

There's a story embedded in all of Pat Cook's paintings, but it's up to the viewer to write it.

What you see is what you get

By Ann Emmert Abbott

The paintings in Pat Cook's "Conversation" series are like theatrical stages: The characters are carefully costumed and the theater is precisely lit, but it's a production with no script. Enter you, the viewer, to provide the story. "My paintings are really just abstractions," says Cook. "Something is going on, but I want the viewer to look at the piece and tell me what it is." Even so, Cook's painting theater isn't about improvisation. On the contrary, each work is a carefully controlled set, on which vital information is laid out visually. Make no mistake, Cook wants you to fill in the words in the conversation you're witnessing, to name the characters, the place and even the feelings, but she, the director, has supplied everything else.

More to the Story

The truth is that there's more than one conversation happening in Cook's work. Her characters are talking to each other, but Cook herself is communicating with the viewer, using the language of an artist: light, gesture, color, line, shape, texture. "I'm literally translating the way I see," she says. "I'm endeavoring to share the

way I see with others. This is the part of making art that's enriching to me." Note that the artist says she's sharing the way she sees, not what she sees. In Cook's work, this important distinction can't be overlooked.

"People sometimes think of my paintings as realism," Cook says, "but in truth, they're totally based in formalism and abstract composition." Until recently, she didn't even place her figures inside or outside, staging them instead in front of geometric shapes, leaving even the setting to the viewer. Of course, Cook didn't get to this point of artistic intent overnight. As any seasoned artist knows, creating content through purely visual means—without the shortcuts of context or sentiment—requires a level of mastery and confidence gained only through experience.

X Marks the Spot In *Conversation LXIX* (acrylic on gessoed paper, 26x22), Cook draws viewers in with a compelling and unusual composition for a figure painting. "By combining the values of the two separate figures and losing edges, I was able to create a larger, dominant shape," she says. "The horizontal and vertical passages form an interesting 'X' that attracts the eye."





Unreal If you think all of Cook's paintings, including *Conversation LXIV* (acrylic on YUPO, 18x24), are drawn from life, think again. The only place these four men and woman have ever existed together is in Cook's mind. This painting is really about shape and light.

Starting at the Beginning

Cook has been exposed to life-drawing classes for as long as she can remember. "As a child, I went with my mother," she says. "Throughout my adult life, even when I was working as a graphic designer, I continued to go to life-drawing classes, but after years and years of drawing the figure from every angle, I got to the point where I felt I just couldn't do another figure sitting on a stool with a bunch of easels in the background. So, I started drawing and painting trees."

It was the early 1990s, and Cook staged several successful shows with her newfound subject matter, but there was something about her trees that caught the eye of well-known fellow painter Katherine Chang-Liu. "The trees were leaning towards each other, as if they were talking," says Cook. "Katherine said, 'You might as well be painting people!'" About the same time, Cook was taking a class with a print-maker, making bleed-edge monotypes. To select a subject for one of her workshop pieces, she looked down at the newspaper that was spread

out to protect her work surface. "I chose part of a random picture of people together," she says. "I named it *Conversation*." Soon, Cook began working on her "Conversation" series, which is still in progress today.

These days Cook takes her own photos of people talking or interacting to use as reference material. "I don't care if they're young or old, man or woman," she says. "I'm looking for the right gesture."

The Gesture Is the Hook

When Cook evaluates a figure for possible use in a painting, her first question is *Where is the weight?* But even when she finds a figure that intrigues her, she'll still change it at will. "At this point, I know enough about anatomy that I can change the placement of a figure with confidence," she says. "In fact, I'm always having to unwrap figures, to relax their postures, so they'll be less distracting, and ensure that the relationship between the two figures remains the focus." Cook credits Edgar Degas with giving

her “permission to paint without feeling that I was doing anything less than painting exactly what I wanted to paint.” Degas, Cook notes, worked from photographs and sketches, often re-using the same character, posing and reposing, or using the same pose in different paintings.

Cook is passionate about the artist’s freedom to completely control visual expression in a painting. “How many times have you looked at a painting and thought, ‘Why did the artist put that there?’” she says. “Then you realize they put it in the painting because it was there, because they didn’t feel free not to use it.”

Like Degas, Cook thrives on the freedom to use a figure, or an element, over and over again.

see for yourself

Working as a graphic designer for years honed Cook’s ability to lead a viewer through a painting and then back to the focal point. In fact, if you try the old trick of standing back and squinting at one of Cook’s paintings, you can clearly see how masterfully she uses light and shape, sometimes with little punches of pure color, to guide your eye. Try it now, using *Conversation LXXI* (acrylic on gessoed board, 24x21) at left. Hold the magazine up and away from yourself and squint hard at the painting to see how the areas of light and dark play off each other. Remember, the shapes, the colors, the settings, even the gender of the subjects are all an expression of the way Cook sees what’s in her mind’s eye. “My training as a graphic designer couldn’t have been more important,” she says. “For years I created advertisements in which my job was to get the viewer to focus on the product, the message of the ad. I had to move people’s eyes.”





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“I’ll often use the same figure in three or four paintings,” she says, “until I just don’t want to paint it anymore.” Re-using a figure also means changing it. As a figure moves from painting to painting, clothes, position, even gender will change, depending on Cook’s vision.

Technical Freedom

After her breakthrough with subject matter, it took another five years of work before Cook found the materials and medium that matched her vision. “I painted the first six of the series in watercolor on paper,” she says. “I was tearing right through the paper, trying to get the texture and depth I wanted.”

Today, Cook paints on a gessoed surface—paper or illustration board—with acrylic paint. Using a trowel, she layers on about three coats of gesso, foregoing sanding during the preparation, leaving the surface somewhat textured. “I like the little marks,” she says.

On top of the gessoed surface, Cook blocks in areas with acrylic washes, then uses a paper towel or a cloth dabbed in alcohol to lift out color to create “paths of light.” She also scrapes and sometimes slashes into the painting to get back



Give and Take Until fairly recently, Cook was reluctant to set her figures clearly indoors or out. She finally decided that she was trading one kind of restriction for another. Now she’ll tell the viewer some things, for example that the setting for *Conversation LXXXVI* (acrylic on gessoed paper, 18x24) is in a city plaza. But it could be argued that a more important player in the painting is the color red. “I don’t have to literally see a color to use it any way I like,” she says. “Red acrylics are difficult. You have to lift any color off the gesso before you lay red in, if you want it to pop.”

Balancing Act “I find I get the best conversations using families or members of the same gender,” says Cook. In paintings such as *Conversation LXXX* (acrylic on gessoed board, 20x16), you can really see Cook’s focus on the gesture of her figures—how they lean into each other, how the weight of each figure is balanced and grounded. Note, too, how Cook uses the bright red railing to frame the conversation, to draw your eye up and around and back to the chat between the two women. Are they friends? Sisters? Strangers in a standoff?

formalism defined

In the visual arts, *formalism* refers to the concept or theory that a work can and should be evaluated only on the basis of its form—the shapes, lines and colors that compose the piece. Content, context or meaning isn't nearly as important, and isn't the onus of the artist.



What's Going On? What are you most intrigued by in *Conversation XXXIII* (acrylic on gessoed paper, 26x20)? Is it what you imagine the figures might be saying to each other, or the way your eye is pulled back and forth between the conversation in the foreground and the blaze of quinacridone yellow in the background? Even the shapes of the dogs in the painting participate fully in the composition. (Are the dogs themselves up to something? That, Cook would say, is up to you.) Note also how the skirt of the dress in the woman to the far right allows a hint of light to shine through—that's no accident.

to the white gesso, especially when she wants to pop in a clean, bright color (when she's not working in pure watermedia, she often uses touches of oil paint on top of the acrylic to achieve a similar effect).

Before she even begins a painting, however, she says she'll have completed several small pencil sketches, playing with shapes, gestures and light to see if she still likes the idea. If she lands on a composition that intrigues her, she tries it out in a 16x20-inch charcoal sketch—again, tweaking shapes and format. "At this point, I'm still not sure if I'm going to paint it," she says.

If an image holds up to the charcoal phase of development, Cook will paint a small color study in oil on canvas or acrylic on board. Often, she'll paint more than one of these small studies—as always, trying different things in her many versions. "This is really the fun part for me," she says. "I enjoy the decision-making process I go through when I'm getting ready to move to the next version." Even Cook's "final stage"—a large (typically 18x24 inches, but up to 30x40) acrylic painting on a gessoed surface—isn't the end. "I might do several large paintings of the same subject," she says. "I almost always have an idea of how it might be better."

Looking for a Way Out

Once an image, an idea or a figure intrigues Cook, she'll often work with it for years, searching, she says, for resolution. "I might do three or four pieces, then abandon the subject for years," she says. "But it's always in my mind—like I've just put it aside somewhere for a while." Cook is candid about why she feels some pieces aren't truly complete in her mind. "I just don't know



Directions “If you follow the paths of light and dark in a painting, they always bring you to the center of interest,” says Cook. “In *Conversation XLIII* (acrylic on gessoed paper, 22x22), the cast shadows on the diagonal also work to direct the viewer’s attention.”

how to resolve them,” she says. Once in a while, an idea may strike, so she’ll try it, repainting a piece with, say, a different color sky or a completely different setting.

“Once, I took a photograph of a man and woman sitting on a bench,” she says. “I loved the man. He looked so comfortable. But I never liked the attitude of the woman, so I set it aside. Years later, I took a photo of a friend of mine, talking to

his granddaughter. I combined the man on the bench with my friend in a painting. They were having a conversation in the piece, but in reality, they had never met. They weren’t even on the same continent!” The moral of Cook’s story? The artist controls her universe, which is her work. 

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