

COLUMN: STUDIO

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## In the Studio with Sonia Almeida

This spring, I was moved by a blurb in the *New Yorker* to visit the Simone Subal Gallery on the Bowery. I'd never been there before and was pleased and excited by my encounter with the gallery, Simone herself, and the work of artist Sonia Almeida.

I noted that Sonia is Boston-based so I contacted her, told her how much I liked the show, and asked if a studio visit might be possible. I entered a medium-sized studio in Somerville that was chaotic and shared. Sonia is from Portugal. After living in the Netherlands for four years and in England nearly five, she moved to Boston, where her husband was offered a job as a sustainability consultant. She has two young children and teaches sophomore painting at MassArt part-time.

There is always a period of adjustment as one arrives in a studio; it's a good time to talk about general things as the eye slowly begins to decipher the activity and the work itself. On one long wall was hung a gathering of large pieces of fabric in many bright colors unrolled from the floor up and overlapped, all very casual, creating probably about twenty-five feet of color blocks. But nothing orderly or minimalist about it. Leaning against the fabric in various places were plywood panels, some painted freshly in coats of raw color, some old paintings that had been reduced to reworked surfaces. Having just finished the show in New York, this was the beginning of looking for something new. The colored fabric was an effort to bring a lot of color out just to see; it was also, Sonia

explained, a desire to address difficult colors like fuchsia or lime green. Contradictory forces were being played out. The most discernible tension was between the depth of Sonia's painting intelligence and the muddled mess of that processing moment.

It became evident that this was a painter trained in exquisite technique within the European academic tradition, and that her knowledge of art history ran deep. She was working very hard to fumble her way in the dark, with a profound interest in understanding misunderstanding and looking for that which is lost in translation. Bad painting, abject painting, is hard to love and harder still to grasp. For me, I suppose, an introduction to this mode was the work of Giorgio Morandi, and he remains an

exemplar for many painters working in this vein. His apparently slight objects painted in slight colors come, through repeated viewings, to gain in presence. I find Morandi's paintings to withstand repeated viewings far more than many spectacular paintings that since have paled. There's the gambit, that somewhere in this frail speaking we might cough out some extraordinary beauty rather than the expected and seductive pretty stuff that painting can make. There might really be not much there, but it is a very tempting game for a painter to try.

I go on studio visits with an eye towards reconsidering my own way of doing things. Sonia's self-knowing comment has given me pause to rethink my own: "I think I worry about the fine line that separates something randomly new from something genuinely



Opposite: Sonia Almeida. *Untitled (The Reader)*, 2011, cotton fabric, Xerox paper print cut-outs, 79" x 60", unique. Courtesy of the artist and T293, Naples/Rome. Photo by Maurizio Esposito. Above: Sonia Almeida in her Somerville studio. Photo: Carrie Moore.

surprising that instigates new thought." There is something new worth developing. I know this seems obvious, but the effort is not simply to seek the new, which so much of the art world is after, but to seek the surprising, which leads us to think differently.

How does Almeida pursue this? First in her own process, a process given to courting doubt and the inappropriate. She pursues it in her use of materials both traditional (oil paint) and casual, like fabric. This use of disjunctive materials forces one to react in new ways while she simultaneously addresses traditional painting and its concerns. It is important that this informs the work; new thought comes from somewhere. She pursues it in the thinking that moves from one painting to the next. The object does not simply stand by itself trying bravely to be something accomplished; rather the context is expanded to include a variety of sizes, gestures and plays with color and figure/ground that liven up the research. Hardly anything, any color or gesture or form is repeated, but each discovery is somehow brought back in for review and reconsideration. Almeida also pursues it in the installation of her paintings. A show is developed that leads the viewer to question, to seek connections, to consider thought itself.

The New York show was exciting for the layers involved. Some of the most interesting work these days revolves around painting as installation so that there is a conversation amongst the various pieces presented in an exhibition and the whole becomes a work in itself. The work of R. H. Quaytman, shown in 2010 at the ICA, is an example. Most painters work in a certain direction addressing a common problem or question, but installation based painters might use the opportunity to pull apart their thinking about painting as much as putting it together.

Almeida's recent exhibition included paintings based on other works, a fabric printed in grayscale reproducing one of the paintings, paintings in a variety of sizes, and each really addressed a different problem. In a sense, hers resembled a group show more than a solo exhibition.

As a painter myself, I began to get thrills of recognition as I discovered strange and fresh uses of figure/ground, gesture, layering, and abundant and unusual color. The work hid initially behind an air of casualness and seeming incoherence, but as an engaged viewer, it began to fill me abundantly. The dissonance added to the thrill as I searched for and found connections

and a livelier level of coherence. The coherence posed and answered questions about viewing, about reading a painting, about understanding and misunderstanding.

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