



Josephine Halvorson



Josephine Halvorson holds a BFA from The Cooper Union and an MFA from Columbia University. Of her many accomplishments, she was the recipient of a Fulbright Fellowship to Vienna (2003), a Louis Comfort Tiffany Prize (2009), a NYFA Fellowship in Painting (2010), and, most recently, a Fellowship through the Académie de France à Rome at Rome's Villa Medici (2015). Her work has been shown in group and solo shows throughout the United States and Europe. She is represented by Sikkema Jenkins & Co. in New York and Peter Freeman Inc. in Paris, and she is a Senior Critic in the Painting and Printmaking department at Yale University.

FOREWARD

Josephine Halvorson is a painter, though the particularities of such a narrow label seem to undermine the complexity of her practice. In a purely structural sense, her works are oil paintings, but if we consider their mood, composition, and scale, not to mention the dedicated process by which she produces them, we see that her pieces have a lot in common with photography, documentary film, and even poetic ode or oral history.

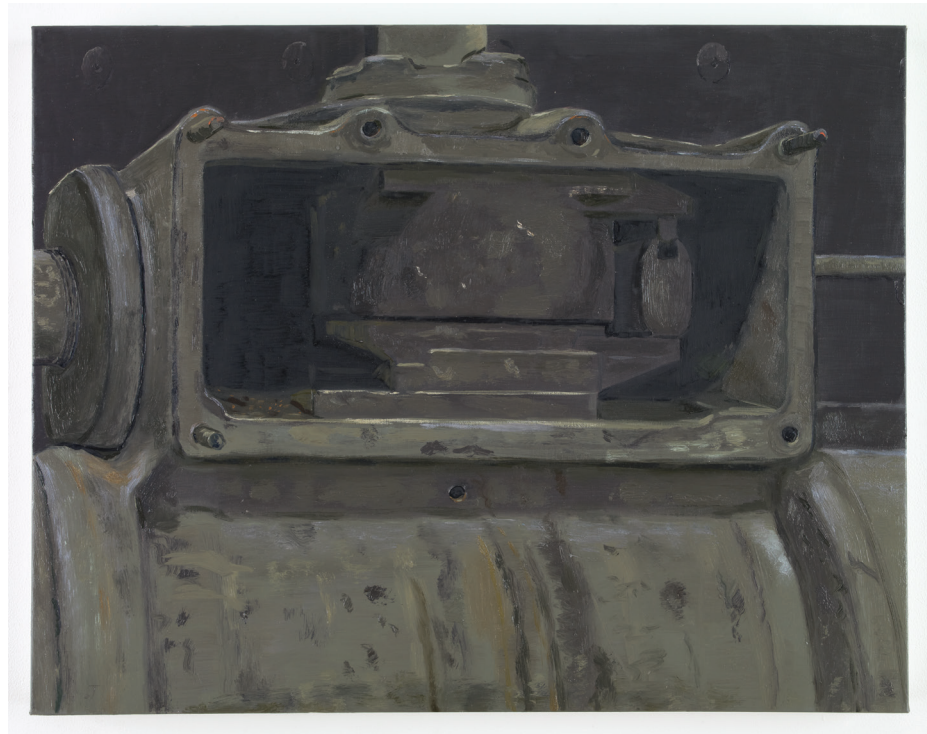
Halvorson presents herself in her paintings, while at the same time, presents herself to her paintings. Her process of painting on-site and completing a canvas in a single day can be described as an encounter. Her aim is not to capture an exact, objective likeness of a given subject, but to distill its character, one which comes alive only through genuine, direct contact. Like any relationship, this takes effort. Following in the tradition of the Impressionists who painted en plein-air, Halvorson is interested in the intimacy she experiences with each unique subject and the environment from which it is derived. She has been known to spend long hours in extreme heat or to haul her materials to a formerly industrious, presently disheveled California mine. More than just priming her canvas and mixing her palette, Halvorson's process entails consulting weather forecasts, packing a lunch, and applying sunscreen. All of this detailed planning and forethought is expediently channeled into a single day's work, leaving behind only a residual rectangle of canvas and oil.

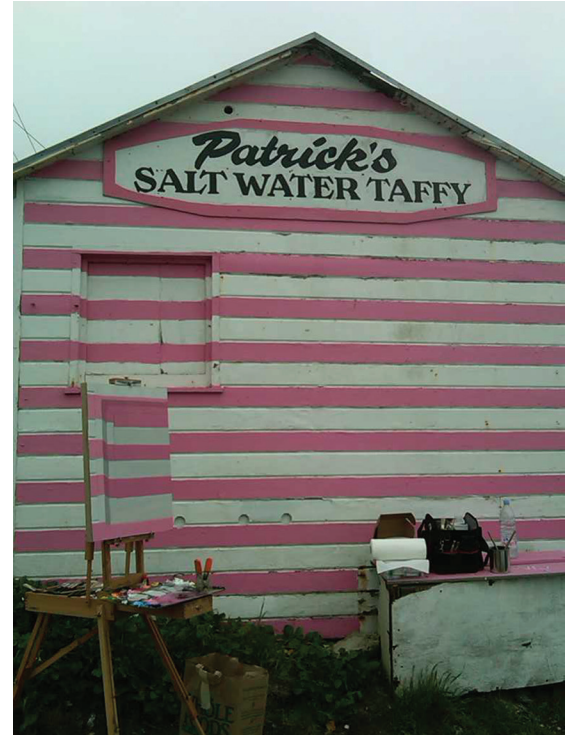
Her paintings are testaments to existence in all its fragility; each brushstroke affixes her subjects' place in the world. Yet, in immortalizing these objects on canvas, we are reminded of the double-meaning of trace: an echo of presence decries its own absence. As much as Halvorson's paintings bring life to the neglected, forgotten, overlooked, and ignored in everyday life, their inception is, in itself, the catalyst for their eventual demise. They become ghostly memories of a moment in time and space that will never be again.

In a review of her 2014 New York exhibition *Facings* at Sikkema Jenkins & Co., Hyperallergic wrote, "We see the painting and we see the paint, its dabs and dashes. By collapsing image and tactility, she underscores that we do not live in a purely visual world." A work of art is not just an object we look at; it is hours on your feet, it is disappointment and pleasant surprise. Most of all, it is a relationship to be upheld, something Halvorson never allows us to forget.

- Nora Landes, '16









A conversation between Josephine Halvorson and students from the Visual Arts program at Sarah Lawrence College, Heimbold Visual Arts Center, April 7, 2016

Participants

Josephine Halvorson	JH
Sophia Collins	SC
Ben Miller	BM
Fanny Ketter	FK
Summer Koo	SK
Nora Landes	NL
Agatha Monasterios-Ramirez	AM-R
Rachel Stone	RS
Kanishka Raja, moderator	KR

All participants are identified by their initials after their first participation in the conversation.

Josephine Halvorson: Maybe people can introduce themselves? What year are you and what are your interests?

Sophia Collins: I'm Sophia. I'm a junior. I love to paint and I really enjoyed hearing how particularly you describe your process because sometimes 'painting' as a word can sound so generic, like 'I paint this' but you really spoke to its intricacy.

JH: It is funny how painting is both a noun and verb. What is that called? A gerund? What else is a noun and a verb? Run. You can go for a run or you can run. 'Photo', I guess; no you don't say 'I photo'. Photograph. Yeah, photograph.

Rachel Stone: Pilot.

JH: Pilot. Mark. It's interesting how gerunds are both active and passive at the same time.

SC: You talked of how it was a meditation because meditation is sort of passive and quieting, like making yourself indifferent to the world sort of, but you don't seem to lean towards that. It's more like highlighting what's not indifferent, what's particular to the object.

JH: I used to say that my paintings reflected a collaboration between myself and an object and my materials, but then I felt that the word 'collaboration' was too genteel. (laughs) What happens when making a painting is better characterized as a negotiation or confrontation.

Kanishka Raja: Encounter?

JH: Encounter, yes, but then after the encounter, that's when it sometimes gets hairy. (laughs)

Nora Landes: That was kind of what I was saying when I was writing your introduction, is that you think of your work as a relationship: a relationship with the process, with the object that you're making, in relationship with the subject that you are painting and all these various relationships come together in a cohesive way, but that's not always what happens.

JH: Right.

NL: And that's something you need to come to terms with.

KR: If I may interrupt for one second before we continue: we didn't actually go around and finish the introductions, so if you would please go around and finish introducing yourselves...

Fanny Ketter: My name is Fanny I was born in Sweden but I'm half American. I take a drawing course with these guys, with Kanishka, and otherwise I study history and all the great humanities you can take here but afterwards I want to do art. Just reading some books first. And I like travel, so I relate to that.

JH: As an undergraduate here, are you thinking about your own history, being both Swedish and American?

FK: Yeah, I just try to read as I travel and learn and reflect on it later, but really integrate education with traveling, which is not always like, optimal for productivity, but it just pays off in the end. Since I want to be an artist, I'm just building my foundation too.

NL: I'm Nora. I'm a senior and I feel like I spent my four years at Sarah Lawrence doing everything about art that you can kind of do. I feel like I study art, I philosophize about art, I make art, write about art and I don't dictate where I fit into all of that. I just kind of let art push me wherever that goes.

JH: That's great. And you're able to do that at Sarah Lawrence?

NL: That's what is so great about (Sarah Lawrence). Because we don't have to pick a major; instead, we have this opposite requirement where they don't let you accrue enough credits in any one subject to major, so it really allows you to have such a breath of knowledge.

JH: That's wonderful.

Summer Koo: My name is Summer. I'm a sophomore and I'm in a Beginning Painting course

this semester. I never touched visual arts before this year, so it's been a pretty exciting ride and I really took to it so...

KR: You'll never be the same again!

SK: I know. That's the hope and the fear.

JH: That's great. And what else have you been studying?

SK: Mainly psychology and literature, but I think that is going to change now. (laughs)

KR: I remember that moment in my college career so precisely; maybe it was one semester before yours or so because I went...

JH: This was at Williams?

KR: No, I went to Hampshire.

JH: Oh Hampshire, that's right.

KR: It was not so different a model from here, where you can design your whole project. I went in thinking about writing and filmmaking, possibly. Narrative. The thing is, as soon as I entered the painting studios, it was over.

NL: I was the same way! I started off with all this painting and photography and stuff and then when I came to college, it was something I wanted to maintain, but it was always something that I did outside of school. It was never something that I thought I could study. And I came here and my first semester took a painting course and I changed kind of, you know, I was able to think about art and that art-making can be in academic pursuit. It doesn't have to just be something you do for fun on the side; it can be just as important as all the academic stuff that we do here.

FK (to KR): Yeah, but I mean, you were drawing before you took that course obviously, you had been doing art all your life...

KR: Never done it, never touched it, never met an artist. Never been to a museum.

F: Oh, so you started in College?

SK: That's really so...comforting.

(laughs — yeahs)

NL: Exposure is the first step.

FK (to JH): I wanted to ask: what did you study when you were at Cooper Union? How was it, did you try many different things?

JH: Yeah, as I showed you during my lecture, graphic design, history, and photography were some of the subjects I studied. Though there's a rigorous foundations program in the first year and you don't have to choose a major. The interdisciplinary structure of Cooper Union allowed me to take classes in many subjects. Cooper was the only art school I applied to, actually. I wasn't sure about going to art school. In fact, I had this experience where I had done a summer program at RISD between my sophomore and junior years of high school. Have you guys ever heard of that? There was someone in my class in the summer program who said "You know, to be an artist you need to do three things: smoke cigarettes, be addicted to caffeine, and you have to think really deep thoughts." And I remember thinking, "Oh no! I don't do any of those things, I guess I'm never going to be an artist." So, I said to myself, "I'm not applying to art school" because there will be people like him there and art is so much deeper than that. Anyway, I show up to Cooper and the first day, he was there! (Everyone laughs).

FK: Did your relationship develop?

JH: No, not really. I don't know what happened to him, but he also wasn't in my section. For freshman year we were put into sections where we got really close, taking the same classes with the same fifteen people, so I didn't get to know him that well. I had really just gone to Cooper because it was the only art school I applied to and it was free. Even when I was a student I questioned whether I wanted to commit to any singular discipline, in school or in life. After my sophomore year I was really rethinking things and saying to myself, "this has been a mistake, I want to be more humanities directed," but in some sense it was through art that I was, and I am, able to access other ideas and practices. Sometimes art becomes a pretext for life experiences, a chance to look at many of aspects of the world. But I didn't know that at the time; I feared it was a profession, a narrow and unyielding path that you took through life. At that time I didn't realize that you could make it as broad as you want it to be.

KR: That art can encompass — that whatever you do in your art can encompass anything and everything.

JH: Exactly. If you want it to, you can learn languages and travel and meet people, do research and...

KR: ...make work about microbiology if that's what interesting you.

NL: Isn't that what being an artist is? Creating your craft and curating your life?

JH: It is, but there are a lot of pressures that can be confusing and seem to make you forget that sometimes. Or at least, that's how it's been for me and friends of mine at times. You know, when you are wondering, "how am I ever going to have a studio or have anyone come over or ever show my work?"

Agatha Monterios-Ramirez: Especially in the New York environment, there's definitely that sense of competition even. Which can be healthy, but can also be negative in a very real sense.

FK: Do you think that because you have a gallery in New York, you can present work and you can go out and explore and then come back with your work and have a centered presentation of it and that is a bit of a safety and it gives you, I would imagine, a focus on your work. But, do you think...have you been in places where...I mean something like your concept of art is under stress? Not oppression, but a little bit more emotional? Because you (undertake) such processes that are just completely enwrapped in the object. But have you felt anything different from that? Like, when you are not in a safe position?

JH: Yes. One of the things that was interesting about living in Italy recently was understanding the concept of the studio space in a new way. I've had an anxious relationship to the white cube as a studio, in the way that it often anticipates the white cube of a gallery space or museum or a collector's home or an institution. That the studio in New York is complicit in the same kind of capitalist system. And in New York it's hard to push against that, to feel free. But when I was in Italy, I was surprised that for them, the white cube means something different...if you rent a studio for example, you are essentially buying your own freedom from external systems of the state. I think for Italians there's still a strong sense of civic responsibility so, in some sense, renting your space becomes an escape.

So there are these inversions; in my home culture, the white cube studio in Brooklyn functions as a workshop to produce things for sale within a similar white cube—so someday they can be displayed in a similar white cube. Strangely enough, that same architectural structure—the white cube—in another cultural context can represent something completely different.

I think maybe what you're asking too, is "Have there been moments of discomfort or fear?" I haven't had to struggle in ways that I can only imagine I will or other people have. But it's all relative to everyone's life, right? It's like asking "have you been in pain?" But these emotions, these challenges are so culturally specific and when you translate them into other cultures, then something tends to get lost. The translation and comparison is what's important. This

is why I emphasize travel for instance, as being very important, so you can see your own experiences through the eyes of other people and other cultures, to put things in relation to one another, and to examine that relativity.

AM-R: My name is Agatha. I'm kind of in sophomore-junior limbo. I am mostly studying art right now. I went to a lot of art schools as a kid, but I only did writing, but I was friends with everyone in the art department all the time. So I never took any classes, but I'd been drawing in sketchbooks my whole life. And I came here for the writing program and ended up taking one writing class the entire time here! I don't know if it's going to happen. But I really identified with a lot of the things you were saying, about the importance your schooling seemed to have on the way your art was developing. I feel like I'm definitely in a very transitional phase right now. I'm trying to find consistency and concepts in the work that I'm making and I don't see it, but I'm starting to realize at this point that I don't know if I need it yet, which is nice.

JH: That's great.

KR: Rachel, do you want to introduce yourself?

Rachel Stone: I'm Rachel. I'm a sophomore and a transfer student so this is actually my first semester here. I'm in the Experiments in Drawing class with Kanishka and I've been drawing since high school. This is actually the first time I've ever considered the fact that it was possible to be an artist. Before, I thought it was like a myth or something... (until) a teacher in high school said, "No, you're going to do it and you're going to do it amazingly".

(laughter)

JH: That's awesome.

Ben Miller: I'm Ben. I kind of just jumped on this because it was a cool opportunity. I loved your talk. It was great. I'm a sophomore. I paint. I've been painting for a very long time and I'm not really actually sure what else to say...

KR: That's good for now. I'm Ben. I paint. That's all we need.

(laughter)

NL: I'm really interested in this, it is something I thought of a lot when I was reading about you before hearing your talk but also you kept reaffirming this in your talk. I'm really interested in what you think of in terms of what is your context? What is your scale? You paint on site but what is your site? Is your site your canvas? Is your site the huge field you're in? Is the site you

and the object? And thinking about that in terms of what you said about regionalism and how you know where your region is. You come from New England, but you've lived in New York and now you've lived internationally. Does this region keep expanding? What is your definition of context?

JH: That is such a great question. I love the way you phrased that question: "what is the site?" Is it the canvas or is it where it's made? The answer is, "Yes." (laughs) It's all of the above. I think it's constantly changing and being redefined. One of the most important sites for me is perhaps wherever the work is encountered by someone else. The people who I love, admire, am curious about, anyone who passes through my head while I'm making the work, even if they're no longer living. Sometimes I wonder what Chardin would think of my painting, for instance. Or my mom. Or the person who witnessed the painting being made. So there's a range of people who, having encountered the painting, develop a "site" of interconnectedness among them, initiated by the artwork itself.

You know, the site or sites of an artwork continue to change over time. As I was saying about my *Night Window* paintings, it 's probably a simple idea, but an exciting one to me, that that window I painted was in my studio, the very studio that belonged to Ingres almost two hundred years before, which is within the Villa Medici, a palace that had been built in the Renaissance as an aristocratic home, later taken over by Napoleon. All of these histories can get compressed into a painting of a singular window. That same window, once it appears in my paintings, can then travel to different places. Its portability means someone could hold it and take it in a car or on a plane. So the site in some sense gets embodied in the artwork and can then be transferred to another place and time. And it wasn't just that it was from this incredibly privatized and private environment where it was made and what it represents, but that it can then be made public. Those shifting boundaries between private and public also factor into what defines a site. But also the temporal aspect inherent to the project, that each painting was made over the course of one night and that that night in some sense continues indefinitely through the paintings. It's still going on as we speak! That's really exciting to me. That it can stretch in these different ways, to different places.

SK: During your talk you emphasized confidence a lot. You spoke about when you went to France, that when you stepped outside of New York was when you gained more confidence in terms of painting and in the slides, the difference between your paintings pre-confidence and post-confidence was noticeable (laughter). As a fledgling painter, I'm very interested in gaining confidence in the ways I express things. So I was wondering if you could talk about your experience in terms of confidence and how that affected your type of expression and finding yourself?

JH: Yeah I do feel like confidence is extremely important in making art of all kinds, especially

in painting. It takes a lot to think you even have something to add to its illustrious history. The medium is unique in that when you have a thought and then you make a mark on a surface, you're essentially saying to yourself, "I want this to be green here," and you do it and voilà, it's green there! But then you quickly notice you can't hide behind anything. Your thought has been externalized, it's there, it looks back at you and says, "This is what you're capable of." I'm not an athlete by any stretch of the imagination, but painting shares a similar, constant testing of the limits of what you are able to do. Painting provides that instant feedback of what you're capable of at that particular moment in time. I think that it can be scary and I think that anyone who makes a painting is incredibly brave to be able to confront one's own limits, and be surprised too.

I have a feeling that every artist who's ever made art, no matter how experienced they are, they still wonder whether they can pull it off. There's a documentary about Alice Neel where she says (I'm paraphrasing), "Every time I go to make a painting, I just want to see if I can do it." And you think, "Well come on, of course she can, it's Alice Neel!" But it doesn't feel that way when you're doing it. There's the cliché of the blank canvas, but in my experience it's not so much the blankness as much as the anticipation of your own moves on it that then get realized, followed immediately by the direct feedback loop, where you learn what you're able to do and what you aren't. And then, once you fail or once you succeed, you can calibrate your next moves. It's a constant process of incrementally building and losing confidence.

I also think our own awareness of art history factors in. We all know about the greats and to look them in the face think, "How can I ever make something that measures up?" That was actually a challenge for me in Italy. I wondered what there was to add to Rome when it was so dense and full: of city planning, architecture, sculpture, painting, light. Sometimes it felt that the city didn't need me. I remember seeing a Lucanian painting from 2700 years ago and thinking, "I'll never make a painting that good." And that was 2700 years ago! Being abroad messed with an American sense of progress. And then there are certain kind of backgrounds or upbringings that make confidence difficult to attain. So I think the most important thing as an artist, is to reassure yourself that you do have something to give, and that it's not what but how. That's something I love about being an artist and being a person. As Rachel said, that teacher in high school, who said that you have something in you—that can go a long, long way. It's really important to have that support system around you. I still get hurt when someone doesn't like my work. I remember I logged onto Facebook a couple of years ago and someone was dismissive of my work and I was bummed out for a couple days. I was so hurt by their comments that I wrote them a message.

KR: You did?!

JH: Yeah. It wasn't someone I knew.

KR: I would think you would just block them.

JH: It wasn't a friend of mine. It was made worse that friends of mine had 'liked' the comments. So I wrote this person and said, "I think what you said is unjust." And they replied that their complaints were directed towards my career, not my work, that as an artist I have received more attention than many un- or under-recognized women of equal or greater merit.

FK: But it's also like among all these women artists you are the one, like women artist issues. You need to select the one that is really good. They can't just be artists.

AM-R: If she's so upset about other women artists not getting attention, she should get them attention instead of complaining about it.

JH: I agree. I think that it's a lifelong process of feeling like you have something to give and inevitably throughout your life there are high moments and some low ones too. I try to pay attention to the rhythms of creativity, of expression, of input and output. This is something that is different for every person. I tend to go through about six months of absorbing and trying new things, of failing, of learning, and then six months of making sense of it all, of allowing the paintings to draw from everything I've been taking in. And there are days during that input phase when I forget and am beating my head against a wall wondering, "Why isn't anything working out?" And then all of a sudden, after many repeated attempts, gradually, it is as if everything I make is incredible. As if I couldn't make a bad painting if I tried, you know? It's an incredible period of creativity and I forget all the bad times, in much the same way as in the bad times, I forget all the good times. But I think the more you go through it, the more you notice your own rhythm. For some people it's one week in, one week out, or whatever it is. Maybe it's a decade at a time. You start to notice your own rhythms.

NL: I think it goes back to what we were talking about before, about context and scale.

JH: Right.

NL: I mean obviously everyone goes through up periods and down periods. I felt like 6 months ago, I was so into the consumption of ideas and images and thoughts and not into producing. But then I realized, in what I thought was consuming, I was doing like all these little tests that ended up becoming this larger and larger body of work. Where do we draw that line between on and off times? It's different for everyone and it's arbitrary.

JH: It is. It's really sensibility-determined. Sometimes, you have to turn the switch on or off. And this is why I think that being an art student is often harder than being an artist, because you are constantly taking in so much...like I said in my talk, it wasn't until I left graduate school—I

think I was 26—before I made anything that felt like art. Before then I was working through ideas and approaches, getting a sense of my own aptitudes, my own tendencies, things I liked, things that rubbed me the wrong way. After a decade of learning how to learn, I felt that I had sifted through a lot. I had a better sense of who I was in the world and was ready to give something to it. I still feel that way today. I still think, "I'm so grateful everyday that I'm not in art school!"

(everyone laughs)

RS: Don't say that while we all are here!

JH: Some people who appear to be artists in art school are often those who don't seem to have continued to make art over the long run and vice versa. I guess the main thing is to just be patient with yourself and know that you have something to give. I studied with Janine Antoni, who is an incredible teacher, and she suggested that no feeling was too small to pay attention to. Even the smallest hunch is important: an instinct, intuition, any sense of life—there's nothing too small. It's all important. It all adds up. Just like you were saying Nora, you're doing this research and it doesn't feel like art but it contributes to who you are as a person, and then it makes you who you are, and therefore will eventually come through your work.

KR: I think it becomes especially critical in your 20's when you are a sponge, when you have to pay attention to all of these things; so you can get to a place where you can give equal weight to all of the things that come out of that constant experience of taking all this in.

JH: Sometimes I've really wanted to change my work but the only way to really do that is to change who I am as a person. And I think that those things just take time.

SC: You talked about confronting the canvas and all that hesitation. How do you feel after the painting session is over and you confront the world after spending so much time dedicated to such a small portion of the world (that) you've been so consumed by? How do you transition back?

JH: In some sense a painting of mine feels like a microcosm of the whole world anyway, so after I finish one, I feel great. I mean, at the end of every painting, no matter how lackluster it is, or if I wiped it out at the end of the day—which I often do—it still feels fulfilling, even if I'm disappointed. In some sense, it's a practice to guarantee success after every day regardless of the painting that comes out of it. Because I feel alive, that I tried, and that I was there and I learned something.

SC: It didn't have to come through a product. Like the process itself was revealing.

JH: Exactly. That's why I advocate for the use of the term "practice" because of the emphasis on experience. People often use the expression, "the end product," which is such an odd term for art. It's often said because we expect, especially in paintings, that they will yield something in the end, which is physical and discrete and one of a kind, but it doesn't always happen. So emphasizing the process more than what's yielded from it gives me the permission, the conditions, to connect with the world and get to know it, slowly, experientially. When my practice is underway, I can spend time with something, see it and think, "I get this. I get you."

SC: Do you see that as accomplishing art and life as (existing) all together? It's no longer "I'm going to go to work, do practical stuff." You are completely immersed.

JH: I do feel immersed. I feel capable and...aware. Like I'm really experiencing life to the fullest. The other thing I've talked about in my work and I really didn't touch on this too much in my talk today, is the way I use nature and time. Painting over the course of a day has been useful to me. Daylight determines the end of the material making. I have to yield to nature. There's no amount of will that I have that can change certain conditions. I give it my best shot during these hours of daylight and hey, if it works out, great. If it doesn't, I'll try again tomorrow. The stakes are low because the day is always memorable and full, but the pressure is high because I only have so much time. Low stakes plus high pressure equals a practice where I don't get discouraged.

KR: It's like the pressure becomes generative...

JH: Exactly.

KR: ...instead of oppressive.

JH: Or paralyzing.

KR: I was going to ask a practical question: so, you've spent the day painting and let's say at the end of the day, maybe you're not so happy with the results or what you ended up with and you wipe it down. Do you go back to that (painting) the next day?

JH: I'll reuse the canvas if I've wiped it well enough, but usually I just do it again on a re-stretched canvas another day. Usually when it doesn't work out it's because I have a great idea in mind and I'll plan to execute it—a subject, a relationship between materials, etc—but when I go to paint, something else I haven't planned happens anyway. Anoka Faruqee, an amazing artist and teacher, also a colleague of Kanishka's and mine, always says, "There are ideas and then there are painting ideas, and they're not the same." What you think is a really good painting idea, if you say as an idea-idea, it sounds totally lame.

SC: It sounds really simple.

JH: And then also, if you have a really good idea and you try to apply it to a painting, it doesn't necessarily work. One time I made a painting of a section of a mural. The mural was on bricks and my painting of it just didn't work. I later realized that I should paint the bricks, forgetting that there is paint on them. I had been painting the paint on the bricks, rather than the bricks themselves. The next day I told myself, "This painting is all about the bricks," and it really was. This was a painting idea! It turned out to be a great painting. I figured it out but it took me that day. Other times, I'll just keep returning to the same thing again and again, until I finally get it. There was this one gravestone I painted one time and then I realized maybe two years later, that the gravestone that was right behind me was the one I really wanted to paint. I feel like my practice is one of hunches. Like, if I have a hunch, if I have a sense that I should do something, that's the thing I want to act on. Sometimes the hunch yields nothing and other times it can be revelatory. Regardless I train myself to be attentive to hunches.

NL: Do you think that fits into the contrariness you brought up here in your talk? You were saying how when you were in art school, you were trying to have all these deep thoughts and thinking about semiotics and language, but now you're just working on hunches and things that you could never anticipate. Do you think it's important that you have those two sides? Does that become reflected in your work?

JH: It is. I think I'm very analytical. I need to create a practice or conditions that allow for hunches and spontaneity, so I don't get tangled up in my own analysis. One of the things as a teacher that I always emphasize with students is to know at what point in your work to become analytical, when it's useful and when it isn't. There are people who do all the analysis before they even get materially involved, maybe through research. There are people who, in the midst of their work, have friends come over and ask, "What do you think? What should I do next?" And then there are people, I find myself in this last category, for whom the analysis really has to happen after they've made something. Otherwise, I would probably never make it to begin with. If I'm too analytical too quickly, I'll never pay attention to a hunch, ever. It's always the hunches that draw on my own experience and knowledge, intellect and sensibility that really tend to yield what I would call art, rather than something that might be...more didactic. That's very important. It's not so much contrarian as it is...

NL: Complementary or...dialectical?

JH: Complementary. Yes, that's interesting.

SK: This is another practical question. With all your travels and then referencing those who have a studio and are stressed out about people coming to see their work makes me feel like

that is not what you do. So how did you get your work shown, as you were, sort of, buzzing all over the world?

JH: Well, friendship is really important. I think that being part of a community of artists is always great and it's reassuring to have your work in dialog with them. To be honest, and this maybe pertains to your question earlier, of how dependent am I on a certain amount of connectedness to a community, I do really depend on that. Whether through teaching or friends or through a gallery or an institution, there are structural aspects of my life that I need, which enable me to be more curious, more free. Sometimes, I wonder whether I'm irresponsible for not having two feet planted on the ground. I can't be there for all the things I want to be there for.

FK: I'm very interested in this article about shame and the comparison to mining and labor and as you said, the relationship between leisure and work. I relate very much to what you said about being a laborer: that you are fulfilling a role and you are trying to unearth something. I want to ask how your career as an observational painter has changed your way of looking at things and if you see this unearthing as the actual process of being close to an object.

JH: The metaphorical aspects of mining, you're saying?

FK: Well, you fill a role by seeing objects. For me, you fill that role. You see objects or you make me see an object, that otherwise I wouldn't see. You make it eternal. Like this door that you made does not look like that anymore, maybe it doesn't exist anymore. It becomes vibrant and it becomes ultimate and otherwise we would not unearth it, we would walk by it. Do you see yourself as an embodiment of your paintings, like you are an unearther?

JH: That's a nice observation. I do find meaning in defining my role through other disciplines: philosopher, interpreter, interlocutor, archeologist. I don't want to deny my own subjectivity, but as I said in the talk, I really want my paintings to feel "found", as a parallel to the way I encountered the original thing. I feel like a painting of mine is successful and I can usually tell right away if it feels like the painting is found rather than made. If I'm surprised and think to myself, "Wow I made that?" Of course I made it—I was there the whole time and of course, anyone who knows my work would know that it's mine—but it's an odd feeling. It is both me and not me at the same time. That's something I really am seeking: a porosity, a blending, between myself and the world. Sometimes I wish I were more like Matisse who knew his job was to make the world more beautiful. I suppose my job is to emphasize connectedness. But I don't want to make people feel inadequate in their sensitivity to the world around them, though I can imagine going in that kind of moralistic direction.

FK: Look at the door!

JH: Look at the door! But don't walk through it!

NL: It sounds like what you are saying is a lot about the difference between recording and storytelling. You're just keeping records and people can interpret these records however they feel but a storyteller, a narrator puts a particular perspective on the same information. You seem to be doing the former, I think.

JH: I'm really into that. Regarding the making and reception of the work, I want other people to be storytellers as much as I am. I kind of wish that everyone made paintings. Then we would be able to see what they're interested in and who they are as people. Like how Winston Churchill made paintings.

NL: George Bush makes paintings!

KR: Do you see yourself primarily as a documentarian then?

JH: Maybe as a subjective documentarian, a subjective anthropologist? Here I am again looking for resonances outside the field of art. My friend Erin is an anthropologist. She writes about hysteria and mediumship, among other things. We share similar interests but approach them through different means.

FK: You must learn a lot from each other.

JH: Yes we do; we share a mediumistic way of connecting with the world. Where is the self and where is the other? But then, you think what's the point of a subjective anthropologist? What is their role in the world? Is it to emphasize subjectivity? Is it to emphasize otherness, curiosity? Is it to provide a model of selfhood, of engagement with the world around us? Providing a model, is that enough? This is why I say I envy Matisse because of his own sense of conviction that what he was doing was good and needed. Should we have more of a certain kind of social prerogative as artists? Is it enough to wander, to think? I don't know. Honestly, I don't know.

FK: But I think in that way it's so interesting because you can see an artist and an anthropologist are so similar. Because you have all this knowledge inside you and you make a lecture for us, but for them it is a science that they put out and their observations become, not ultimate because there are so many different anthropological perspectives (and) conclusions. I wanted to ask: you become a container of all these experiences and you are not a force for making the world look at more things, but you become a container for all these experiences and information. I was also very interested in and wanted to ask you about the dead animal that you spent so much time painting. Because I mean, there must have been an absurdity about it, about looking at this thing. . .

JH: Yeah, I also think it's interesting that you bring up this idea of storage or containing. I'll address that first. As a woman, there's a biological capacity that I think has shaped my sensibility. Maybe I offload my storage onto my paintings—that there's relief in them containing experience, which frees me up.

The dead animal is a separate issue. Because that was around the time that I was trying to figure out where life existed in these things. When I was doing the What Looks Back paintings, I was thinking about these more anthropomorphic objects that I would find, the way they would look back at me, and I was trying to find out where liveliness resides. I felt that it would surely exist in an animal or, at the very least, in something animate. Clearly that's where life is, right? But I was still wondering... because I was looking at these rusted machines and they felt alive! It just wasn't making any rational sense. My friend Bára helped me get access to the slaughterhouse. I eat meat but I'd never killed an animal consciously and I just figured that this was the time. So, I saw the execution of several cows and I saw them butcher them all. It was shocking but fascinating. I never knew, I had never seen the inside of a slaughterhouse; I had blood splattered all over me. The next day I came back after the carcasses had been hung up and I made this painting of one of them. Honestly, it didn't feel any different to me. And that was the strange part; it wasn't what I expected. I thought surely there would be a difference.

So if life isn't in the living or the animate necessarily, where is it? We all have felt it in art probably. You go into a museum and something can “speak” to you, right? Or it might possess a quality that is undeniably alive. Not every time, but sometimes. And that's the thing that I find perplexing... and uncanny.

RS: You mentioned at the beginning of your lecture that painting is a kind of language and that when you were talking about the faces that you saw in objects and then painted, did you ever feel that while painting that the objects were trying to say something to you?

JH: Oh, definitely, that's what I'm talking about. When something speaks to me or calls out or makes eye contact; I don't know what they were saying, necessarily, but I felt something. I wrote this in the Shame article. I was so devastated to have missed out on painting it, that I called my parents and cried. My dad answered the phone and, without hesitation, said that maybe there was a reason I shouldn't paint the machine; that perhaps it had blood on its hands. And I remember thinking, “Ok, this is obviously why I am the way I am.” He personified the machine, suggesting that it would contain within it the memory that someone died at that very site.

KR: Or that the history of the object mattered for your interaction with it, that's a very important kind of recognition.

JH: Exactly, that the history was alive and present and...

NL: And you were complicit in that history.

JH: ...that I was complicit in that history too. Like there's a reason why I wasn't part of the history of this machine, and that I should be glad that I didn't have to be complicit in that, you know?

NL: In that vein, I'm curious how you felt about painting gravestones and painting in graveyards, being complicit in that history? Were you ever conscious of (that)? I know in one of the articles I read—it may have been the Shame article—you talk about reading about the people whose graves you were encountering. Do you ever feel that that history impacts your process or impacts how you intend to create a painting?

JH: Yeah, and I also feel that many things don't want me making a painting of them. Now that I've shared enough with you all and you've been kind enough to be interested and attentive to my way of thinking, you might understand how transgressive and aggressive it felt for me to stand on someone's grave and make a painting of their headstone. I don't know if I would want that if I were buried. And this is what I meant when I said that I used to think that my own engagement with something that was overlooked was somehow doing it a favor by making it come alive through my own presence, but now having made almost a full 180, I feel lucky that I'm given the chance to paint anything at all. In the case of the painting of the pink striped wall, it probably was my attention that made the owner repaint his wall.

KR: He didn't want any more artists coming to paint his crappy wall!

NL: The realization that it's run down; that was the aspect of it that attracted you to it, but to him that wasn't a positive, it was actually a detriment in his eyes.

JH: Yeah, to him it probably seemed like a criticism of his negligence. Those ethical concerns are interesting to me.

SK: Along those lines, I was wondering if you believe there is any responsibility that comes with being an artist and producing art that's meant to be seen, even if that responsibility is paradoxical, like “Your only responsibility is to have no responsibility”? Do you think there's some sort of obligation or something that comes with producing work?

JH: Well, right now I'm teaching this class on attention and it's a new course that I've developed out of my own interests. One of the things about attention that's really interesting is that to pay attention, you have to not pay attention to other things. To do the thing, you have to not do the thing that you need to do to do the thing, you know?

I feel like painting is like that too. To make a painting—and make all the decisions within it—you are also choosing not to make so many other decisions, not to make any other painting. To have that responsibility to not be responsible is, as you say, also a responsibility, and one of those paradoxes that come with making work. A lot of it comes down to time and how you spend your time or how you conceive of a resource like time, attention, or meaning. It's interesting how everyone defines that differently for themselves.

Sometimes I think art is like a highway off of which are infinite exit ramps. You can take any exit where you'll find all sorts of interesting ideas and people. Some people get off an exit and remain there their whole lives, like me. I'm hooked on looking at something and making a painting. This still feels endless to me. Other people do that, then they're like "Well, that's cool, but I'm going to get back on the road," and then they take another exit and they find something else there.

Or, maybe, you get back on the road to visit your friends and try to understand what they're up to. Then you go back to where you were. There are so many possibilities. It's where you find something that really energizes you that matters. It's just the thing that you feel you could spend a lot of time with and get into in a deep way. That's the thing worth paying attention to, giving yourself permission to explore, knowing that at any point you can get back on the highway and go somewhere else. It does mean doing that at the exclusion of doing all kinds of other things, but when you find what it is that you really want to do, you forget about all the other things that are happening because you are so curious about what it is you are doing.

KR: As long as you remember that the highway is a circle; a big loop. There's a whole bunch of exits, but...

JH: I've gotten off at exits where I've just wandered...

KR: I think that's a very important part of the longer-term trajectory of being an artist. Sometimes you have to be in places that end up being in a very immediate sense, unproductive. You don't necessarily get anything tangible out of it, but in a larger sense you actually do. You have to spend time getting kind of lost even if it's for nothing else (but) finding out what you not interested in, which is just as important.

JH: I remember in graduate school, I was dealing with questions of the market and about the relationship of painting to commodity, questioning rarefied zones of art school, New York City, and the global art world. It was really hard for me to justify reifying certain histories and traditions that I felt marginalized people. I was deeply concerned about what it meant to be complicit. So basically I just stopped painting and was reading more than I ever had. I was glad I asked those questions. I remember running into a teacher of mine and saying, "Paintings

are always just indexed back to paintings. Paintings are always commodities," and he said, "Josephine, those are really interesting issues, but they're not your issues. You have your own issues." All of a sudden I felt like I'd been in therapy for someone else's problems. I'm glad I'd gone down that road, so I could explore those ideas that I continue to encounter now, but it did prevent me from concentrating on my own issues, of which there are many. Probably back to when I was growing up on Cape Cod, definitions of regionalism. Just like in life, there are times when you go into therapy because you have to work things out. There are certain things that I'm still working on as an artist and probably will be working on forever. I wish there were art therapists. That's what I really want. I want to go to therapy and be like, "let's sort out this plain air thing now."

KR: I have a version of that fantasy where artists, like tennis players, should always have coaches with them. Tennis players always have those dudes sitting right there, giving them feedback: nodding, telling them what they should do, what they shouldn't have done. Not to say anything while you're working, but as soon as the painting is done, they'd say, "Listen, next time..."

(laughter)

NL: I feel like that's something we get as art students from our peers and professors; constantly getting feedback. And then once you're out of the institution, you either have to do that on your own or find someone else to do that (with).

SC: You have to build a system around you that fosters that kind of thought or interaction.

NL: Right and in my experience, the solution is to fill your world with people who are there to constantly remind you that you're on the right track; that you've gotten off on the right exit, but maybe you want to go back on the highway, see what else is out there...

JH: Exactly, and I think that art historically or culturally, it's important to identify those people who are your friends, your colleagues within your set of interests and ambitions. I remember learning about Sylvia Plimack Mangold a few years after graduate school and wondering why no one had told me about her work. Because if they had, I think I would have had greater confidence in what I was interested in. It's just little things like that, even knowing that there's someone out there who is pursuing something along the same lines makes you feel bolstered, that you're on the right track.

FK: Have you ever been surprised by the public opinion of your work? How does it feel to have some of your work be more acclaimed than other works and how does it line up with how you feel about your work or expectations of the work?

JH: Criticism is really important. Artists need to have people who take their work seriously and get back to them on it. For instance, I had been in love with someone for a long time, at which point I made a body of work that all took place at his house. They were all paintings of him or for him, like love poems. That's not how I intellectualized the work, of course, but clearly that's what was happening on some level, which I only realized retrospectively. There was a review that came out in the New Yorker I think, I don't know who wrote it, but it said that the paintings had the "heft of English portraiture." And it was eerie because my partner is English and he has some heft, physically as well as emotionally, intellectually, and I felt the writing in that review absolutely nailed him.

NL: So do you think they were successful paintings in that way?

JH: Yes, but they were succeeding at something that wasn't my conscious ambition, rather something deeper and more personal. Maybe that's too intimate an anecdote, but when someone who doesn't know you, who doesn't know where your work comes from, can intuit it all from the paintings, that there are feelings that come through...it was so moving. But it's also scary, the realization that it's going to reveal what you're thinking and feeling whether or not you want it to, whether you want it to be public or not. That was a time when I felt the power of my own work in the way that it was received, and the way that my own feelings could be transmitted and realized.

KR: That is a terrific anecdote. I'm so glad you shared that with us.

JH: The thing is, if I were to ever make a painting of him, it would never work.

FK: It would maybe tell less about him as well. What you said about this animal painting that you thought you were going to have a vegetarian experience, but you were like you see "more in this door." Like the thing about your paintings is that you are looking at things where you don't expect to find something human, but you find so much emotion in these doors and in these meat paintings. They are things we haven't seen or things we haven't looked at in that way and still they are so...human.

JH: All of these feelings are real. You know when you feel something, even if you can't prove it. That's what I want to do through painting, to somehow materialize something otherwise immaterial, like an emotion, a hunch. But if I were to try from the outset, I probably never could. If were to try to make a painting about how it would feel to kill an animal, I honestly wouldn't know how to begin.

KR: It would be too direct a connection perhaps, between intention and...process?

JH: Exactly, and that's what this class, Forms Of Attention, is addressing. I should say that it's almost through attention rather than intention that things rise to the surface. Attention actually has its roots in waiting. If you wait, things will come which is in some sense in direct opposition to intention.

KR: Allow it to come to you.

JH: Allow it to come to you.

KR: Well, Josephine thank you so very much for that much generosity and for sharing your thoughts and ideas. I think it was absolutely terrific and I'm glad you were able to do it, I'm glad you were all here.

JH: And thank you all, for your thoughtfulness and for preparing these questions and Nora again, for your introduction, it was really beautifully written.



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Image courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

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Image courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

The woodshed, Canaan, NY, February 2, 2014
Image courtesy of the artist.

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Image courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

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