

[After Vasari](#) Studio Visit: Cynthia Hartling by A.L. McMichael – 2/20/12



Cynthia Hartling's studio with a number of canvases including Blear-eyed (oil and gold leaf powder on linen).

Inwood, Manhattan

[Cynthia Hartling](#) is immersed in her art. Whereas more than a few Manhattan apartments have studios within, Hartling's instead offers the distinct impression of a studio that happens to

contain living space. Congenial and hospitable, she offered me snacks and tea, which I sipped amidst souvenirs of her travels and adventures, mementos of education and vacations, and most of all, canvases. Filed neatly in corners and under tables and hanging on walls, examples of her work inhabit almost every room, bridging the gap between living and working spaces. Hartling told me that making art is an “essential component” of her life, that being separated from it can make a person anxious, but to make art is a way into understanding the world.

The larger world is, indeed, embedded in the vivid geometric forms of Hartling’s oil paintings. She speaks of the Celts, of the 1960s and 70s in New York, of Native Americans and Europeans, of cave paintings and artifacts, although a viewer might not immediately perceive her abstract, aniconic compositions as carrying the weight of art history. But Hartling’s two-dimensional works actually offer nothing less than an alternative to linear perspective.

The subject of *Blair-eyed* is, at a glance, dots. But when the artist referred to the shapes instead as “balls,” their connotation as objects in space became irrefutable. As such, they acknowledge a depth and an existence that goes beyond the surface of the canvas. It’s as though she has sculpted space out of a two-dimensional surface, bypassing the need for a vanishing point, figural narrative, or three-dimensionality. The surface is an active space. Oil paint is subtly sculpted on the canvas, raising the plane into the viewer’s space, bridging the gap between surface and viewer.

Hartling has such a visceral and tactile reaction to color that her hand gestures become more articulated and pronounced when she talks about it. She has a deep affinity for color, for the richness and complexity it develops in relation to the canvas and to the emotions or expressions of the artist. In *Blair-eyed*, layers of melancholy blue-greys beneath sharply contrasting warm tones reveal raised paint and visible brushstrokes in currents of energy that require a close viewing.



Details of *Blair-eyed* (left) and *Now What* (right) reveal the artist's textures and techniques.

Larger pieces such as *Now What* enable a different kind of viewing. Immersion in the space is more immediate because of their larger-than-life size; I was able to stake out a small area to focus on the minutiae: texture, adherence of paint to linen, stray dots of paint. Regardless of their size, these paintings all dispel any notion of non-figural compositions as impersonal. The shapes themselves convey humanity. As opposed to Renaissance geometry, Hartling's rectangles and circles are drawn without a compass, offering evidence of the artist's hand; they feel unmechanical. Each layer of cracked pigment or splattered paint represents a motion, a human decision.



Medicine Wheel (oil on linen) with smaller paintings and supplies.

In abstract compositions, responses to human experience are often embedded as well. *Medicine Wheel* is imbued with a cosmological essence in the geometry and organization, with objects and moments layered upon one another and at the center, white on white. While I would not have guessed that it is the artist's response to a white buckskin from a Native American ceremony, the painting does convey ritual organization and the electric excitement of experiencing something vivid and pure.

By channeling a lifetime of travels and experiences into seemingly abstract works, Hartling demonstrates the truism that we are all products of our experience, and that allowing ourselves to be immersed in that experience is a way of making the creative process richer, more personal, and simultaneously more universal.

This studio visit took place on Thursday, November 10, 2011. For a list of Cynthia Hartling's current exhibitions and portfolio, visit www.cynthiahartling.com.