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Conversation with [Allison Miller](#) A Written Email Exchange about Molly Zimmer's "Raveling Lines" Exhibition Fall 2017

As part of the exhibition Raveling Lines, I asked Allison Miller to explore the relationships in my work through a written exchange of questions/answers.

Allison Miller is an artist and teacher based in Los Angeles. She is represented by The Pit, Los Angeles and Susan Inglett Gallery, New York. She was the first recipient of the Frederick Hammersley Foundation Fellowship in 2017. allison-miller.net

AM (1): I can imagine a few reasons for the sewn-together canvases, but I'm curious to hear what you would say about why you wanted to add that extra step in the building of a painting and the extra lines/texture to the painting that sits on top of it.

MZ (1): Structure was my first thought, and thinking of a way to make the canvas support of the painting connect to the thread structure of flatly woven textiles. These warps, the vertical and continuous lines, play a determining factor in where turnarounds, breaks, and corners of diamond or trapezoid shapes stop or begin. I wanted the strips to be the foundation for my shapes that I have been using to form the paintings from observation of the landscape.

I enjoy the process of building my own stretchers, stretching these sewed together sections of canvas. It is an investment in the painting, and an acknowledgement that canvas is a textile.

I think the process also helped me to think less of depicting a textile, but rather to respond to the seams, the lines, so that the beginning of the painting was a response to my previous moves. I think it also allows me to break out of the rigid structure of weaving, to negate the repetition of symmetry or pattern.

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AM (2): A related question: do you want the viewer to think about the making of the painting when they look at it?

MZ (2): I don't want it to be the first thing, but yes I want it to be part of the conversation. I want the first thing to be the color, shapes, and space-- the image itself. I am driven by my curiosity of how things are made, but I do think the image should speak for itself without the involvement of process.

As a teacher, I would say yes we should encourage people to think about how things are made. As an artist, I would say the most engaging art is a work that doesn't ask anything, but you are still interested.

AM (3): It almost makes me think of certain aspects of the works as being passive and certain aspects as being more assertive. The seams may be more passive players when viewed, taking more time to register and to make their effect known, but simultaneously, they are in a sense one of the most assertive aspects of your process. You are constructing in three dimensions before you construct in two dimensions on top of that. I like that idea and find the physical reality of that perplexing, which is good.

I also understand the idea of relating to the painting as a textile first, freeing you and the composition from the need to mimic a textile, because it simply is one already. It can circle around once again to that reference within the composition, but even if it doesn't, the reference is embedded in the painting already.

Explain what you mean by "I wanted the strips to be the foundation for my shapes that I have been using to form the paintings from observation of the landscape."? In what way are the strips themselves the foundations for the shapes?

I understand not wanting "process" per se to be the first thing one concentrates on, but it is interesting that once you make your way to seeing the seams, one must consider the process more than one might have before that moment. It physicalizes the composition, almost literalizes it, and then you can almost choose to go back to seeing a strictly two-dimensional composition again.

MZ (3): I like what you said about constructing three-dimensionally, before painting two-dimensionally as that makes me think of my process of collaging with many layered materials. Some materials are fabric, felt, magazine pages, yarn and different types of papers. These then inform the paintings, like a map that outlines the beginnings steps for the process.

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To answer your question about the strips as a foundation for shapes, I have found that the imagery on my paintings are informed by the almost invisible boundaries that the seams make. I begin to play with how shapes meet up against one another and how they can be divided by these physical breaks in the fabric. It could be akin to geography where layer of soil and tectonic plates meet one another.

I also see this solid structure of a loom, and particularly the vertical warps to be in our interior environments. I see that everything is connected to an embedded structure that is either visible or hidden. I also see the strips as a means to connect with the history of weavers in the southwest working outdoors, and literally looking through their weavings to the landscape behind them. I have begun to see where these senses of vertical lines are found in my daily routine, such as fences, rows of windows, gates, floors, blinds, striped furniture, architectural forms, and in the rugs that I have been working on at the rug shop.

Material and tactility become agents of action for me to paint something. I would agree that the seams have a physical and assertive presence in person and draw attention to the canvas material. I think something in common with rugs and painting is the dialogue between 'object' versus 'process', or 'rug' versus 'weaving'. I think the object can be separated from the action of making, leading me to consider what is the life of my paintings after they are made?

AM (4): I get what you're saying about teacher vs. artist regarding process, but I also think the process is sometimes intended to be the narrative - this is not what you're interested in, I take it?

MZ (4): When process is the narrative, I think it can either be so seductive that people don't consider the image, or it can be so much about process that the painting is self-sufficient and doesn't even need an audience-- it just exists. This can go into a realm of considering how paintings become real or an entity, they breathe and have a life of their own. Then again, isn't a painting just an object? Could you even consider these paintings figurative, but without a figure present? I view rugs as vessels for humanness. They hold space for a person, in the same way a painting holds space for the viewer.

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AM (5): Can you point out a moment in one of the finished paintings where the seam or the “invisible geography” determines the edge of a shape or element? A moment where the seam literally dictates what sits on top of it? Or is that essentially covered over or worked through by the time a painting is completed? When I see them in their finished states, I see the paintings ignoring that invisible geography.

Thinking of the painted elements as sitting like man-made boundaries on top of the physical geography (which I think of the seams as being more than “invisible geography”) is an enjoyable way to think of your paintings. And it seems to highlight, again, this idea of building or constructing the painting. Relating to weaving and even sculpture. No doubt at least partially a result of your experience repairing and/or constructing textiles which ultimately will live as flat, 2-d works, but live in your hands as much more 3-d objects that have fronts and backs and interiors with a structure that is visible and another that is not. That is my vision of weaving, anyway, am I way off in how those textiles behave for you?

MZ (5): Here is a recently finished painting that can help with our conversation on “invisible geography”.

I this painting I think that the imagery both ignores and is dictated by the seams. There are two main vertical lines, or pillars, that come down on this one--the white colored one--and in the bottom right is the dark blue vertical block and cerulean blue strip at the side of the painting. These are both based on the seams. At the top of this painting, the jagged teeth-like triangles are sized to fit within the seam sections. I also see that the width of space between each seam becomes the general size for things to either relate to or be in comparison to--like a scale.

There are overlapping organic plant-shaped forms that ignore the structure, and the horizontal bands at the bottom of the painting are in line with the vertical structure, but not to the seams any more. It is as if there are a few points that relate to the seams and then the rest is built off those few points of alignment.

I would agree with your description of how I interact with weaving, and that I do see them as 3D objects-- and my job is about re-construction or repairing holes tear and broken elements. The interesting part of restoration is that I am also recreating the structure to reweave the rug, and in that process, there is an aspect of creating a physical, but artificial loom--a replication of the structure into the rug. The other part of how the rugs behave is not a physical but emotional response to the object, and a learning of the hand of the person who made it.

AM (6): Ok, I'd like to leave the material concerns of your work for a moment and, if possible, think about the surface image itself. I think, at least for our purposes, that is possible. For all our talk of preparation and logical decision making, the compositions that you make are almost haphazard. Not random or accidental in any way, but purposely left in a state of un-do.

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Meaning, there is movement and shifting that seem to happen before our eyes and it's hard to determine if things are coming together or moving apart, being built up or torn down. It is very apparent that the landing points of the paintings is purposeful, in your control, but I'm curious what you think of my description of them. Is that how you think of them?

MZ (6): There is an element of chance to the paintings, and when I look at them they I see a thoughtfulness and purpose to the decisions. By haphazard, do you mean intuition and chance?

I think of my interest in the landscape and textiles, and bridging this gap within painting-- they are left in a state of undone (like the paintings are not finished weavings or the not tied off or unwoven or unraveled). This is interesting because some of the other paintings are more locked down and structural, as if they are the opposite of undone--more akin to weaving or entangled lines.

I am fascinated with where things almost come together, but then fall apart-- the push and pull-- in the natural world and man-made intrusions into the landscape, where you look at something and for a split second you get confused as to whether it is one object or two and what is in front or behind, or two objects coincidentally align to become another recognized object. I see the 'landing points' or markers as points of interest or points of tension. They are like signs or corners to the composition.

AM (7): Yes, I see the interaction of the seams and composition and, aside from this conversation, I think it would worth a try to highlight the seams even more in some places and leave them to fade away in others - taking advantage of the structure in some places within a painting and letting it not matter in other places within the same painting. I like the idea of needing a system when you need it and letting it drop when you don't. Intuitive systematization. :)

I would describe "where things almost come together, but then fall apart" as a haphazard system. There is a visual logic to the compositions but a looseness in application and what feels like visibly intuitive decision making at the same time. It is how things coming together and simultaneously falling apart, which is how I see natural systems as well.

In terms of the lines and somewhat recognizable subject matter within them - I'm always put off by works that seem reliant on the binary relationship between man-made, architectural forms and more natural, biomorphic forms. This is an easy relationship to visually quote and one that seems beaten to death to me, especially when using somewhat universal visual symbols for them. Your works seem to be about the hazier aspects of that very relationship and can combine and orchestrate both types of elements with ease that becomes more than just juxtaposition. Possibly eased along by the fact that your "straight lines" are hand-painted and as wobbly as the other elements in the paintings. If they are architecture, they are a soft

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architecture that can mainly organize or compose, or maybe shield, but not correct the space. I think of Braque's late studio paintings as an odd mash up of hard and soft forms, man-made and natural lines, with a flow between them that stops easy categorization.

In your work, often, I feel like there is a real space being alluded to, but maybe I can't pull back far enough to understand the parameters of that space, or where I am. The distance between my body and the front of the painting feels slight. Like I can't get my bearings.

In thinking about your color palettes, can I just say, your *Shrub Wall* painting is glorious. I'm super into your combining of the red, white and black in that painting, on top of a much subtler color palette. A breaking of a convention for you, maybe. I've been thinking about forcing two color palettes together these days, so maybe I'm into it anyway, but it's a much more graphic palette that sits alongside but a bit in opposition of or out front of the rest of the painting. Interesting. Amazing what color can do for you if you let it.

In most of your paintings, aside from *Shrub Wall*, I see a base of a complimentary color combination and then a somewhat limited and related palette built on top of that. It feels like each painting has an emotional tone to it, in a way, because of this. Or maybe an overall color of the light in the painting...dominated by one of the hues in the complimentary relationship. Is that how you think of them?

MZ (7): Intuitive systematization-- I do have an internal set of rules-- that is a funny way to think about it. Thinking of those senses of wobbly or soft lines that are "straight". It reminds me of how rugs do have a system of a grid, but those lines are usually wavy and crooked, responding to temperature and moisture, and changing the size of a rug from one end to the other. Even the seams are kind of wavy and crooked, in some places—they are not hard lines.

I like what you say about the natural systems, and I don't view the man-made versus biomorphic in binaries, but rather that they are inseparable from my perspective in the push and pull of logic.

Thinking about natural systems, I would describe the systems as being broken down into textured space. What happens when things get really close? Almost as if you are wearing the painting, or embedded in the painting. It is different than flat painting because the textures create the depth in combination with color in places. I am thinking about how you build something and the closeness that you feel with the material and the making is just as important as the weight and surface of the object. The culmination of surface creates a visceral atmosphere.

About the color palettes, I see each painting as living in a color family with a narrowed sense of light, or atmosphere. The complimentary colors and slight shifts in the same value of a color are nuanced, such as different dye lots, and then some stark outlying color that activates the nuances. For the *Shrub Wall*, the black/red/white part was meant to feel separate and float on top of the rest, as if it was even draped/hung in front of the painting. I am thinking about how I might be able to push this aspect more in some of my current paintings in progress.

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AM (8): After all this discussion of paintings relating to weavings, and your personal connection to how they relate, I think it's time I ask how you got involved with textiles to begin with? Did you have a relationship to textiles as a kid? When did they become so present in your consciousness? Was it when you took the textile restoration job that they became prominent in your thought process?

They seem to have tied you to the idea of paintings as physical objects. Even conceptually, the idea of the 'soft grid' of a weaving and the idea of the 'soft grids' of your intuitive systems dovetail nicely. Strong but flexible bases on which all other decisions and moves can sit.

I can see that intention behind the color palette in Shrub Wall, and, in those moments, it does seem to come further out towards the viewer than some of the other paintings. I always think of an accordion being pulled apart - some elements of paintings living beneath the surface of the painting and some sitting or floating on top of that surface. Maybe this is a new phase for your color palettes and paintings? It seems like a shift.

MZ (8): My connection with textiles is embedded in my family history, and in my memories of growing up. I think about my experience of growing up on a farm, and how if you wanted something-- you had to make it. Resourcefulness is admired, and self-sufficiency, too. My mom and grandmother taught me to sew, and my great-grandmother made this book of her own quilting patterns she used. My grandparent also raised wool sheep.

I was taught to sew, applique, knit, crochet, and create things with found materials for household items of function. There have been little projects like making quilts or curtains along the way, or taking a class at school in weaving that built up some of my skills. These all led up to me having the skills to do the textile restoration, which has sparked my interest over the past year working there. I see that interest has grown into an investigation into the way that one interacts with different types of fiber textures, and how weaving can relate to the language of painting. I have also begun to consider color and texture more deeply from my relationship with these rugs.

Your mention of an accordion fold explains how I think about paintings, and connects to some of our aforementioned ideas on painting and textiles as both 3D. An accordion is meant to be viewed from both sides. There is also something about how the unfolding or revealing of the image can build greater curiosity.

AM (9): Funny how all of these smaller experiences and decisions build on each other over time - and eventually give us the art practice that we need/want. It all makes sense. One last thought,

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I keep thinking of how paint hardens fabrics once it dries. Keeping it from having some of the qualities you have talked about appreciating - it will be interesting to see what you make a few years down the road...

MZ (9): Yes, it will be interesting to see how this work further develops. I am working on some sculptural pieces right now that are more woven and include a more flexible grid in them. I am even considering how the edges of things can become more prominent. I can see how art practices develop, and it is revealing how some aspects of your practice only make sense after you construct something.