Interweavings: A Conversation with Katherine Mitchell

By Rosemary M. Magee

In October 2006, Katherine Mitchell and Rosemary Magee talked about art, life, and chance encounters.

RMM: When did you first start to think of yourself as an artist?

KM: I think I was always moving in that direction. As a child, I drew all the time. Growing up in the South, one did not see a lot of paintings. But Memphis did have a small museum which brought an extraordinary exhibition that included a Philip Guston painting, and it completely stunned me. I mean, this really incredible revelation—it felt like the meaning of life.

RMM: How old were you then?

KM: I was old enough to have driven myself there, fifteen or sixteen. After that, I knew I wanted to be an artist. Then I heard a lecture given by Lamar Dodd from the University of Georgia. He had been sent all over the world by the State Department as sort of an ambassador for art, and that set me to thinking "not only am I going to do it, but that's where I'll start." While a student at UGA, I met entirely by chance, through a literal detour, a graduate student who had gone to the Atlanta College of Art, and I decided that was where I wanted to be. And so that shaped my life for awhile. At that time, the Atlanta College of Art had an arrangement with Emory, so for art history I had John Howett and Tom Lyman as well as other great academic professors.

RMM: One of the things I noticed when I browse through your various materials and artist's statements is that three words seem to pop up periodically. One was "stillness;" another one was "solitude;" and the third one was "serendipity."

KM: And serendipity is not unrelated to the diversion idea.

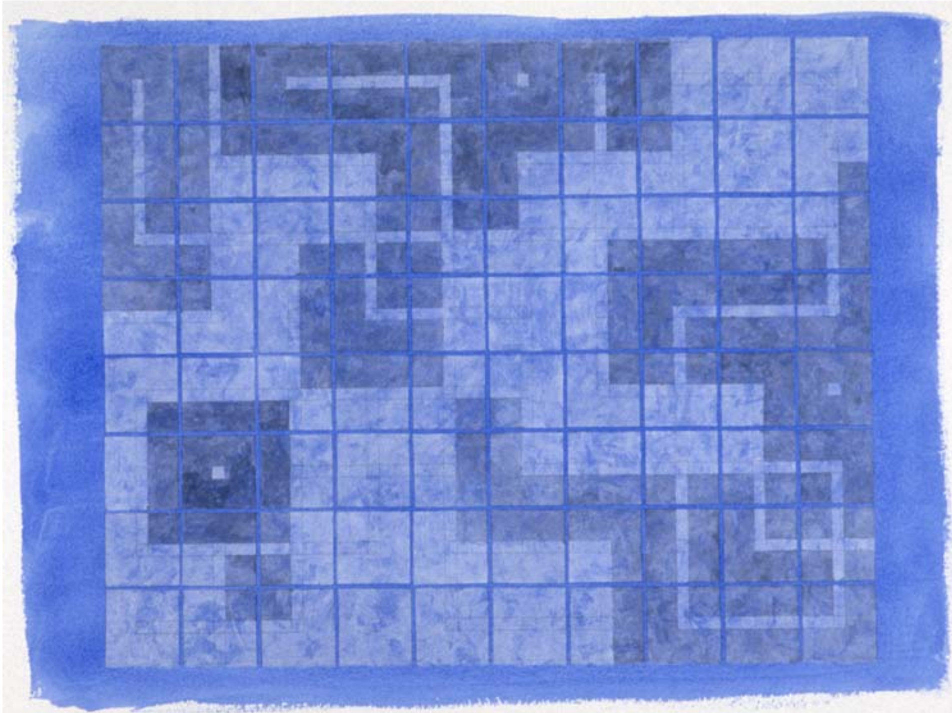
RMM: Do these words, in fact, resonate with you?

KM: I think so. I do think art comes out of solitude. I find it very difficult to work if there are other people around. It's hard to maintain the social side of oneself while trying to do one's own work.

RMM: How does teaching affect your work? Do you feel that you learn from your students as much as they learn from you?

KM: Some of the most exciting students with whom I have worked are the architecture students, who often are remarkably motivated and hard working. Sometimes I can see a point at which things really begin to come together for them. That is a very exciting thing to witness in a student, and the student senses it, too. I don't know how to express what I learn from that, but it certainly is one of the things that keeps one teaching.

RMM: I imagine that you have to learn new styles of teaching with different types of students.



except on my own. It was there that I developed works in a different range of colors, the Etruscan colors, and experienced the first development of the architectural influence in my work. These ideas continued in my work for many years, up to the start of the MARTA project in 1995.

RMM: And there have been other unexpected wanderings?

KM: Even first going to Austria in 2003 was based on the recommendation of a friend of mine who lives in Berlin. She was so adamant about it that I applied for an artist's residency in Krems, a small town with a vibrant art scene near Vienna. Through an odd series of events, it ended up being a three-year experience that was very meaningful for me—and came about in a completely unexpected way. Towards the end of my first year there, I realized I needed to build a crate to get my work home. Why this didn't dawn on me earlier, I don't know. So right at the end of my time there, I was told a man in the Exhibitions Department at the museum would be willing to build me a crate. He was a very interesting person, a master craftsman. The curator had come with him to make sure we understood each other because I don't speak German, although the man spoke good English. I had all my work just tacked up on the walls. And so, the next day, the curator offered me an exhibition in 2006. If he had not come to the studio, if I had not had that crate built, I would never have been offered the exhibition.

KM: I've taught in the alumni university, and that means working with some people who are doctors or lawyers perhaps – which is quite different from working with college students. But I think the big thing that one tries to do is to respond to individual differences because I don't believe that there's just one right way to do anything. Students have to make their own discoveries, so I feel like I'm trying to set things up so that they are making their discoveries, rather than me saying, "Do it this way, exactly."

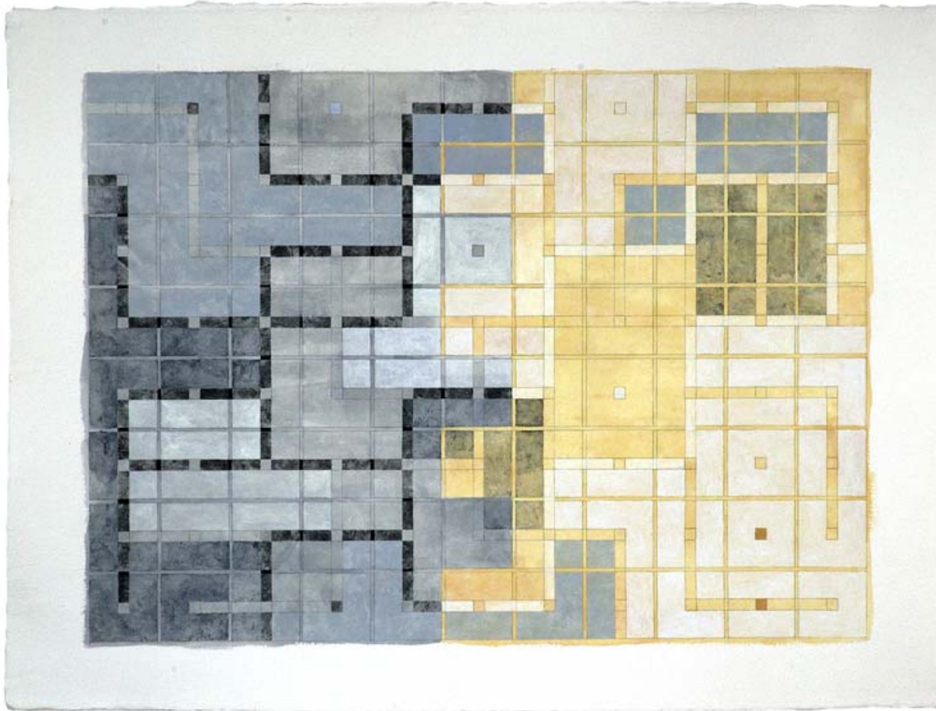
RMM: As a writer, I know that meandering rather than following linear paths can lead to new insights and experiences. You have mentioned before that you are a walker and that you pursue detours and diversions in your walks and in your life. How does this inclination show up in the work itself?

KM: I think it does throughout. Here's a perfect example of a chance encounter shaping the direction of my work for many years. In 1979, I had works in an exhibition at the American Academy and Institute of Arts & Letters in New York. A friend took me the day after the opening to visit her painter friend in SoHo, and he kept referring to another painter, Harrison, who also had a loft in the same building. By chance, I discovered this Harrison was a friend of mine from my student days at the Atlanta College of Art. He summered in Spain and rented his SoHo studio, which he offered to me for the summer of 1981.

That summer was one of the really great working experiences of my life—very much like a residency,

RMM: As I look at your works over different moments and periods, I see some real shifts in the use of color. How do you come to know and select the color for your work?

KM: It's very much a felt thing. When I was a student and in the early, early work, I was looking at what I called nominal color, by which I mean color that one could name, by name—red, blue, and yellow. Then I began working with what I call color temperature. Later, after I moved and was living in the country, I worked with color based on nature, which was very soft and delicate. When I spent that summer in New York, I wanted a different kind of surface quality and a different kind of color, and the color that came back to me very



strongly was a memory based on Etruscan tomb painting with terra cottas, blues, and a field of white. It wasn't color coming from the experience of New York in a complete way, but it triggered in me a color that I'd long been attracted to—and the work was becoming more architectonic.

RMM: Can you talk about other life experiences that have affected your choice of color?

KM: When I went to the Hambidge Center for the Creative Arts and Sciences in 1994, it was very rainy. I was thinking about mist, vapors, and clouds—and I was coming to the end of the architectural idea. But just by chance I had gone to a lecture at Emory by John Howett where he mentioned a Chinese painter, Chao Meng-fu of the 14th century, whose work was a revelation to me. I'd seen Chinese paintings before, but it took seeing the right painting at the right moment for it to give me something I needed.

RMM: Does the natural environment often influence your work this way?

KM: I love being in nature, but a lot of my inspiration comes from what man makes. So, when I was in Austria, in this world heritage site—exquisite medieval villages that wind from the Danube River, which is beautiful, up the hill into thousand-year-old vineyards, it was just about close to perfect.... You can wander up into the vineyards and overlook the whole thing, the river and, in fact, literally overlook the village—it's so far below you that you don't see it, you just look out at the river so you feel that you're really in nature but you also are part of this beautiful little village.

RMM: Your work has a quality of precision that is very overt, even tangible. I imagine this requires a lot of focus and attention, a physical as well as mental discipline.

KM: The paintings do have to be precise—especially the architectural, geometric, and lineolate works. There's a certain pleasure on my part in seeing a sort of harmonious balance. But there's also a state you enter when you're doing a particular body of work, when you just have a feeling about what to do and how to do it. I think if somebody told me that I had to go back and do one of those paintings again, it would feel like a complete physical impossibility. I don't know how I would do it. And I've heard other artists say this, too, that you're so involved in that state at the time that it's quite natural.

RMM: How would you describe your choice of materials?

KM: I like using traditional materials a little bit differently than they are intended to be used. The architectural works are pastel, which is usually very soft. You think about the Impressionists using pastels, and you don't think about geometry and very precise forms with them. So, I like using traditional materials but using them in ways that they really weren't necessarily meant for. And that's pleasurable to me, also.

RMM: When you are moving into a new kind of work, are you able to recognize this shift?

KM: Usually I do, because it can be painful, and it involves a lot of banging my head on the wall and feeling like I'm almost in free fall and can't figure out what I'm trying to do. And that can go on for a while. But I guess if you didn't go through that, there wouldn't be as much pleasure when you feel like you've finally gotten into a sort of zone where things are really working. And then it changes into something else, and if it didn't change, I think it would be very boring. I don't turn my back on anything that I've done, but I don't want to do it again. I want to keep moving.

RMM: Do you know what leads to the changes?

KM Some artists have a theory, and the work becomes exemplary of a concept and an idea. I don't work that way. I do the work and that's how I learn where I've been and where I'm going. Without the work, I have no way to relate to the world, or to my experience in some ways. Usually I have to do a good bit of work in a particular vein to begin to sense what that change is about.

RMM: When people ask you to describe your work, to categorize it, what do you say?

KM: Once, at a bad moment, I was asked that question and said I really didn't know. But now I try to have a few words ready as an answer—and usually "abstract and geometric" best describe my work. However, I also think it's important to spend a lot of time being not quite sure what you're doing. It's an important part of the process, and often when responsiveness to diversions or detours is particularly likely to be important.

There is a quotation from Philip Guston that I often use in teaching. He said, "We (the Abstract Expressionists) painted what we didn't know." I like the idea of not following the path or plan, but of creating one's own.

RMM: While very precise, your paintings also have an expressive quality. Looking back on your work, do you see it as reflective of events in your life?

KM: In 1996, my brother died. When I am confronted with the death of someone I love, my work becomes very ephemeral and very delicate and perhaps more spiritual in feeling than some of the other work. So that work grew and produced a whole series for more than five years that I called *Water Series*, based on ripples, on the movement of water, which was such an important part of his life, and which then turned into the structure of DNA. This DNA represents my relationship to my brother, our common heritage. But the double helix in these paintings grew entirely out of my working with the intersecting patterns across the surface of water. I had not been able to resolve these images until the double helix emerged, and it was a surprise to me.

RMM: Do you think that your work, and, in looking back on it, is representative in some way of your emotional being?

KM: I think emotional states—that's what comes across in the works still. And it's really fundamental to appreciate the work more than the event as such. One person's death might stand for the fact that we've all experienced death; it's part of the human condition. The distillation of form from experience is what's important. Rilke talks about "blood-remembering" from which comes poetry. It's about layers of memory and layers of experience—not the superficial memory of what happened yesterday, but how those layers really become who you are and enter your life, and then come out.

RMM: Do you have a sense of how all this unfolds?

KM: I do think there is a gestation period. At times I might be working in one direction, and then something like my brother's death occurs which then shapes the work in a different way. That seems to happen very often, and it's a little nonlinear or almost impossible, but it does seem to work that way: the direction of the work may begin changing, even before a particular event occurs, and the occurrence of this event will then shape or reinforce the direction of change.

I go back and forth between very ephemeral and somewhat bolder works. Early on, in the sixties and seventies, I would have said that my work was about the act of marking. The new paintings, these woven works, really go back in some ways to that idea.

RMM: When you look back on your work, and I know that you're arranging or thinking about how this exhibition will all be organized and arranged, you have several periods. Could you name what you consider those to be?

"[I]t is not yet enough to have memories. One must be able to forget them when they are many and one must have the great patience to wait until they come again. For it is not yet the memories themselves. Not till they have turned to blood within us . . . and no longer to be distinguished from ourselves—not till then can it happen that in a most rare hour the first word of a verse arises in their midst and goes forth from them."
[Ranier Maria Rilke]

KM: I think there's a linear period, a period about marking, or lines. I think there's an exploration of architectural form. The linear pieces have been moving in the direction of geometry and then it becomes really more concrete with the more architectural works. Then you get the beginning of spiritual works, the influence of nature and that influence moves into the water series. And that stays with me for several years. I guess it's the only advantage to living a certain amount of time is that you have decade-by-decade of work [*laughter*] . . . .

But then, feeling the need to move into yet a different direction and leading into the sacred stairs and magic squares. And from there we're into the . . . maybe I'm not distant enough to yet have a name for this *Umleitung*—*Umleitung* means detour—or labyrinth period. But after all of those works, then comes the woven. I feel that in some odd way, they do really have a rapport with some of those earliest works. I could build that case even more strongly, but I'm wanting to put more recent work in the show rather than earlier . . . . I had a major 24-year retrospective in 1991. And I don't want to repeat it completely, or even that portion of it.

RMM: Could you talk more about how weaving enters your work?

KM: For years people talked about my work as having a relationship to weaving, and part of that was because of the way I made color transitions. I might start out with a row that had 100 lines and 90 of them would be red and by the time I got to the bottom row, there still would be 100 lines, but maybe only one of them red, progressively building in a color change. It is the way weavers make a color transition. Intellectually, I'm really rather secular. I don't believe in past lives. But I did have a past life in Afghanistan, and I think I was a weaver. Centuries ago . . . .

RMM: And how did you come to this discovery?

KM: I was in the Atlanta College of Art library in the early seventies. There was an article that I read about Afghanistan, and I thought, "I've been there: I know this place." It was chilling—such a strong experience.

RMM: And so you think of yourself from an earlier time—that you were a weaver in Afghanistan?

KM: I think of myself as a very menial laborer most of the time.

RMM: You describe your work as being inspired by architecture, and we know that when we're in a built structure there are aspects not seen—such as pipes or vents. In your most recent work, the woven work, it seems like the hidden parts are pushing out in some way.

KM: When I was thinking of architectural influence, I was thinking of things that are so simple—of literally taking a block and putting it on another block, more than that there's a structure within the building. In fact, though, I think these new paintings start very much the same way some earlier paintings end, and then they pick up this overlay of marking and other elements. I feel like now I'm taking this new structure and pushing in a different direction. At some point, that structure will be replaced by something else.

RMM: When you say "marking," what exactly do you mean?

KM: The physical act of making the mark. Early on, in the sixties and seventies, I would say that my work was about the act of marking. The new paintings, these woven works, really go back in some ways to that idea.

RMM: This idea of marking seems very primordial, even instinctual . . . .

KM: Those things mankind has done over thousands and thousands of years.

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