



THE HORIZON EXISTS IN OUR OWN BODIES

*An Interview with Artist Claire Anna Baker*

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By Chad Sweeney

CHAD SWEENEY: Thank you for taking the time to talk with us about your art and some of the specific pieces featured here in Issue 6 of Ghost Town. To begin, can you tell us about your process? And what areas of consciousness are active while you are painting? What energies and sources do you draw upon while in the act of painting?

CLAIRE ANNA BAKER: I try to tap into source consciousness when I work. I allow myself to bleed into my environment, and vice versa. The consciousness becomes very fluid. I build a giant environment in my studio out of miscellaneous matter, lights, this time mannequins. I collect energy from experiences in nature and from reading that goes into building this source object. I then draw this environment repeatedly, daily, until the energy within the objects becomes a kind of center. The objects come to life and the environment unifies. Suddenly the teetering scrappy artificial natural simulated environment becomes everything and nothing at the same time. The environment is my constant, every time I draw from it is different. My observation of it changes like an emotional weather system. My process is very much like that of an ancient Chinese ink painter. I stare at the waterfall until I make one stroke that becomes the waterfall itself, the energy of the source itself rather than an image of it. I become it energetically. This makes my process seem contemplative and then fast, which it is, but then after the main event of that first stroke the painting evolves very slowly. It takes me many months to understand that moment and open it up into a whole reality.

CS: Your process is fascinating! Can you walk us through one of the paintings that we are showing in this issue of Ghost Town? What environment did you create for this painting? Which objects and lighting? The shapes of the negative space, and so forth? And how did the painting evolve through a process of layers and time as an expression or integration with the “source energies” of your studio environment?

CAB: I actually made a short video of my painting process recently which you can watch here, <http://vimeo.com/78112423>, or on the process page of my website. The video captures an external view of the relationship between me and the environment. You'll see that I make the dark mark first, before I layer the transparent washes gradually over the gesture. I work with one studio environment for an entire body of work. For the SunBody series I had a large mound of crumpled paper and yellow fabric and cardboard boxes, etc., punctuated by a copper toned mirror propped on top of it all. I thought of this mound as a

dark sun. Above I suspended a tight wad of black foil, reflective matter, and a black veil. This compressed, dangling counterpart I loosely thought of as an earth form. I used a lot of lights in between them, so the space between the two universe mounds compressed and reflected hot incandescent light. I wrapped black taffeta around everything to connect it all—I thought of this as the shadow. You can see in the studio snapshot from the SunBody series that I am surrounded by paintings on the floor. I work on all of the paintings simultaneously.

Anti-Shock is a good painting to focus on (see it here). The scroll format of this painting was directly tied to capturing the tense, dangling, elongated, pendulum like form featured in the environment. I thought of the vertical lines here as very spinal, full of folded minutiae. The thicker curve is almost braided and then a personified light form rests in the curve of the dark disk at the bottom. This blade like form was taken from kinetic photographs dated around 1900 of veiled dancers becoming the mark, defying the mark. As this painting evolved, the pressure of that golden light on the right side intensified and pushed against the rest of the painting, almost like a blast of heat against the steadfast though molten left side of the painting. The thicker part of the black mark in the upper area of the painting almost appears to slip behind the color, as though the black was continuous behind all that light. However, the light in this piece is all negative, coming from the raw light of the surface. I like this reversal. The slight bit of erasure amidst that deep royal blue I thought of as a dimly lit candle, the darkness slowly absorbing the blast. This painting also has three horizontal horizons that cut through its vertical format. The dark saturation of the color in this painting took many, many layers over many weeks. I wash and puddle the ink over the whole surface at once using large pieces of foam. I allow the pigment and the water to move and to absorb into the surface, sometimes for days. Then I wash over the whole piece again and again until the color looks full, feels alive, and I can “see into” it with depth the same way I can see into the environmental objects. Many layers of thin transparent color create more radiance than an opaque application of paint. My work is very much about drawing, so a lot of variations in the washes have to do with the subtlety of the light, and the strength of its contrast. This painting captures the reflective quality of light in the mirror embedded in the environment. The light is so strong exactly because it also plays against the translated weight and darkness of the black taffeta mass.

CS: What are current intrigues in your own artistic process? What are you working through, working out, exploring?

CAB: I am currently thinking a lot about vastness, as Bachelard discusses in *Poetics of Space*, often referencing Baudelaire. I am interested in this idea of what is very far becoming very close, and what is close very far. I am interested in expressing an intimacy with the horizon, and how the depth of the horizon exists in our own bodies. What is close and perhaps blinding our view can then melt away through expansion. In my daily life in LA I experience such a small speck of the life of this universe. The more we can think expansively, the more we can understand where we are and direct where we're headed.

All of this manifests in my actual painting through trying to draw the dark gesture so that it holds a body of light. The dark gestures all contain horizons. Their black, dark lines jump out to the eye. Working the

surface in order to flip these dark marks so that they become deep space has been very challenging and rewarding. I am interested in achieving a real, radiant glow in my paintings. They need to shine out. This of course takes many many layers of transparent ink to achieve. My last body of work, SunBody, which you feature here, did not focus as much on this, it was more open, white, and minimal. This next body of work is built more gradually. It is important for me to have very long, slow construction processes before a series of minimal fast pieces falls into place. The work has to happen before you get to the surface on the very immediate pieces. The stroke just is what it is then, no going back.

And when I say body of light in these series, I mean literally. The SunBody series had more to do with a cyclical, radial, compression and expansion in the dark mark—where the mark as body became a kind of sun. Now I have swung more literally to the side of the human body, where now the sun becomes the body. The light, absent form is now what you will see first. There is a lot of flipping between bound, twisted compression and then released, open expansion in my work. My work is very much about density, so that is a way to vary the density of the work not just in mark and material but also in how it conducts energy.

I am thinking a lot about transformation, about how to make transformation real, physical, accessible, and relevant now. I am not interested in a grand romanticized transcendence, but rather a receptive openness to the possibilities for transformation in our daily lives, in our society. Transformation through exchange of energy; how can we humans experience life like a river or a fire rather than a machine? Transformation is part of nature, and we indeed are part of nature, so our transformation is real.

CS: Kandinsky wrote that his paintings were translations of the soul. Can you make a similar statement about your own art, are they translations of something? Even as your paintings are not “representational,” can you locate elements of your paintings in the world, in consciousness, in spirit?

CAB: I would say that they are translations of internal space into external. I always seek to reveal my inner world to the viewer. The painting must make that dream space as real as possible. Because, well, it is real. Good art creates a full reality for the viewer to enter. Through the bridging of internal and external space wholeness is created. I often read when I paint and that always anchors my work. Particular paintings tie to their own book passages. It helps keep me going and create a through-line in my thinking about the work. In SunBody I was very inspired by *The Life of Poetry* by Muriel Ruykeyser. She has a chapter about Walt Whitman and his struggle to resolve opposing forces within himself, his struggle to find this wholeness I am talking about. She quotes him as saying I am a dance, pointing out all the struggles which inform that dance, which he dances in spite of.

The simple answer to your question though is that I am really a landscape painter. My paintings are more abstract now, but I will always be a painter of nature and of the horizon. Although now in my definition of nature I don't separate the wild from the city, I treat it all as our broader environment.

CS: Ah, yes, I enjoy that way of viewing your art, but your “landscapes” remain in motion, transformational, of both internal and external spaces, as if rendering the motion (or potential motion) within the weather above the landscape, how wind might be shaped against the mountain, and how light is shaped within the wind. In another vein, the semantic rather than the spatial, do your paintings feel more like statements or questions? And how do you know when a painting is “true?”

CAB: I love those images! They are perfect too because they have so much to do with the relationship between elements, and how everything exists in constant flux. My paintings are most like metaphors. They serve as both statements and questions, lending themselves to ambiguity and multiplicity. When they are at their most open they are at their best. Otherwise they are really meditations. They are very quiet, receptive works, despite their sometimes aggressive aesthetic. They are still the way someone is still when leaping through the air. I know when a painting is true enough to make when an image paired with a very specific yet all encompassing feeling comes to my mind and to my body. Then I know there is a real seed. A painting is true, in that is resolved enough to live on in the world beyond its nest, when it rings like a bell in my eye. The finish of a painting is very tense, exhausting, exhilarating, like a tender nerve that is so sensitized the slightest touch fires cannons. The piece is done when it has its event, its place, its bodies, and I enter the space as one. These forms are questioningly ambiguous in the most specific way; the arrangement between these forms does create a statement. The painting must be expansive and hold the eye at once. So when you look at the piece the eye literally senses release at the edges of the frame. There is always a kind of drishti, a center of the painting on which I can gaze in stillness while the surrounding movement unfolds.

CS: Can you describe an artistic breakthrough for you? What sources and energies were present to catalyze this breakthrough?

CAB: For me breakthroughs happen when I identify what is and what is not serving my work and then I, poof, let go of what is not. It is always very painful to do, with lots of crying and struggle. I have always been stubborn. But when I finally accept my limitations it is very liberating. I have realizations to add elements into my work, too, but that happens generally very gradually. I realize that a new tool will add another element, or that I want to push the edges of the frame. These tend to be more like natural growth in the practice, work leading to more work. My real breakthroughs have always been about letting go, letting go of the artist I thought I should be or expected I would be and accepting the artist I am. This is about becoming oneself, and becoming an artist. We all have heroes, but letting go of those heroes and pioneering the uncertainty of your own, new voice, is what we have to do.

I have always wanted to do everything, use every brush, every material. Letting go of oil paint and embracing ink as the material that best expresses my voice has been my biggest breakthrough. People told me I should do this for almost a decade before I did. They were right, but it was indeed important that I stuck to what I was doing for so long. I learned an immense amount about density, touch, surface, and painting through my many years of struggle with oil painting. I painted Marsden Hartleys, Joan Mitchells, and Cezannes. It was great, but it wasn't my work. My ink drawings at the time looked like Claude Lorrain

landscapes from the 1700s. I was a retro graduate student. It wasn't one or the other that would be the answer, it was finding a path of integration.

CS: Please, talk us through one of your paintings in which a breakthrough took place. What was let go? And do you still feel the gravity of what was lost? Does the completed piece still contain the ghost of what fell away as well as, perhaps, the years of technique and effort that led to the breakthrough?

CAB: Inside the Whole was my first painting on polyester. The painting emerged out of uncertainty in the most immediate and focused way. I first painted invisible marks—washes so thin you could barely see them, but they gave the surface a sense of air and pattern. Then in one fluid movement of five minutes the dark mark emerged. I remember looking at the piece after lifting my tool and going back in for one delicate line with a little bit of water on it so it disappeared into the void at the center of the painting. Before this I had worked on several paintings that I never resolved for too many tortured years. I ended up throwing away all of those paintings. Here I let go of showing how hard I was working on the painting. Or rather I was able to hold the intensity of the painting, to bear its weight, without buckling. All that time made me strong enough and aware enough of my own energy to conduct the energy into the mark. It's like sending just the right amount of electricity for the right amount of time along the wire so the lamp lights and the fuse doesn't blow. So nothing was really lost here, only gained, in that the light was finally lit. The only thing lost were the years of work and pile of material it took to arrive there. Those years amounted to a long, slow, expensive education more about me as the artist than about the work itself. Inside the Whole and the works following compressed and concentrated all of that learning. Finally the work could just be the work, with me as the support for the movement of the painting. Through all of this the work always came from the same source. The only real difference is that my effort to create the work no longer reads as content.

Despite all of my intentionality, the painting in many ways must ultimately paint itself. I am only its most intimate guide. I have learned to work together with the painting as in an intimate partnership. I have only begun to express what I see in a way that you too can see it. Almost every time I finish a painting I feel a sense of disappointment, because it doesn't yet fully express my experience to you, the viewer. So the learning has just begun, I am sure, and there will be many more breakthroughs that deepen the work. Now I am beginning to occlude the gesture with white so it feels like parts of the painting literally dissolve into light. In Belly I almost completely occluded the gesture to dissolve into the darkness of night sky.

Current breakthroughs now push farther the integration within the work. The duality between the dark mark and the ground will find greater and greater similarity and interchangeability. The object of the gesture must fall away; the open being space of the imagination must continue to rise out. It is so scary to reveal your inner world to others. This fear is a lot of what I am always trying to shed. Struggled, impenetrable work can be a shield. As an artist I have to create a very safe and protected space around the work, so that the work itself can grow and thrive. Energy I used to spend working in raw panic I now protect and cultivate. It is almost like when you are in a protected forest and you make yourself really quiet and gentle so that you might be able to make eye contact with a wild rabbit. You have to listen very

quietly to its every step in order to even know it's there, and if you're lucky, watch it grow. Hunters and stompers, of course, must be kept at bay!

CS: Your perception feels transformative and multiple, as if you view the phenomenological world entirely differently—I say “view” or “see” but I believe you are using all of your senses to become the objects of your perception as a kind of transpersonal knowledge. In your way of knowing the phenomenological world, what is an “object?”

CAB: To me an object is anything with a defined boundary; objects and their boundaries then interweave in our lives. Of course there are material objects that can serve as vessels for memory and sensation, etc. But also there are mind objects, thoughts that do have boundaries whether or not we realize. The physical body is a physical object, and then sensations, consciousness and identity become amorphous objects themselves. I often think of objects as bodies. So all of these elements of awareness become translations of the body object. I explore a fluidity of identity, of objects and of bodies, but I do still believe boundaries are necessary. We need to be able to define our own boundaries in experience so we can maintain the integrity of our own identities, even as we integrate with other bodies. By looking into objects I do feel a deep empathy across these defined boundaries, which offers this kind of transpersonal learning you mention. I am so fascinated by these boundaries because my instinct is to be completely open, which of course does not work because complete openness generally leads to being seriously, painfully burned. So creating a protected sanctuary for expansive feeling and receptive vulnerability is really what I am after. The heart must be safe and healed before it can be truly open again. Society constantly and dangerously dictates external boundaries of identity, of gender, class, race, etc. There is an external construction of difference that divides us, or tells us what our boundaries are supposed to be. But in fact all individuals have their own internally defined identity on a vast spectrum of experience. Indeed the boundaries of self constantly transgress, defy, and complicate external categorization. My exploration of all “trans” related experience is really about finding commonalities that may expand, bridge, specify, and complicate all boundaries. Trans awareness is about projecting the self, the senses, the imagination out into the world consciously in order to open, redefine, and intimate the relationship between self and world.