and together build a greater picture that even might have a sort of harmony and therefore symbolizes hope.

Question 7:

How do you transform realistic views into visual language?

That is a very difficult question because I don’t. I always find it interesting if people look at my paintings and tell me what they see in them. Because I almost never imagine real/realistic things when I create my works. I somehow express my feelings through the painting but never an image.

But this is the beauty of abstract art that everybody can see something different in it. It does not have to be the same thing the artist wanted to express. To me an abstract painting fulfills its purpose if it stimulates any kind of feeling or inspires an image or just a thought in the viewers mind. This also underlines the idea that we are not all the same but yet again individuals with our own wonderful imagination.

Question 8:

What would you describe the tendency of your artistic language? Emotional or rational?

It is both because that is exactly the fight in mind.

My education or better to say my educational choices are foremost based on rationality. I loved mathematics when I was in school, I chose to learn Latin with its wonderful structure and logic whereas I kind of hated French with all these terrible exceptions that did not make sense. I studied law and to a certain extend I believe in rules and regulations.

You can find all of this in my work, the order, regularity, repetition, straight lines, clarity of colors.

This side of me is in constant struggle with my emotions. I am a very sensitive person, I need feelings in my everyday live, I need smiles or even sometimes anger can be o.k., I need and feel a lot of empathy and love. But feeling cannot only make you happy but also hurt a lot.

Looking at my paintings with the ideas of order and chaos in mind you could also describe rationality as the orderly part and emotions as the chaos. If you completely let your emotions rule than you could end up in disaster. The ups and downs can be quite high but also very low.

If you also listen to reason, be rational and don’t let yourself be touched too much by all the misery than you have a sort of grid that gives you hold, boundaries, principles, values and hope.

Question 9:

Would you please talk about painting “Happy days” and “Constant Struggle”.

The paintings are a bit like the contrast I just described. Different sides of me came out.

In "Happy days" you can see an underlying grid of stripes in black, grey, silver and white and my husband who studied mathematics really liked it that way. It reminded him of the façade of a skyscraper by Mies van der Rohe. I looked at it for 2 weeks and was not totally satisfied with it. It was too exact, too orderly. So one day when I came home and really felt good I thought that color was the solution. So I applied many different colors on top of the shades of black, grey and silver. It took quite some time because each time I used a different color I needed to clean all my material. But it was an exuberating feeling. It was like when the sun comes out in spring. Everything is blooming and you leave the grey of winter behind. That is why I called it "Happy days".

The Painting "Constant struggle" however comes from a period, where I had some conflicts in my life, at work and at home. I was not so very happy. You can see and feel all the scratches on the surface of the painting. The underlying order and nice structure of regular stripes in various colors is "overshadowed" and scratched. I felt hurt, disappointed and frustrated.

But I decided to use the yellow for the "shadows", the "disturbance". Yellow is the color of brightness and sunshine. So there is light at the end of the tunnel and I did not feel completely lost (like in the painting "frustration") I was disappointed with other people but not with life itself. We all get scratches over time. But that is how our personality is formed- by all these different kinds of experiences.

Question 10:

You named your works as nature, emotion and behavior and so on. There are intricacies and struggles in the picture, but it still reveals the sun, hope, and positive feeling. What journey did you go through to make the final work?

As I described before, my art is very personal. It helps me to deal with a lot of issues; it was like finding a valve for my emotions and thoughts. When I dared to show my works to other people outside my family, I discovered that my way of searching for answers through art also speaks to others. Nature is something that gives me a lot of energy too. Finding likeminded people beyond the superficiality of today's society was a consolation.

Question 11:

Please tell us about the events and art works that impact on or impressed you most.

When we lived in Houston my children were little. Living in suburbia in Texas was kind of hard in a lot of ways. People spend a lot of time alone in their car or in malls.-However nature/outdoors in the US was great and Houston has the Menil collection (!) which does not only have great contemporary art but also a Cy Twombly pavilion and the Rothko Chapel. I had liked Mark Rothko for some time as one of the pioneers of abstract art. I am fascinated by the depth of the colors. Entering the Rothko Chapel I was first disappointed because suddenly the wonderful bright colors were gone. But after understanding the feelings that Rothko put into these works I discovered what a unique place the chapel is being surrounded by these large black/gray fields of paint (and pain...). I love Rothko's innovativeness regarding the materials he used, the long process of trying/layering to reach the final breath-taking results.

Another artist who influenced me is Gerhard Richter. Not only seeing his painting in exhibitions but in particular by seeing him work in the famous documentary film. Watching him work with his squeegee/scraper impressed me and actually made me buy my first spatulas in a hard ware store to try out scratching. At that time, I had no knowledge about squeegees for silk screen printing and other fancy, expensive art material.

After I had already been working in my own little studio for 2 year learning a lot about different paints and materials by just trying them out for myself my husband gave me this wonderful catalogue of Soulage for my birthday. And the paintings just spoke to my heart. All this wonderful black and the marks that look a bit like the ones I had discovered using my spatulas. This gave me the confidence I need to continue on my path and stay true to myself.

When I came to China one of the exhibitions that impressed me most was the Yu Youhan solo show at the PSA. I was so happy to see the repetitiveness of his stripes that he applied with his brush. This again was a boost for my confidence -not being alone.

It took me a long time to call myself an artist. I started to do all my art just for myself and not for others and in particular I never thought of my art as something that others would value. Particularly coming from Germany I am so conditioned to believe in proper education and qualification. So how could anyone see any value in what I do as I never studied at an art academy or had any special expertise other than what I had discovered just for myself over the years of self-study and all my thinking.

The final step on this path to becoming an artist was meeting all these wonderful-artists in Shanghai in person. Hearing their stories- the stories of their lives, of what motivates them, how they define themselves, how they have self-doubts as well, how they struggle. I felt so privileged to find friends who shared their way of thinking with me in a personal way not the way art is sometimes described in a highly intellectual paper of art critics. Especially Shen Fan has helped me a lot. He told me that patience is what I needed and that being on the right way, following a path is already a lot. Walking patiently instead of running, rushing, aiming at achievement. Taking your own time brings us closer to the goal. Being able to wait and letting things settle in against all the speed of today's time was great advice.

Question 12:

You chose to use common items, such as scrapers for wall painting, picked stones, homemade cardboard, etc. as the creative tool. Does this reflect a concept of your life, what kind of concept? What are you pursuing in art?

I have always been very observant of my surroundings. Not only did I do a lot of crafty things with my children with whatever we found in the forest. I loved all the tools in my father's basement.

When I went out to buy my first art supplies, they were kind of expensive in Germany so I went to a hardware store too to see what I could find there. That is how I discovered the spatulas/scrapers that are normally used by handymen to apply plaster to walls.

As a self-taught artist I never followed any instructions and liked not being told how to do things.

I am very curious and I like experimenting with whatever comes into my hands. Especially when I have leftover paint or material, I produce a lot of little pieces on paper.

There is this longing for perfectionism in our society which stresses everybody out. I am not perfect; my art is not supposed to be perfect and so is my material.

I also collect a lot of things that have been thrown away. They have a story to tell like the broken tiles from demolished houses that I use for small prints. Old houses have a history along with the people who lived there. Weathered things like rusty wire or metal objects, wood, twisted traffic signs with lots of dents and scratches. These objects were kicked, left unattended - they lost their function and value. Something weathered, old, rusty, broken and imperfect can still be beautiful. To me all things that show marks of time and life and history are valuable.

Question 13:

As a professional woman and a three children's mother, you have already been very busy and hard. Why do you want to do art and what are the driving forces that make you create art? What does creation bring to you?

Growing up we must make a lot of decisions. We can follow the path that society and/or family is expecting of us.

I followed a career (with some extent of ambition). I became a wife and (full time working) mother of 3 children, I was also a daughter and took care of my parents needs when they got older. For a long time in my life I tried to fill out all these roles as best as I could.

At some point I discovered that I was basically just functioning, doing what was expected of me, living with the responsibility and constant concerns that all these roles bring with them. Making compromises every day to achieve some sort of harmony and keep it all going.

However, I had lost myself in the process. What was it I had wanted to achieve at the beginning?

Looking frustrated at my teenagers during puberty in a world that was going crazier all the time, a world full of people being more interested in buying a bigger car and expensive clothes than in climate change or real happiness.

Being confronted with the illness and death of my parents I was at a point where I had to figure out who I had become and who I wanted to be.

Contemporary art had always been my passive passion. But I longed to be actively passionate about something – something for myself, a way to express my feelings, weaknesses and a way to look for answers, go deeper and not just stay on the surface.

Putting this idea into action was a way to deal with existential questions (hence the name of the series "trying to make sense") but art also put me in touch with a lot of like-minded people. Art is a dialogue and artists dare to show their soul to others in all kinds of ways.

Question 14:

~~Does your professional environment affect your creative status and art form? Is the current professional status more able to stimulate creative desire?~~

Question 15:

What would you want to bring to others through art?

Artists allow other people to look into their soul. It is one way to find like-minded people – to connect. To allow others to see beauty through a work of art, to provoke a smile or critical thoughts or sorrow to stimulate any kind of feeling in others is a kind of dialogue. Art is like a language. It can create an understanding and show the human side in us all.

Question 16:

Where were you during the virus outbreak in China, what did you experience, and what role did art play in your life during this period?

During the virus outbreak I was in Shanghai. I experienced all the uncertainty, the lock down restrictions, the sadness over the victims, saw the fear in the faces of the people, the constant overflow in the news and social media coverage – all the up and down we all had to go through.

It is an experience that none of us will forget. It goes deep into the bone to the very heart of our existence. We were so used to have our own free choices and suddenly everything was put into question. We always reflect upon our priorities in life and suddenly we see ourselves just longing to get our sometimes boring, normal life back that we had put into question so often before. Normality has a value.

Crisis situations can bring out the best and worst in people. I am happy to see so much solidarity. I hope that soon we can leave our isolation, encounter other people again and see smiles not hidden behind masks.

My art helped me to structure my thoughts in this period where we all felt tense and lost our inner balance. Things that were important before suddenly had no meaning anymore. I made a painting before Chinese New Year that had many bright colored stripes. When I came home from my office driving through the deserted streets of Shanghai, I put a lot of dark shades on top of the stripes. Then by scratching off the black some of the brightness of the colors came back and that is where we are now. Waiting for the first spring colors of nature. Hoping that the situation will get better not only here in Shanghai but in all affected areas.

Question 17:

What do you think the relationship between art and life ?

Over the years somehow my life felt so heavy with the responsibilities for my family, in my job and with all the stuff I had – a whole household of a 5 person family. I kept on thinking of the lightness of life/of being when I was younger – like the title of the book by Milan Kundera. Art gave me back this lightness without being superficial.

When I go into my studio I manage (most of the time) to leave a lot behind like my “to-do-list”, conflicts, concerns. The spinning of all these thoughts stops. I manage to be in a state where there is nothing I MUST do but lots of things I CAN do. Then colors and pattern and creative ideas take over. They sometimes start spinning as well – but it feels more like being on a light cloud, floating, like an opportunity instead of being dragged down and stressed.

In meditation you try to relax and empty your brain completely. When I am working on my art I explore myself. I am not driven by others, by expectations, by circumstances and obligations. I am not reacting, I am creating.