

# History and Memory: The Muses of Abstraction

The East Hampton Star, May 31, 2007

BY ELIZABETH FASOLINO

Sally Egbert, an abstract artist, has painted hundreds of canvases in her career, but only one of them hangs on the wall of her house in Springs: a painting she made when she was 9 years old.

"I'm around my own paintings in the studio all day — I'd rather look at other people's work when I'm sitting in my living room," Ms. Egbert said the other day. "But when I look at this one, it makes me laugh, because it's so like what I'm doing now. I guess it's like your signature or your handwriting — it's formed very early. I sometimes wonder about other artists' work from when they were little."

Ms. Egbert, who, her grammar school oeuvre notwithstanding, has been painting professionally for 25 years, lives in a simple one-story house in Springs with her husband, Luigi Colarullo, a composer, musician, and photographer. They met at an event at the LongHouse Reserve in East Hampton while Mr. Colarullo was visiting from Milan.

Now both artists work at home, on opposite sides of the kitchen and living room area that serves the dual function of separating, and bridging, the two studios. Ms. Egbert paints in a spacious, sky-lit, converted two-car garage. Mr. Colarullo composes in a study with a sliding glass door off the living room.

Ms. Egbert's studio is filled with the scent of turpentine, which she uses liberally to create transparent washes from oil paint. Trestle tables fill the room, and are covered with tubes of paint, brushes, art books, solvents, and color reproductions that seem to serve as shorthand visuals for the themes behind groups of paintings and collages.

"I'm a very visual learner, and always made stuff," Ms. Egbert said, taking a step back from the table with her collages. She enrolled at the State University of New York at New Paltz after graduating from high school in Bay Shore. She studied studio art, and took every art history class she could, developing a vocabulary that incorporates disparate styles and historical periods.

The walls of the studio are punctuated with small montages composed of reproductions art history students use to prepare for exams, interspersed with paint swatches daubed on index cards, snapshots, and sketches. Along one wall a grouping combines a Nativity scene by



Sally Egbert in her Springs studio

Luigi Co

Giotto, a photo of early spring redbud against a blue sky, and a sketch of birds in migration formation.

Still another includes a snapshot of Dane Dixon and his friend Willem de Kooning at Wolfie's Tavern in Springs, an essay on Leonardo da Vinci by Alex Katz, and a photo by Gerhard Richter of a mountaintop avalanche.

"The best way for me to do my day is to come in here before talking with anyone," Ms. Egbert said. "I don't like to go out until I've been here for a few hours. It's so much better for me to work in the mornings, then I can work in the evenings too. It's a process, and my thoughts are in the process. It's like going in the ocean. It's not as shocking once you've already been wet."

"I like to play music — Brian Eno works for me. I've become so used to seeing a blank canvas," she said. "I like to find inspiration in the elusive memories consciously or unconsciously summoned up by a book of Renaissance art from Assisi, and Islamic calligraphy."

Ms. Egbert works on several compositions at a time. "One painting leads into another. With the collages I'm almost more physically involved because they're three-dimensional." Her large canvases rest propped against the walls. Her smaller canvases hang from nails in

the Sheetrock, and collages are arrayed across the top of a table.

"My work is very emotional," she said, looking it over. "It's all about adding and subtracting for me."

"I think artists should be able to edit their own work. I don't hold onto things I don't like," she said. "I love paintings that breathe, that have space for your eye to rest. Paintings that I love must have tension. I'll add and subtract and build up the surface of the canvas so the color almost glows. They take time. You have to look at them for a while, and detach to get them."

With canvases arrayed on the glossy gray floor of her studio, Ms. Egbert likes to stand over them and apply layers of washes, then broad swaths of deeper, denser color, and finally carefully placed lines.

"I pull the lines from nature, from the sky, from those overhead branches," she said, pointing to a leafy tree beyond the domed skylight.

Ms. Egbert's work can be seen in a solo show Sunday at the Salomon Contemporary gallery in East Hampton. It opens with a reception from 2 to 5 p.m. Her work will also be in a group show at the Fireplace Project in Springs, which will open on June 9 with a reception from 6 to 8 p.m.