

Henry Finkelstein
Jerusalem Studio School Interview by Rebecca Harp
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Son of the much-admired painters Gretna Campbell and Louis Finkelstein, Henry Finkelstein received his MFA from Yale School of Art in 1983 and has been teaching at the National Academy of Design in New York since 1996. Primarily a landscape painter, Finkelstein admits that his working dynamic is highly influenced by the Abstract Expressionists, discovering meaning as he works, though he paints primarily from life: “Nature gives me a grounding,” says the 51-year-old artist. “Then what I do is go wild in it.” Reacting to the landscape in a loose, lyric painting manner, Finkelstein focuses on discovering in nature new color relationships, spatial concerns and rhythms to express in his art. It is a process, as he says, of “listening to color.”

Recently, we asked Henry Finkelstein to provide some more insight into his technique and background.

JSS: Tell us a little about your working methods.

HF: In the landscape, at first, I draw a lot. I seek a motif, (which stands for motive), and I find it through drawing. Something seems paintable once I find a theme, an approach. The color often has a lot to do with this, the particular light at that moment.

Then I go home and square up the drawing as exactly as possible onto a canvas of the same proportion. At times I might follow the drawing too much. I want to be free to move the drawing later. But this also means starting with the initial proportions that I found in the first place rather than wasting a lot of time just trying to get back to that. Recently I’ve taken to copying my drawings in a general, free sort of way, not so much to fix all the information as to catch the rhythm of it. Later on the drawing helps to remind me of the initial feeling that I had about the place. I’m not interested so much in documenting the place as I am in what I have to say about it. I like the statement by Bonnard, “Look at your subject once, or a thousand times”.

I work mostly outdoors on the painting, returning at the same time of day, and in the same weather, (as much as is possible). Often I find another motif just as I’m packing up to go home. My awareness has been heightened so I see better. I sketch the new thing and, if it works, I proceed with that as well.

In the studio, often months after having worked on a painting outside I adjust the color quantities. I can’t add information, more branches, clouds,

etc. But I can look at the painting abstractly and judge what it is trying to say through the color areas.

Although you're not supposed to say so, my still lives develop somewhat differently. I do seek a sense of place to the still life. I like it to be a bit confusing, a bit of a mess, like my outdoor subjects. But I don't do preparatory drawings. Instead I just draw directly onto the canvas, more or less life size. It can be harder to find a motif in the still life because it's very abstract. No one really walks in a still life or farms there or has a history there. It's possible that the subject matter of a landscape is more important to me than I am aware. There is a feeling that I seek from a still life, but it's perhaps a more formal feeling, like a piece of music. Once I get a still life going it becomes easier for me to see possibilities for the next one.

*JSS: You talk about **listening to color** in your artist's statement and specifically you say "I can often find colors by listening to them, by attributing certain sounds to each color." This sounds fascinating; can you explain more? We often hear the term color notes, but it seems that you have taken the term to a new level. Can you give some examples of recent color and musical note relationships you discovered in one of your paintings?*

HF: I don't like to think of color through color theory, of colors existing on an idealized chart that measures their hue, value, and intensity. Theory can be helpful for describing variations of color in a general sort of way. But I'm interested in a more emotive, and to me more specific sense of color, first as pigment, and then as sound. Take Manganese Blue or Viridian for example. The differences they have from other blue or green pigments cannot be described on a hue wheel. Manganese is acidic, sharp. Viridian is like green glass; the particles of Viridian pigment are actually transparent, like green glass under a microscope. I like to think of pigments as precious stones, or metals, or earths, which they are.

Then as I apply color it can take on the character of a sound, (provided I pay attention to it). An acidic yellow or a lime green can feel like a sharp sort of high-pitched sound. A Mars Orange can make a damp sound, or if mixed differently, a soft sound. Some soft sounds can actually feel pale or like a perfume, others might have more weight. These sorts of contrasts create a sense of how the color relationships feel to me. It's not an exact science like Blue means A Flat or whatever. It's more like a sensation, and it has everything to do with the context of how the particular colors are placed at that time. It helps me to be more specific about what I mean by each color. The touch too is an aspect of the color, whether the paint is applied with a big brush or a small brush, a round or a flat, whether it's thick short paint, or slippery flowing paint, or glazes. Lately I've taken increasingly to not completely mixing the pigments on the palette, but rather letting them

partially blend on the brush. I liken this to the way one makes notes on a violin, which, unlike a guitar, has no frets.

So color first is made of real material for me. Then it is transformed into something more abstract as feeling. The feeling might be sensing the color as a sound, or it might stem from a piece of music in my head. But the feeling is a way of making the color specific, not general. It is abstract and concrete at the same time.

JSS: You mentioned that you do not need to know how your painting will evolve or if it will succeed. Does this ever bring you to points of frustration, and if so, how? How do you define your “failures” and “successes”?

HF: I suppose one can get too heroic about this. But one of the things I admire about DeKooning, something we all admired about him when I was in art school, is how willing he is to lose the whole painting in a single gesture. How the search, the discovery a painting leads you to, is more important than the result. The trick is, this is what leads one to the best results. That’s how I see it anyway. Each painting should be in some way a new experience. It builds from the last experience; it can be different even in a small way. But there must be something new about it, something discovered, unanticipated.

There is a fusion of willfulness and letting the painting paint itself that all of us seek, each in our own way, and in different proportions. I don’t think anyone can live and work as wildly as DeKooning. Probably I don’t even want to. But DeKooning can represent for a modern artist the most extreme example of abandonment. I think this quality of “risk”, of performance, is just as evident in Titian, perhaps more powerfully because of the depth of his form. A Titian painting offers more resistance for me, doesn’t slip away as quickly as a DeKooning because Titian’s paintings have more to say. Titian is the real hero for me, but I’m thankful for DeKooning for how he affects my understanding of Titian. (DeKooning by the way, can also affect one’s understanding of Ingres, Picasso, Rubens, Soutine, Memling, Roman painting... He’s a very inclusive artist. I aspire to be inclusive too, maybe not of everybody, but of a range of things beyond the immediate references my paintings might suggest).

How do I define a successful painting? One in which something fresh is arrived at and is clearly stated. A failure? I’m as disappointed by a painting that I know too well from the start as I am in one that just becomes a hopeless mess.

JSS: Sometimes, you said, you have a thread of a theme in mind, but that you are always surprised by the final result. What is your painting process like in terms of studio/outdoors, time spent, reworking, etc? When is a painting finished for you?

HF: I think most of what I've already said answers this question. I would only add that a painting is finished when I don't know anymore what to do with it. If I'm not continuing to build on it, discovering new things within the initial intention, I'm taking away from it. It can be kind of sad sometimes. The end of a painting is when I have reached my limitations as an artist at that moment. I admire Titian because he can go on and on. I prefer a painting that continues for me for an extended time to one that wraps itself up right away. This becomes rather inefficient if one is thinking of the hourly rate that might go into a painting when it is sold. But again, it's not really the result that counts. But I like to think that my better results are ones that can give the viewer something rich to explore again and again upon viewing it. I'd like to age as an artist, the way Titian did, although simplicity has its role as well.

JSS: What are some of the artists that you look to for inspiration?

HF: Titian, obviously, for everything, space, color, light, volume, drama. Renoir is one of my favorites, his opalescence, the way the light comes from inside the form, goes around the form, and for his perfection. Many people hate Renoir, I think because they don't understand his joyfulness. But I think he is like Mozart, in the way his forms float through the air and are grounded at the same time. Veronese I love for his colorism, for the third color he makes between the colors that he puts down, like the note between the notes in a Beethoven piano sonata. Bonnard for his poetry. He uses color as a metaphor. His paintings suggest a host of things in subject and in mood, and his inventiveness. No one paints quite the way Bonnard does.

But I also love a lot of Italian art for its sobriety and its intensity of purpose. Everything can't be sweet. I lived for a year in Italy on a Fulbright and it became an important part of my experience. Piero, very sober, beautiful in that way, serene, transcendent. Nothing in nature can really feel like a Piero. I love Donatello, I can't describe why. Duccio for his sparseness, the Lorenzetti, Giovanni Pisano, Michelangelo, his sculpture more than his paintings, (everyone loves Michelangelo).

Of the Flemish I like Van Eyck and Memling and VanderWeyden for their idea of space as an eggshell.

Some recent artists I admire, along with DeKooning as I have said, are Paul Georges and Robert DeNiro. Georges for his sense of humor and his ambition, which I think was clearer in his work from the 60's and 70's than more recently. And DeNiro for his use of color quantity. There are other contemporaries I take from now and then. But I'm not going to tell you who they are. I think it's especially important to include some art of the past because you are forced to translate it for yourself, whereas you're probably only going to scratch the surface of someone contemporary to yourself.

Essentially I like everyone. Those above speak to me personally in the ways I've described. But the whole tradition is a breathing, organic thing that we each synthesize in our own way. I'm not one of those people who shuns the 20th century, as if everything before it was better. But I'm not too worried about it either because I know that I see all of these people through 20th century eyes. All of painting exists in a kind of timelessness. I think all painters seek that. We paint so that we can live longer, not just in posterity, but also in the present. We have glimpses of a no-time in our conversations with the past and within ourselves.

Along with painters and sculptors I'm inspired by music. I've mentioned Mozart and Beethoven, but I also love Satie and Poulenc. Poulenc has an airiness and a quiet elegance. Satie does as well but also has an edge of absurdity to it. For edge I especially like Miles Davis. He did so many different things; he has a smoothness and then a sudden sharpness. He's often unpredictable. I grew up on Bob Dylan. His music holds its power for me with the passage of time. I like Rimbaud's poems the way one might read a piece of music. It's not clear exactly what he's saying, but there's a definite atmosphere and mood to it.

JSS: Can you share with us your preferred subjects and scenes, and the reasons why you prefer to paint them?

HF: I like a landscape that's a bit of a mess, where I have to find the order to it. I often like it if the foreground is in the way a bit, semi-translucent, blocking my view of something. A shift up and down is always nice, as opposed to a completely flat field. I like it if there's a human trace to the landscape, where the land has been considered; I'm not very interested in wilderness. But I had a hard time painting in Italy where every row of soil was claimed by something, artichokes, tomato plants, etc. , where it's too ordered. I remember how a neighbor in Italy would cut down his fruit trees when they ceased to bear consistently whereas a French gardener will often hold up an old tree with crutches as it builds character, like an old relative. For some reason, I tend to prefer valleys to being up high. I prefer gray days to sunny ones, and I often like working at the end of the day, when the light is going. The volumes seem richer then. I seek a light that comes from within the form as distinguished from a light on the form. Renoir can pull this off on sunny days. But I also like Constable's declaration that he wanted to paint the moisture in the air. I'm sure there are Freudian reasons why I choose certain kinds of motifs over others that I may become aware of by degrees, as time goes on.

JSS: Your parents, Gretna Campbell and Louis Finkelstein, might obviously have influenced your shaping as an artist. Was this ever a struggle for you? What would you consider the most important thing to have learned from them? Did you ever feel too influenced?

HF: They did indeed influence me at first – a lot. They were what I knew most from childhood. Of course, being around the other painters they knew and regularly visiting museums, such as the Metropolitan Museum in New York helped to introduce me to a larger art culture. When I was 12, in 1970 we traveled through France, Italy and Spain and I was exposed to a lot of things that became part of my visual vocabulary.

I feel fortunate to have come across some teachers, two in particular at Cooper Union, Rueben Kadish and Nick Marsicano, who were of a different bent from my parents. They did not work from life, for example. They placed themselves in the tradition, as did my parents, but from a very different point of view. Marsicano talked about the relationships in a canvas in a very abstract way. He talked about space and light, but of a space and light that existed somewhere in the mind. He had a wonderful way of weaving together ideas from the old masters and the Abstract Expressionists, as though they were painting at the same time. Whereas most of what I knew had been tied to the impressionists working from nature. Kadish spoke of authenticity and the pedigree of an original expression, which, if someone doesn't tell you to look for you might not notice it. He sort of led you to what blues musicians call the "crossroads". Of course these things are more complicated than all that. I'm sure my father spoke of a space and light that is in the mind, for example. I just mean that those teachers showed me new horizons from what I knew at the time.

When I was in Art School the experience I had in art from before, through my parents, gave me a kind of edge up. I knew how to work. I could speak clearly about my work and that of others. I knew art history like the back of my hand. How could anyone not be grateful for that? But later on in life, I would say in my late 30's I did reach a sort of crisis of doubt, about the whole thing, and perhaps of being, as you say, too influenced – by my mother in particular. I felt as though I had just been going through the motions of being an artist and I needed to either possess it for myself or drop it and do something else. This was terrifying because I don't know what else I could do. Although painful, this was a good thing because it led me to a more personal sense of color, and of painting from emotion, of sublimation. People have asked me, "What's it like growing up with two painters?" and how can I answer that, not having anything to compare it to. But I guess I never had the privilege of a more youthful doubt, of having to prove to oneself at the age of 20 that this wasn't a waste of time.

JSS: You have been teaching at the National Academy of Design in New York for the last 13 years. Can you describe a bit about your teaching philosophy? What are some of the things you feel necessary to get across in your teaching, and what rewards do you find in teaching?

HF: I have learned so much from teaching, going back to my first job at the University of Hartford in 1984. Approaches and teaching styles I have taken have changed over the years, so I can't remember all of them. But I know that I have always stressed plasticity in some way, the effect of each move on the whole of a painting or a drawing. I've always been interested in space and volume, and color. And I've always found exposure to historical examples to be essential. Then I like to draw out what distinguishes one student's work from another's as they explore the visual language.

I've always believed that one view or idea is not superior to another, but rather it's what each artist does with the idea that counts, what kind of depth can they bring to it, how personal can they make it. Unlike, say, the kind of discourse one finds at the Whitney Biennial, I don't really think there really are any "new" ideas. Instead the newness that I look for is what has a given individual done with an idea that hasn't been seen before. Ultimately what has never existed before is each of us. To me this is true newness, whereas I see the other as novelty. And I think one can always find something special in a work at any level, be it the professional artist, the full time student or the hobbyist.

All of this can be talked about in infinite ways by any artist, and thus my approaches to it have evolved over time. The important thing is to stay alive in one's teaching, to always keep it fresh. New work by new students can help in this regard, along with one's own personal development. Articulating visual concepts for students has brought out some of my own artistic priorities. I'm not interested in everything, but I am interested in some things. It's important to recognize that one is never "right", but rather, hopefully competent at something, and that one can respect others who are competent at something else.

At the same time too much teaching can be poisonous because there's something private that I'm doing in my studio that can't be translated into words, which exists outside of all this other stuff. It might begin with visual ideas as a background, but hopefully it transcends them in some way. For me it's the feeling I can imbue into the work and hopefully communicate to someone else. It is never fixed, but rather it lives on in its own right. This is the simplicity that I seek.
