

# An interview with Bonnie Neumann

## by Jamie Brunson, April 2012

*JAMIE BRUNSON: In your two most recent series, Edges and Crosscurrents, you're using a motif of layered and overlapping or repeated lines that produce random forms and patterns. In your statement you wrote about the influence of water—particularly light on water—in your current work. Is there one location in particular that has influenced your work?*

BONNIE NEUMANN: I think observing water has always been a source of inspiration for me, but the place of most influence in these two recent series has been Lower Lake, in Lake County where we have a vacation home with a view of the lake from about 200 feet. It's a place where I can watch the light change on the water. The elevation and the distance allow me to watch the reflections on the water, the lines involved, the patterns and movement. I see it in different seasons and various weather conditions. It's fascinating to me—light makes water's movement visible, and makes patterns in water visible. Water captures and then reflects back the light, giving form to light. Since water is transparent, it absorbs and reflects light differently than other elements and objects. The lines and flickering patterns they form literally led me to the meditative drawings that are the foundation of this work.

*JB: So, is water a metaphor in your work?*

BN: Light on the water is a real, observed phenomenon that I work from, but it's also a metaphor. Water and life are both fluid and ephemeral. They're of the moment—they keep moving. The moments in your life are the same way, they keep moving. As I progress in experience, time seems to speed up.

When time seems to go faster, you realize you can only have the moment you're living in now. The trick is to expand the moment. It's a state of fluidity that's hard to grasp.

*JB: In your pattern work in the past, and in this new work, you've used silk-screened layers of form and color to create a final composition. Can you describe your technique and some of the decisions that enter into your process?*

BN: I begin with a basic color surface, so color is the first element I work with. I like to work on a smooth surface so I usually start with three to five coats of the ground color, sanding between layers and polishing the last layer. When I've prepared a refined, colored ground, I start laying in the patterns I'm working with, guided by my drawings and a mental image of where I'm going. My color choices depend on formal considerations like value, and how colors will relate to the ground and to each other.

*JB: How has silkscreen evolved into a significant part of your working process? Is it related to the idea of layering and repetition in your earlier pattern-based work?*

BN: The silkscreen process allows me to repeat patterns almost endlessly. Altogether, in any given painting, I usually end up with fifteen to eighteen layers of lines and marks.

In my most recent series, I've begun to engage line and negative space. I've always been interested in the relationship between form and ground, the surface tension that's created when you shift between the two, and the ambiguity of space when you place an abstract, non-dimensional element like a line, within it. When the ground and the shape interact, that tension creates the sense of pulling forward and receding. Working all these things together determines my compositions—the layering and off-registration help to develop that shift and enliven the patterns created by the line work.



*JB: Several painters I know have spoken about the influence of nature on their work. When I interviewed Donna Brookman, she described using elements that she saw on her walks in the Berkeley Hills as a starting point for painting— things like the quality of light, or a color relationship. The New Mexico-based color field painter Tracy Rocca has written about using imagery she sees on meditative daily walks as inspiration for her large paintings. Like you, both are working with an abstracted version of nature. However, references to the natural world are still visible in their work, whereas your work is much more reductive, and formal. Can you talk about the role of reduction and abstraction in your work?*

*BN: I think I'm looking for something larger, something behind the kinds of literal references you're talking about, or perhaps just different. I'm not interested in representing a literal location, so much as showing what I call the force and structure behind an experience.*

When people say they "like being in nature," I think they're really talking about having a poetic experience on a deep level. It's not just that the trees or the scenery are beautiful, it's that they sense something that has a deep correspondence to something inside them. It's a force that's primal. I use abstraction to uncover

the inner law, the hidden network. At one time in my work, I was fascinated with grid structure, and was using the grid, to get to this idea. It's an idea that I'm starting to work with again.

*JB: Can you tell me about your initial drawing process? For example, do you work on site, referring to specific waterscape or landscape, or do you work from memory?*

*BN:* Initially, I work on site, making at least a sketch, a kind of meditative recording of my impressions. It's a form of note taking. I use memory when I'm working on the composition of a painting. Sometimes I'll return to a site to confirm my original sensory impressions.

*JB: What materials do you use for your line drawings, and what is the scale of the drawings?*

*BN:* When I'm making drawings I keep it simple, and usually draw with lead pencil. I work on small, five or six inch squares, for the initial drawings. I don't like to have to manipulate a lot of materials while trying to capture what is usually a transient and fleeting image.

I use an enlarger later to scale up the pencil drawings, and retrace them in pen, then have them shot and turned into a film positive on Mylar to make the silk screens. When I print from the screen I use a transfer technique, using the transfer to print onto the prepared grounds.

*JB: You recently started using metallic paints for your grounds, which give your surfaces a burnished, glowing quality. What was your inspiration or concept in turning to this new material? Can you describe what went into that decision?*

*BN:* Water, because it's transparent, or at least translucent, seems luminous when it's involved with light. Metallic paints have that luminous quality, so they can evoke some of those same physical qualities that we experience seeing light on water. I started experimenting with them in addition to traditional hues in several paintings in 2010. Since 2011, I've used metallic paints much more, sometimes exclusively. It's an attempt to capture some of the transcendental qualities of light and water through a kind of material mimesis.

*JB: In your artist's statement, and in this conversation, you've described your drawing process as "meditative." I know from our past discussions that the idea of memory, or of evoking a fleeting, elusive sense of remembrance, has been an ongoing concern in your work for more than a decade. I also have the sense that there is an underlying metaphysical intention, or content, in your work.*

*To put it another way, it seems as if you're consciously constructing your work from formal elements like line, color, and reflectivity, but there's something in the layered patterns of repeated lines that seems to point to something else—an openness to phenomena as it occurs, a sense of union with the process and whatever results. Can you talk about the relationship between what's literally there, on the surface, and what it refers to, that exists outside of the picture plane?*

*BN:* What I call my "meditative" drawings could also be described as "automatic" drawings; I let my hand record what my eyes see, without any translation. Recording phenomena that exist within the moment is an attempt to unfold the hidden network behind what you see. My thought is that by recording marks in this way, I can relay transitory moments to the viewer. Also, I'm deliberately building surface tension using abstraction and reduction, because that visual shift creates an opening into the immediate moment.

---

*Jamie Brunson is a painter, curator and critic who lives and works in the San Francisco Bay Area.*