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HYPERALLERGIC

Beer With a Painter: Claire Grill

“If a painting doesn’t have the right seasoning, it has to wait.”

Jennifer Samet
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The poet and art critic John Ashbery wrote, in relation to painting, “most good things are tentative, or should be if they aren’t.” I think of this idea when I experience Claire Grill’s abstract paintings. I live with a 12 by 10-inch painting by Grill in my bedroom: “Horseshoe,” 2016. The colors range from deep pink to burgundy, and the forms, as the title suggests, all take off from a horseshoe shape, stretching into arcs and crescent moons across the surface, pulled by gravity into uneasy ovals. It is punctuated by a thin, pinkish border around some of the edge, suggesting a slightly asymmetrical wall hanging. A tactile range is packed into the small piece: it suggests red velvet, but it is also viscous, scratched into, and translucent. The marks are both considered and very aware.

I walk by the painting every day as I open my window shades in the morning. There’s something about the painting that reflects and echoes these small moves, these repetitions, that comprise daily rituals, domestic life, intimacy. When I first met Grill, her studio was in her home. I have a memory of a studio visit in which we spent time talking about painting in her kitchen. She still lives in Sunnyside, Queens, with a studio in Long Island City. This Spring, we met at a sidewalk table of a new brewery in the neighborhood. New York had just begun to lift pandemic restrictions, and everyone was taking tentative steps toward normalcy.



Clare Grill, “Trumpet” (2019), oil on linen, 48 x 38 inches

Grill was the subject of a recent exhibition, *There’s the Air*, at Derek Eller Gallery, New York, where she showed paintings of different sizes, each one residing in what she has called a specific “color climate.” Also on view were works on paper that respond to antique embroidery samplers. The drawings can suggest barely legible handwriting. The paintings take off from these sources, gathering families of marks and shapes. Their brushwork interacts with the tooth of the linen and exposes luminosity underneath. They radiate with a joy of making, an awareness of the imperfections and complexities of everyday life, and also a consciousness of what is beneath the surface.

Clare Grill (b. 1979) received her MFA from the Pratt Institute in 2005, and attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 2011. She has been the subject of solo exhibitions at Zieher Smith & Horton Gallery, New York; Reserve Ames, Los Angeles; Soloway Gallery, Brooklyn; and Diane Rosenstein Gallery, Los Angeles. Grill was the Fall 2017 Artist-in-Residence at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. Her work is represented by Derek Eller Gallery, New York.

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JENNIFER SAMET: *Did you have meaningful experiences looking at other art or making art, as a child?*

CLARE GRILL: I grew up in the suburbs of Chicago. My sister and I would draw and paint and make stuff for plays we created. I would copy my coloring books, copy from our picture books, always copying something else as well as I could.

However, I didn't know that being an artist was something you could do. We didn't go to art museums really. My siblings and I played in the backyard. That's what we did, always and forever. We had so much fun. We had our freedom and we had each other. There were five kids, and all the neighbors. But I'm sure my mom was not eager to get us all in the van and go downtown to take us to the museum.

I only took one art class in high school and I remember a trip into the city to see galleries. We ended up at what I think was a Paul McCarthy show. My teacher probably hadn't fully realized what she was bringing us to. We were Catholic school kids. It involved Santa and chocolate and reindeers and elves and everyone was scandalized!



Clare Grill, "Vein" (2020), oil on linen, 24 x 23 inches

JS: *I was curious about a faith practice, then or now, since your work, particularly the drawings based on embroidery samplers, refers to religion.*

CG: I was raised Catholic and I went to Catholic school all the way through college. We went to church on Sundays growing up. It was just what you did. It was very comforting as a child, and I liked all the rituals. As I've gotten older, so much has been revealed, like an awareness of the pain the Catholic Church has inflicted upon people. It's also done wonderful work around the world. It's complicated, like most things.

But it makes me sad because it was such a comfort and it was nice. The innocence has been yanked away. Maybe it's always that way when you grow up. Losing it is not so simple, especially now with a little child. It's what I knew and now I don't. But religion, and Catholic faith, showed me mystery. It was the first place I learned about what seemed like magic. Also, there is a blind faith and trust you get, a letting go of the idea that you can control everything, which can be a wonderful thing.

I went to a liberal arts college, University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minnesota. It didn't have an art program. I didn't look at art magazines or go to galleries. My senior year I was the only student enrolled in advanced painting. They turned it into an independent study and gave me a great studio. My professor came in every three weeks, gave me the thumbs up, and I'd keep painting. I learned that I loved to go to my studio.

JS: *How did you end up studying at Pratt Institute, and what was your experience there?*

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CG: Pratt was my first art school experience, and it was amazing. My shell got ripped off me. I learned about the art world. I had great peers. We went to openings all the time. We were serious about our work and helping each other. Before that, I had no guide.

In graduate school and right after, I was making figurative work that was based on photographs. I struggled because I was trying to find a way to make the photos mine. I felt like a robber, or a phony. I began to use personal imagery, like family photos, to try to have more ownership or sense of myself in the work.

I was thinking about my mother and grandmother, and the women who I'm descended from. I was referring to their things — their wallpaper, their fabrics, and their curtains. Family history was engaging because it is so complicated. There is so much love and beauty and happiness, and there is so much sadness and pain — and so many secrets.

I realize that I felt a responsibility toward those family members and places. I felt more bound than freed by them. I had a show at Edward Thorp Gallery of this figurative work. I was so drained after the show. It was my regular routine of crisis: What do I make work about?

JS: *I know that attending the Skowhegan School residency was meaningful to you. Can you talk about that and your journey into abstraction?*

CG: I found out I was going to Skowhegan shortly after the show at Ed Thorp ended. I didn't know what I wanted to make, but I knew that I love when I am in the middle of painting and I'm not thinking. I knew that that's all I wanted: a different way to get to that heightened state. It is like running a marathon — it's almost autopilot, and it is magical.

When I arrived at Skowhegan, I quickly put away my box of photographs and just waited to make work. I wanted the work to be urgent. It was during that summer that I began to trust and look at my painting as a collaboration. The painting itself became the source material, as opposed to my picture in my hand. I wasn't looking back and forth.

I made one particularly weird painting that summer. It was from a photograph of my mom in her 20s, when she was pregnant with me. She was with my oldest brother, and they were squatting down on the sidewalk, probably looking at an ant. On the sidewalk is a shadow cast from the stroller. I made a painting with the shape of that cast shadow. You wouldn't necessarily recognize it, but you would see something specific.

I gradually began to trust myself to whittle away. I've likened it to learning a foreign language. I lived in Spain for a semester. One day, I was on a bus talking to an old man in Spanish, and I realized I wasn't translating into English. I was just understanding. There's something that happens in painting that's not unlike that. You are not translating with words or your mind — you are just knowing.

Over several years, I discovered that the voice I was looking for wasn't rooted in an image. It was rooted in color, material, touch — and linen. For me, using imagery feels like my brain is too much in charge and my eyes and my gut or my heart aren't. I think about Giorgio Morandi's paintings. You can name what you are looking at but they unfold in ways that are about painting and life.

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JS: An important source for your work has been 18th-century American embroidery samplers, which are made by girls as demonstrations of their needlework skills. How did you start using them, and what role do they play in your work?

CG: The embroidery samplers came to me through my husband, Bill, who studies early American literature. I loved them immediately. They felt like a previous version of a family heirloom — a document of a family and a life. They are traditional, beautiful, orderly, and sweet. But if you read the verses stitched into them, they have a heavy content: an awareness of death, obedience to God, and praying for your soul. They are rich source material because of their complex mood.

I draw from the samplers. Each drawing is a response to a single sampler and the one thing that is literally borrowed is the girl's first name, which I use as the title. When I'm painting, I work from my own drawings. This gives me a feeling of freedom with the original artifact. I don't have to be reverent toward the thing. I'm not trying to transcribe anybody's story. I am just responding to them.

The original forms change as the painting progresses. I get down to business when my face is up close to the painting. It's about the subtlety and the little marks — the little touches. That is the stage when the shape gets morphed into something strange. It's about painting.



Clare Grill, "Elizabeth S." (2021), oil on paper, 19 x 15 inches framed

JS: You have talked about concentrated attention to the painting being central as you work. What kinds of things are you responding to as your paintings develop?

CG: I paint flat most of the time, in a window with light falling on the surface so it casts little shadows. I can see the physical material and the relief: the ridges of brush marks and the weave of the fabric coming through. I move around the painting so the color changes according to where my body is. I see things happening and I respond to them.

I paint on it until I can't really see anything else, or until the paint is getting dry. The shine obscures and creates a veil over the painting. In that condition you can't see color as well, but you can see tone. If it looks too shiny, I might use sandpaper to scumble it. This pulls a bit of paint off and reveals color underneath. I might paint the scratches.

I'll put it on the wall and start to see forms, pieces of things, and compositional relationships. I make choices: to cover over, pull things forward, or even let them cast shadows. Sometimes I like for my paintings to have an edge: a little painted border in parts. It's like a punctuation mark, or a way to show that the whole painting matters, not just what's in the middle. I tend to go back into any mark I've made and touch it some more. I love the way that a fresh paint mark looks, but I don't trust it. It's too alpha.

If a painting doesn't have the right seasoning, it has to wait. I don't ever throw them away. They might be very stubborn, but I know that awful, frustrating painting underneath might be the bones, informing the layers of paint that come after. I don't know what the finished painting is going to look like, but I recognize

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the feeling I get when I look at it. They have to have presence and power, and if they don't, they are needy or annoying. A good painting doesn't want anything else.

JS: Can you tell me more about the importance of linen to you? I also find that your work is so tactile and suggests the feeling of different fabrics or materials. Can you talk about this?

CG: I love painting that makes you wonder what it feels like to touch it. You can change the character of the surface so it looks like fabric or suede. I choose linen because I like its inconsistency. It is gnarly, nubby, and imperfect. There is a lot to work with in the very beginning. If you rub a dirty rag over white linen — which is how I begin most of the paintings — you reveal character about the surface. You can do so much with so little if you look closely enough.

When I look at other painting, I consider the ground and the substrate, and if there is anything magical that happens when the two of them come together. The ground has to have as much presence or integrity as the paint. Kathy Bradford's recent [exhibition](#) at CANADA really moved me: the little hairs of paintbrush left frozen in the surface. It's like a snapshot of the vulnerability that is painting. There's both an urgency and a surrender, a letting be.

JS: Domestic arts are a source material, and your earlier figurative painting referred to women in your family. In the press release for your recent exhibition at Derek Eller Gallery, you included a very personal statement that refers to your experience as a woman, and a series of miscarriages you experienced. Do you think of your work as rooted in the feminine? And can you tell me more about that press release, which really struck a chord with people?

CG: I think of my painting as seeking, and there's a huge amount of waiting and listening and caring and patience that go into their making. Maybe those are feminine qualities. I don't know. I didn't set out to make art that was rooted in this feminine place. That wasn't my pursuit. I don't really know what my pursuit is. I just put my head down and do what feels true. There have been these truths about my life and they peek through my work in different ways.

I didn't intend to write a press release for my recent show. But I had a lot of work in my studio that I had been making for years. So one morning, a few weeks before the show, I sat down to try to help myself understand the work, and which paintings fit together. I wrote that piece, and it felt like the only true thing to say.

I thought of these lives that never got to be. There are babies who were never born. But they are the root. They are still integral. They are part of my story, in the same way that the layers of the painting are like bones informing the final thing. They are necessary, even though you don't see them.

I can't look at any of that work without recognizing when they were made, and with what experience. It is like a sense memory. I see them and they are full of many months of grief. They are not describing that. They aren't trying to symbolize or translate anything.

I didn't know if I wanted to share that bit of writing. But it touched on all these different aspects of what informed the painting: my own personal losses, the great loss we are all still experiencing because of the pandemic, and the commemorative embroideries — these mourning samplers that I look at and think about.

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I don't have it all together in terms of putting my paintings in a larger context. I back into my paintings. After they are made, I think "I see you, but what are you?" They aren't about anything, but they absorb things and are formed from a lot of outside and inside urges. I don't think it is grander than that.

JS: *In his review of your show in *Hyperallergic*, John Yau referred to a "faith in painting" and the *untranslatable*. How did this resonate for you? I am also curious how it relates to other art you look at and admire.*

CG: I don't have a strong background in art history, but this may have helped me. I don't feel burdened by art history. Maybe that's naive. I look at art, but I think it's important to do less looking, less talking about the work, less looking at media. Instagram can be a gross feedback loop for young artists who have no idea what they want to do or look at. How can you know, when you're flooding your head with all of that imagery? I think it's good to be quiet. Put it away and wait.

I go to an acupuncturist every week. She talks about faith being the opposite of fear. Faith is about surrendering and existing in not-knowingness. Faith is believing in what you're doing right now. For me to paint well I have to have a good amount of not knowingness. I have to give up control in order to have a real conversation with the painting. I have to be very open to it, which requires a lot of attention and humility. There has to be an element of surprise, and learning and seeking, in order for my paintings to achieve their presence.