

IN THE STUDIO: PAMELA WILSON-RYCKMAN

May 3, 2011, 11:16 am

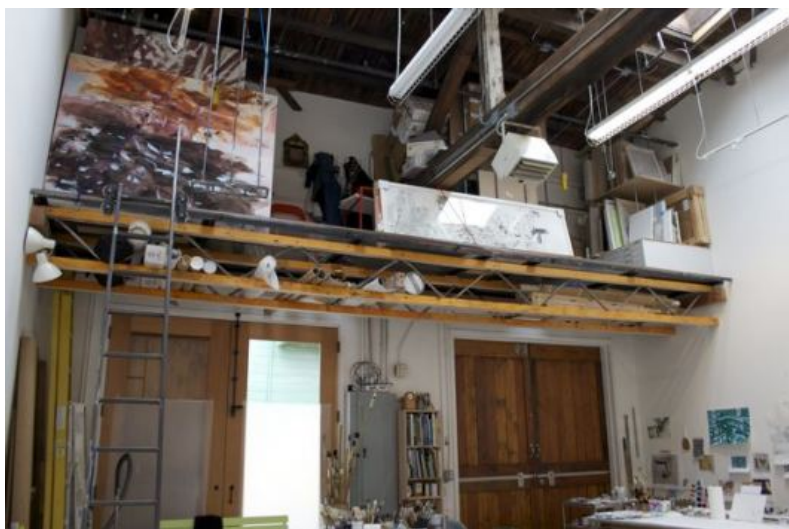
Filed under: [Art World](#), [In the Studio, Q&A, San Francisco](#) | Tags: [Luc Tuymans](#), [Marlene Dumas](#), [Nadiah Fellah](#), [Pamela Wilson-Ryckman](#), [Paule Anglim Gallery](#), [San Francisco](#), [UC Berkeley](#)

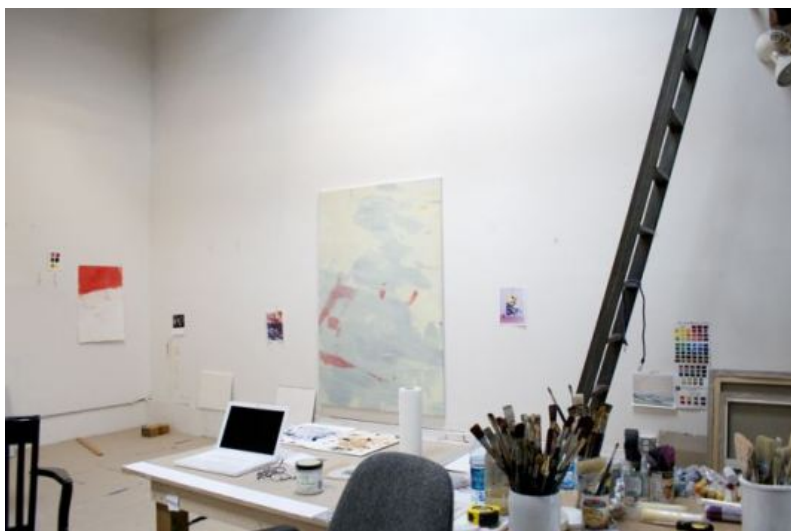


Pamela Wilson-Ryckman, *Looter*, 2010 | Watercolor on paper, 22.5 x 30 inches. Courtesy the artist.

I recently caught up with San Francisco-based artist **Pamela Wilson-Ryckman** in her studio—one of many housed in converted horse stables that still bear the high ceilings and large wooden barn doors of their original structure.

A native New Yorker, Wilson-Ryckman discussed her process, the inspiration for her watercolor paintings, and [her recent solo show at Paule Anglim Gallery](#) in San Francisco. Her paintings are particularly engaging for their technical mastery and temporality—two components we can expect to see from the artist in future works. Images and our conversation after the jump. —*Nadiah Fellah, SF contributor*





Many of your paintings are images that depict a specific moment, sometimes they're recognizable locations, and sometimes they're more abstract and difficult to place. Do you paint from memory or from photographs?

I work from images that I clip from newspapers or magazines, and sometimes images that I photograph myself. I choose things that catch my eye initially, and for multiple reasons. Sometimes it's the subject matter, sometimes the quality of the light, sometimes the way the shapes and the forms are moving and collapsing in the pictures. I guess many of them deal with really difficult and complex subjects. I clip and I collect, and I look at them for awhile, and sometimes I use them quickly, and sometimes they sit around here for awhile before I use them. But I'm always working from an image in my paintings.

I don't like the most obvious images, though. Sometimes it's the picture on page 16 that's really small and you don't really look at first, but then when you do look at it, you realize it's an odd and interesting image. I'm not interested in the really dramatic statement, or the didactic statement. I think I'm more interested in the idea that we see these images, and that they come and go, filter through our house each day, or in any way we experience the media, and how they register in our minds.



Pamela Wilson-Ryckman, *Counting Votes*, 2010 | Watercolor on paper, 21.5 x 30 inches. Courtesy the artist.

You must have given much thought to the investigation of images, memory, and experience. What conclusions have you arrived at concerning the connection between them, and particularly in relation to the sometimes more difficult or complex images that you choose to depict?

When I started looking at these images I was collecting, I thought that I was interested in them for really abstract reasons, and how they suggested things in shape and form about abstract painting. But I came to realize over time—I've been [painting representationally] for about 8 or 9 years now—that I was, and I am, very involved in the content as well. But I think in the larger sense it's really about how do we receive this imagery, what do we think about it? How does it shape how we visualize the world around us, what do we remember and why?

In painting them, it's like representing them another way, and also slowing them down. I guess I want to paint them in a way that's more open-ended, that one can enter into them your own way and reflect on them. And you'll notice that in many of my paintings there are a lot of white spaces—I work with a resist—played against the color and the space. The information is there, but it's not entirely illustrated for you. It's suggestive so you can move into the paintings in a more visual and emotional and experiential way.

I'm interested in this large world, and how contemporary painting can engage the world, but also engage with the history of painting, with abstraction, with images, and how can you put all of those things together in a way that's interested – and sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't.



Pamela Wilson-Ryckman, *The Exchequer*, 2010 | Watercolor on paper, 21 x 30 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Do you ever use your own photographs for your paintings?

I do. When I started to work representationally again, which was in 1999, it started with working from my own photographs. I began thinking: What do I look at? What do I see? I was just photographing things around me, and at the time it felt kind of silly, but I think it's really the thing that led me to where I am now.

So your history as a painter is based in abstraction?

It's always swung back and forth. Initially when I was in school I was painting abstractly. I went to school as an undergrad here at [Berkeley](#), even though I'm originally from New York. I came back out [to California] in 1999. I also went through a long period where I was working as a scenic artist. I painted sets for the [Santa Fe Opera](#) for a number of years, and I started painting landscape out there.

Even though it felt very disconnected from my life in New York and how I thought of myself as an artist, it was a real foundation for the work I'm doing now, because all of my recent watercolor work basically deals with landscape, including the urban landscape. I think that the urban landscape is interesting to address with watercolor because so much of the history of watercolor is about the pastoral, and much more quiet and meditative subject matter. It interests me to use what seems like such a fragile and delicate medium with such a difficult, sometimes violent and complex subject matter.



Pamela Wilson-Ryckman, *Downtown*, 2010 | Watercolor on paper, 21 x 30.25 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Are there artists that have inspired you in the past, that inspire you now?

I think Luc Tuymans and Marlene Dumas, and Peter Doig. Those artists that were working figuratively, that I really began to learn about in the 90s, had a big impact on me, and I think probably gave me more confidence about going in that direction with my work.

But then there's another other set of artists that have also inspired me. Joan Mitchell has always been a really important painter for me, and when I was very young, Richard Diebenkorn. I grew up in New York, so abstract expressionism was a big thing, particularly when I was first going to

school, so I think that really shapes my thinking as much as these more recent artists.

Now that you say Diebenkorn, some of the lighting and colors and shapes in your landscapes remind me of his Berkeley or Ocean Park series.

When I was in school here in the late 70s I saw a lot of those, but also when I was growing up in Manhattan in the 60s he was showing all of that Ocean Park stuff at Knoedler, and I would go to those shows with my father.



As you go forward, do you think you'll continue to use images drawn from the media?

Yes, and I've been doing that right now. I can't decide if I want to do anything with the Japan [earthquake and tsunami] or not. When I look at the images, it's just so overwhelming. With the other subjects maybe there was a kind of distance from them, so I felt like I could find a way in. I've been playing with this large painting on the wall, and it's not from an image, it's from my memory of what I've seen. I was thinking of all those images that we all saw; that video clip of the wave coming in. I'll play with it, and maybe I'll keep it, maybe I'll throw it away.

In general, I think I'm drawn to images that seem kind of mundane, but are actually more complex, and the more you look, the more you can pick out multiple figures. That's the kind of image that becomes really engaging, that things are kind of buried in, and as you start to pull it apart, you realize there's a lot more information there.

Nadiah Fellah is a curatorial assistant at the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art \(SFMOMA\)](#).