

## Shannon Bueker

MJ Sharp Open Studio Guest

May 2016

I first saw Shannon's artwork at my co-curator Linda Crabill's house. It was a small little painting of some chickens behaving like chickens. I knew this, though it wasn't in any way a realist painting. It was all done with the loosest of gestures and boldest of colors, but somehow those gestures contained the entire behavior of chickens. Whenever I was at my friend's house, I visited with those chickens and loved them anew.

Fast forward to a Shannon Open Studio a few years later. Again, I was bewitched by the completeness of the animal's essence conveyed by bold colors and loose brushstrokes. Those loose, free brushstrokes, however, seemed to describe a very precise moment in the life of the animal. Shannon seemed to be channeling the famed photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment" in paint. But abstractly. What was going on here?

My attraction to Shannon's work then began to take a certain form. I realized that my appreciation of Shannon's work was specifically the way a photographer would appreciate another artist who had captured a very specific moment spectacularly well. But Shannon's work wasn't so easily explainable. After all, Shannon was capturing a specific moment, but that moment was populated by chickens *qua* chickens or dogs *qua* dogs. Shannon was creating very precise narrative moments with the most symbolic version of the animals.

When I met with Shannon specifically to discuss her artistic process, I was scandalized to learn that Shannon didn't see and sketch in the field those extraordinarily precise moments found in her paintings. What she did sketch in the field was colors that she found affecting at a scene. When she was back at her studio, it was the colors that she referenced. The narrative moment she just made up. Let me say that again—those beautiful painterly gestures in her paintings that nonetheless seem to add up to a very precise narrative occurrence are all MADE UP. If memory serves, my reaction to Shannon's telling me that was something on the order of, "But that's crazy!"

The way Shannon might describe her process is that she paints and paints and paints and stops painting right before it becomes even one gesture too defined. As you might imagine, that is a very difficult line. It's instructive to talk with Shannon in front of one of her paintings because she can tell you exactly what she left unfinished to what degree and why. That restraint appears to be one of the secrets to the feeling of animation in her work.

Photographers always find painters fascinating in part because of this peril of one stroke too many. Photographers have many ways we can kill the animating spirit of an image but adding just one stroke too many isn't one of them. Usually, by the time we're done it's a zero or a one. It works, or it doesn't. I'm so glad that Shannon boldly and fearlessly walks that boundary of "just right."