

## Elizabeth Osborne: Art as Experience

Judith E. Stein

Most children love to draw. Little ones delight in color and line, as they progress from scribble scrabble, to stick figures, to composing images of what they see or imagine. But few children grow up to be artists, and fewer still attain the stature of Elizabeth Osborne, whose extraordinary body of work spans more than five decades. Her uncommon talents, spotted early and lovingly nurtured, propelled her passage across childhood to a lifelong passion to create. In Liz's case, to consider what was given and what chosen, the hand dealt and how it was played, is to freshly value her achievements and singular career.

Both Liz and her twin sister Anne, born in 1936, were remarkable children. Anne loved to dance, and Sally, as Liz was then called, drew. During their early years, the Osborne household included their parents Charles and Virginia, and their brother Phillip, three years older. When her children were young, Virginia took a variety of courses at Penn, with a focus in philosophy, and an interest in aesthetics. Several of Virginia's professors became her friends, particularly the avuncular Louis W. Flaccus and his wife Laura, neighbors of the Osbornes in Lansdowne. Another was the radiant Elizabeth (Betty) Flower, who in 1939 at the age of 24, became one of the first American women with a university career in philosophy. The circle of friends included Paul Philippe Cret, a strikingly handsome, mustachioed architect

and industrial designer who likewise taught at Penn. A French-born charmer, he'd received the Croix de Guerre for his heroism in World War I. One of the "lighter touches in our lives,"<sup>1</sup> Liz remembers, was the parties her mother gave when guests danced to recorded music. Her entranced children would watch the fluid figures from a perch on the stairs.

As a retiree, Professor Flaccus and his wife Laura took special delight in the Osborne twins, folding them into their lives as if they were their own grandchildren. He had taught aesthetics at Penn and cared deeply about how people looked at and learned from art. "Art is a living experience,"<sup>2</sup> he wrote in the preface to his 1926 text, *The Spirit and Substance of Art*. The idea of "art as experience" is closely associated with the philosopher John Dewey, who believed that appreciation of art rests on experience, the artist's and one's own. Art refines and intensifies experience, he believed, and embodies the substance that connects artist and observer.

Dr. Albert C. Barnes, a contemporary of Louis Flaccus, strongly believed in the idea of art as experience, and prior to the publication of the professor's treatise, the men had a cordial friendship. In the mid-twenties, the two joined forces to attempt to align Dr. Barnes's collection with the curricula of Penn's Philosophy Department, where the collector envisioned a Fine Arts section headed by Flaccus. In response to the "Tentative Proposal" Flaccus drafted in this regard, Dr. Barnes wrote him that it "accords so exactly with my ideas that I have no criticisms or suggestions."<sup>3</sup> When the university rebuffed Dr. Barnes's overture, he wrote Flaccus, "However, the logical place [for my collection] is Penn and I do hope that they will see what is dropped into their lap and will wake up."<sup>4</sup> But they never would wake up.

Liz's early awareness of Dewey's revolutionary and egalitarian belief that art appreciation did not rest on higher education but developed from perceptual experiences—a basic tenet of Barnesian teaching—came to her via Louis Flaccus. To understand art, Barnes—and Flaccus—believed, one can learn to care about the visible aspects of the world: color, texture, the flow of line, the rhythm of light and shadow, and the sequence and interplay of volume, an awareness that Liz exulted in as a mature artist. She became acutely attuned to the abstract substructure of the world around her, while retaining the recognizable as a touchstone.

In 1945, when Liz and Anne were nine, their father Charles Osborne died from leukemia. That same year, heart disease claimed the life of Paul Philippe Cret. The girls would not have understood why this double loss devastated Virginia. Liz would not learn for decades that although Osborne was their mother's husband, it was Cret who was the children's biological father. When the twins were twelve, Virginia took her own life. The note she left asked her childless brother to raise her orphaned children, a request that would be dutifully and joylessly fulfilled. At age nineteen, Anne too cut short her life.

Although Liz did not get to visit the Barnes Foundation until her late teens, Louis Flaccus likely described its treasures to his young and increasingly art-savvy protegee. Flaccus' home was full of art. Liz still remembers the 1920s portrait by his friend Harry Kidd, a modernist in the style of Arthur B. Carles, who used color for compositional structure. In this painting the professor kept above his desk, Kidd's female sitter appears to be there and not there, vividly present as form and color yet unreachable. In the coming years, Liz would become a master of this duality in her portraits, enticing viewers with lushly-colored compositions but keeping her models' inner lives off limits.





“Uncle Louis,” as the children called him, was an amateur painter and poet. In 1951, he published *Skits, Poems, Riddles* for his young friends, “ranging in age from three to five-and-ten/Joy they have given and guided a pen.”<sup>5</sup> There were twenty black and white illustrations by Liz, including a full-page self-portrait that documents an outwardly conventional teenager, with saddle shoes, cuffed jeans, and a stylish pageboy (fig. 2). But the composition is ingenious. We look in at her from behind, peeking over her shoulder to catch her brush in mid-stroke. She sits propped up on the floor, painting at a low, child-sized easel. It’s always a challenge for right-handed self-portraitists to show themselves in the act of creation. Liz cleverly solved the quandry of recording a hand in motion by showing herself working left-handed.

Although she grants an unimpeded sight of her work-in-progress, she shields her face from view. People are very sensitive to faces. That’s why runway models



have blank expressions—the clothes need to be noticed, not the person wearing them. Our brains have a special area dedicated to the perception of faces, a skill that comes on line just weeks after babies are born. We can only guess at the mix of vulnerability and determination that Liz’s mentor could read on his young friend’s face. In a poem of description and forecast dedicated to her, Louis Flaccus pronounced her “grown, a youthful slip,” with “honest eyes and smiling lips; . . . a hand that never falters/And an aim that never alters! A world is at your fingertips.”<sup>6</sup>

As Liz came of age as an artist, new friends and teachers would help sharpen her understanding of the world and her place in it. While working as a day camp counselor, she formed a close bond with one of her charges, the colorful Nancy Carlen, the young daughter of the Center City art dealer Robert Carlen. He, his wife and their two girls, became Liz’s surrogate family during the years she studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. To save her the long trip in from Lansdowne,

3 **Untitled**, (Portrait of a Young Woman 1), 1973, charcoal, graphite and watercolor on paper, 29 1/2 x 24 inches

4 **Untitled**, (Portrait of a Young Woman 2), 1973, charcoal, graphite and watercolor on paper, 29 1/2 x 24 inches

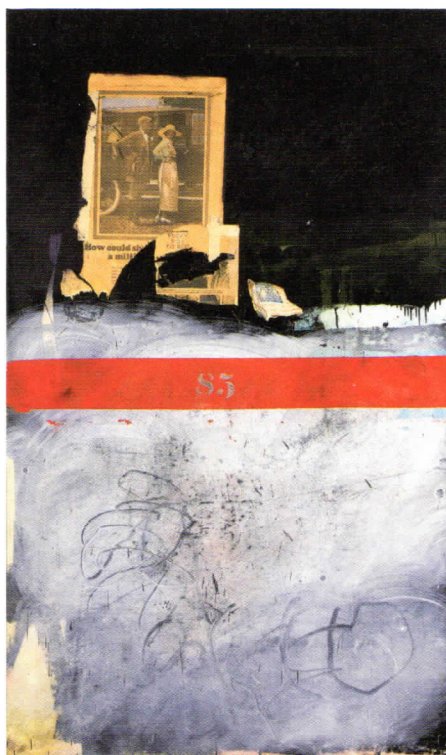




the Carlens gave her a room in their home while she completed her studies, and in the process, informally expanded her art education. Bob Carlen ran his gallery from home, where he showed American folk, primitive and decorative art, as well as African, European, and Oriental Art. Historians best remember the dealer for launching the career of Horace Pippin, and for bringing to light many long-lost paintings by Edward Hicks. Liz vividly recollects a group of Rodin's watercolors he showed her.

Liz, Raymond Saunders and Louis Sloan were among the most dedicated and promising students at the Academy in the mid to late fifties. An intense, introspective young man unwavering in his desire to be an artist, Lou Sloan was "steadfast and honest to a fault,"<sup>7</sup> Liz remembers with great fondness. Both she and Sloan were mentees of the esteemed painter, Hobson Pittman, a master teacher who encouraged his students to experiment with expressive brushstrokes and colors.<sup>8</sup>

5 Louis B. Sloan, **Gathering Storm over Philadelphia**, 1961, oil on canvas, 38 x 46 1/4 inches  
 Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, John Lambert Fund



Ray Saunders was a vibrant, voluble personality at the Academy. There was nothing artificial about Saunders, a dealer would later write about his work, described as “a personal and exuberant visual diary. . . [that] make[s] me glad to be alive.”<sup>9</sup> Both men were African American—Sloan, a native Philadelphian, Saunders from Pittsburgh. Liz, Saunders and Sloan, unique talents all and equally passionate about art, would become lifelong friends.

The mainstay of the Academy’s curriculum—still life, landscape and the figure—became the armature around which Liz would build her singular vision. Non-representational art that liberates color, line, light and space from the burden of describing the real world had been an option for decades when Liz was an Academy student at mid-century. Although none of her teachers made abstract art, and some were even hostile to the wave of post-war expressive abstractions that came to public awareness in the fifties, they nonetheless laid down a foundation for those of their

6 Raymond Saunders, **American Dream**, 1968, 69 1/4 x 41 inches, oil and collage on canvas, Gift of the American Academy of Arts and Letters (Childe Hassam Fund), Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, Massachusetts



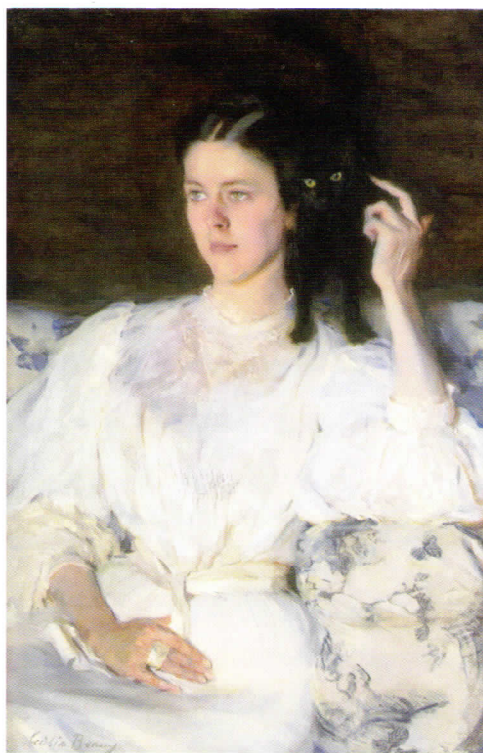


students who wanted to find their own way to balance what they saw, what they felt, and what they found in the process of creation. In a color spectrum series she began in 2008, Liz released her hold on the recognizable world, and created a group of paintings that exulted in color as an end in itself.

There have been times in her career when Liz fell in sync with a hired female model, who became a muse and inspired painting after painting, for example *Standing Nude*, (1987, fig. 7). These various paid sitters held in common an emotional connection with the painter, a link evident in her later portraits of family and friends. For several years she moved away from figurative subjects to concentrate on still life and landscape, but in 2013, after seeing a snapshot of her daughter standing in front of her paintings, Liz returned to depicting people.

When Liz began teaching at the Academy in 1963, she stepped onto the path trail-blazed by Cecilia Beaux, the first woman hired as full-time faculty at the





Pennsylvania Academy. *Sita and Sarita* (circa 1921, fig. 8), Beaux's daring and memorable image of a pet and pet-owner, may have been in the back of Liz's mind when more than a century later, she herself devised a composition that juxtaposed a woman and a cat with contrasting moods.

"Never work with children or animals," W.C. Fields admonished. Unpredictable four-legged creatures can be scene-stealers. But unlike actors, painters create scenes of their own devising, basing them, if necessary, on quick sketches. That's likely the process Beaux followed in her portrait of her cousin Sarah and her black cat Sita, in which she arranged their eyes in near horizontal alignment. While Sarah thoughtfully focuses her gaze to the side, the cat looks out intently at the painter, and by extension, us.

In *Maine Portrait*, 2017 an imperturbable tabby, with folded paws and closed eyes, pays us no mind. But the supine model is wary, alert to the unseen artist who

brings her into being. The woman on the couch is Liz's adult daughter, Audrey Cooper, who's been posing for her mother since she was a young girl. In *Audrey with Navajo Blanket*, 1976 two small clay figures stand hands on hips near the solemn child. During the seventies, when women—and a few men—reveled in color and design with impunity, Liz found imaginative ways to stay rooted in the real while indulging her joy in pattern and decoration. Here she defines the background plane with a classic Native American eye-dazzler textile.

Color captivates in *Maine Portrait*. While a nearly bleached-out blue defines the pillow under Audrey's head, a darker version pools on her chest and sheets down like water beyond her shirt's boundaries. Darker still is the azure swatch of wall between the windows. Liz commands a family of browns to signal upholstery and wood texture. As in several of her recent paintings, she calls on a sun-hot yellow—here fringed with orange—to block views of whatever exists on the other side of the glass. On the right, skinny branches with pink and yellow flowers press into the picture from a hidden source, emissaries from the world outside. Liz enjoys this visual strategy, which was popularized by artists like Whistler, who in turn learned it from Japanese printmakers.

Yellow window panes, a favored device, reappear in *Audrey Seated*, 2015. Her daughter's inner life, evident yet barriered, rivets our gaze, as does the blood-red pillar of her torso. Like most mothers, Liz is as attuned to the nuances of her daughter's feelings as she is to her own. Here she documents Audrey's resolute expression. Although the history of art has innumerable portraits of women painted by the men in their lives, depictions of the intricate bonds between mother and daughter are rare. Audrey resembles Liz, and the painter knows her child's features "like the back of her hand." At the composition's center, a grey causeway of paint begins at the top edge but halts before reaching its expected end, letting slip a few

ambiguous streaks of light against a blacked-out pane. This central stripe is both frame and abstract shape, present as two things at once, a characteristic of Liz's practice.

In *Window Tea Hill*, 2017 Audrey's positioned in near *profil perdu*, or "lost profile," her head turned away almost to the point of eliminating her features. She looks out at a seeming tornado of green that fills the top pane, becoming a narrowing cone of color below it. In *Audrey in Profile*, 2014 we see her from the side, standing like a sentinel, her backbone positioned to coincide with the composition's central axis. A frieze of vessels of uncertain scale punctuate a loosely-defined background of shelves that alternate with wide, wavy bands of color. The ceramic pots are Audrey's own, here present as design components and her daughter's self-portraits. Liz takes family portraiture one generation further in *Imogen*, 2015 a playful painting of her granddaughter half-hidden by a vase of blossoms that sits—against the "rules"—just about smack in the middle of the composition. Imogen cocks her head, studying Liz as closely as the painter studies her.

In 2014, two decades after her Academy colleague Jimmy Leuders passed away, Liz painted *Portrait of J.L.*, (fig. 9) a masterful homage to the man who was one of her dearest friends. After Louis Flaccus, he was the most important mentor of her life. Liz had known Jimmy, who was ten years older than she, since her student days at the Academy, and continued to treasure his friendship after joining the faculty. Jimmy was a major presence in the lives of generations of students. "Painting came first; recognition didn't drive him,"<sup>10</sup> she remembers. A gregarious yet highly-disciplined artist, he was her role model. Jimmy loved to laugh, to cook and to entertain, but primarily he worked in his studio. Like many of Liz's closest friends, he was an outsider/insider, in his case a gay man who was out to a select few, but ostensibly straight to the larger world.





*Portrait of J.L.* calls to mind aspects of Velasquez's *Las Meninas*: its use of anchoring figures at the right front corner; dynamic diagonal linking of foreground to background; and a man visible in the far distance. Velasquez included himself in his composition, tantalizingly shown working on a painting we cannot see. In *Portrait of J.L.*, perhaps the woman we see from behind (as in Liz's early self-portrait) is the artist herself, conjuring her late friend across time and space. In another portrait of Leuders, he's much closer to us, seated at an angle to the picture plane. A table top still life—a genre both artists were masters of—commands the lower quarter, and our eyes shift back and forth from the sitter's head to the family of vase shapes nearby. An intelligent, thoughtful and responsive man, Leuders is intensely present in this painted remembrance, a potent mix of seeing and feeling.

*Painter in the Catskills* (Lou Sloan), 2017 is likewise an expression of love for a late friend and colleague that is based on one of Liz's snapshots. She occasionally

accompanied Sloan on his expeditions to paint the mountainous landscape *in situ*, and this painting commemorates one such day. Liz's paint gestures swell, flow and drizzle around Sloan, a man absorbed in the process of art making. Unlike Sloan, shown here negotiating the translation into paint of what he sees, Liz presents another friend, the painter Edna Andrade, in the domestic context of her Maine home. She called on boldly-patterned garments and a linked display of greens to pay tribute to Edna's love of nuanced color and geometric order.

A chance finding in 2016 of a decades-old snapshot prompted Liz to paint *C.K. Williams—The Poets*, 2016 a remembrance of a trio of friends who by then had all passed on. In 1972 in Philadelphia, Jeff [S.J.] Marks, Seven Berg and CK Williams co-founded *The American Poetry Review*, a publication that soon became the most widely circulated poetry magazine in the U.S. Its acronym APR leans against the painting's front plane as if it were made of glass; a ghostly gray "BERG" hovers uncertainly above and behind it, tangent to the irregular blue edge of his sweater; and letters that spell "Williams" tumble around CK like gravity-free astronauts. Williams is the only one who doesn't make eye contact, engrossed as he is with something he's holding.

Liz's favored yellow tints Jeff Marks' vest, visually weighting the painting's lower left corner. A yellow band, perhaps a wall, runs from top to bottom right of center, one of several color compartments that complicate a straight-forward reading of the space as one plane. One thing seems clear—slender horizontals proclaim themselves as books, differentiated not by title but by color and shape. A versatile visual conceit, these sticks of color here stand upright or lie on their side, as in *RPW Reading*, 2015 as well as in *Yellow Window*, 2015. They take center stage in *Ex- Libris II*, 2015 where they're caged within the grid of floor-to-ceiling cubbies. *In Studio*, 2014 Liz plays with the related image of tall verticals, distilling a dignified

procession of canvases stacked sideways in storage. In *Curtis House Library*, 2005 a stack of books engages our attention inside the room, as the competing fall landscape tugs at us to step outside.

At times Liz paints landscape qua landscape, as in *Field*, 2016 and *Park*, 2015. Yet in *Hop House Studio* 2011, and *Charles Hopkinson's Studio*, 2016 it's not clear if the luscious seascape is a view through a window or an art work hanging on the wall or propped up on an easel. She unambiguously sites viewers outside in *Dawn Slide*, 2010 and *Currents*, 2017 where sensuous, scalloped horizontals convey the allure of water in motion. Short, darting passages of paint embody the behavior of light on water in *Reflection I*, 2015. Like the bleeding edges in Ikat textiles, irregular threads of color shoot across the surface in *Heat*, 2015 and float up vertically in *Under the Pond*, 2015.

The urban landscape has long engaged the artist, especially what she can see from her studio window, as in *City View 1*, 2004 and *City Hall Tower*, 2006. Intriguingly, there's an unintended resemblance between the jagged outline of buildings in *City 2*, 2007, and the kindred silhouette of the Ship Rock landform, a sacred Navajo peak in New Mexico. Her eye ever scouting for provocative form and color, Liz sometimes finds it close to home. On a walk in her neighborhood she found the ingredients she transformed into *Car*, 2017, a work that balances the natural and the manmade, curved shapes and those with right angles.

*Doggie Daycare*, 2017 was inspired by a surreal enterprise near the artist's home, where, for hefty fees, a variety of purebreds and mutts daily sniff, pace and lounge in an otherwise empty storefront, a window onto a world with far more variety than a pet store. Sidewalk passersby can peer in, and if they so wish, dogs can look out. In Liz's hands, the attendant and pets take no notice of onlookers. A tour de force composition, it relegates the dogs to a shallow, yellow-green stage



between a blue outer wall and an interior of complementary orange that heats to a glowing yellow ball near the ceiling.

Liz's mentor Louis Flaccus didn't live to see the world he envisioned for young Liz come to pass, a world attained by her unfaltering hand and unaltering aim to be an artist. Experience shaped her resolve, and nourished her art. The work she's created over the course of her long and distinguished career embodies contradictions. The late Philadelphia Inquirer art critic Edward J. Sozanski, a keen and admiring observer of her art, praised Liz for her "Dionysian commitment to vibrant, saturated color" as well as her "superb Apollonian sense of order and placement."<sup>11</sup> Within one painting's frame we might encounter inside/outside, open/closed, implicit/explicit, the world abstracted and not.

*Judith E. Stein is a Philadelphia-based writer and curator, author of the Eye of the Sixties: Richard Bellamy and the Transformation of Modern Art (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2016).*

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Osborne, Telephone Conversation with the author, June 27, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Louis W. Flaccus, *The Spirit and Substance of Art*, (New York, NY: F. S. Crofts & Company, 1926): vii. The author expresses her deep appreciation to Jonathan Flaccus, for his kindness in lending her this and other material from his collection.

<sup>3</sup> Albert C. Barnes. Letter to Louis Flaccus, February 17, 1925. Albert C. Barnes Correspondence. Barnes Foundation Archives, Philadelphia, PA. Reprinted with permission.

<sup>4</sup> Albert C. Barnes. Letter to Louis Flaccus, February 9, 1925. Albert C. Barnes Correspondence. Barnes Foundation Archives, Philadelphia, PA. Reprinted with permission.

<sup>5</sup> Louis W. Flaccus, *Skits, Poems, Riddles*, (Missoula, Montana: Mountain Press, 1951), Frontispiece.

<sup>6</sup> Louis W. Flaccus, "Sally, the Artist," *Skits, Poems, Riddles*: 48.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Osborne, "Remembering Lou Sloan," *Louis B. Sloan: A Particular Vision*, (Philadelphia, PA: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 2008): 5.

<sup>8</sup> David R. Brigham, "Louis B. Sloan: Artist and Mentor," *Louis B. Sloan: A Particular Vision*, (Philadelphia, PA: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 2008): 12.

<sup>9</sup> Terry Dintenfass, quoted in Samella S. Lewis, *African American Art and Artists*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) : 148

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Osborne, Telephone Conversation with the author, June 27, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Edward J. Sozanski, "The Happy Marriage of Order and Color," *Philadelphia Inquirer* (September 22, 2000).