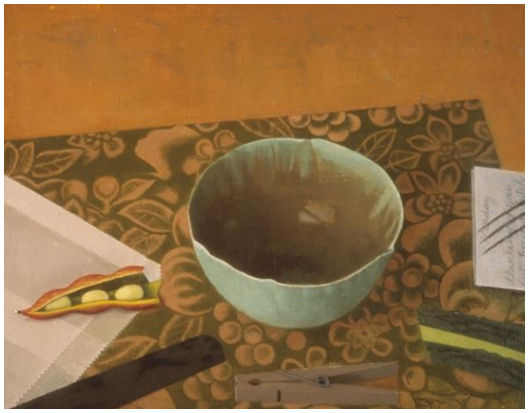
HYPERALLERGIC
Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Beer with a Painter: Susan Jane Walp

Jennifer Samet | October 10, 2015



"Empty Bowl" (1995), oil on linen, 8 x 10 inches. Private collection

In the middle of our conversation, Susan Walp suddenly paused, gazing down at the table. "Look at that," she told me, pointing out tiny ellipses, the patterns of the window screen reflected on the surface of a small pewter pepper grinder. We were sitting on the porch of her house in Washington, Vermont, eating a homemade vegetable soup with bread and cheddar cheese. It was telling moment — her enthusiasm about that detail, while my view was focused on the broader landscape, and her garden with streams of orange, red, and purple blooms.

Walp's paintings have drama, but it is a drama of intimacy and devotion. Her studio, on the top level of her home, carries this atmosphere of quiet, dedicated practice. The tools, the set-ups, a few handwritten notes, a lit candle near a Buddha sculpture, and a choice selection of art books, all have their place. My time there was brief; it is not a space for socializing. That happens downstairs, on the deck, and in a living room and kitchen hung with the art of her brothers, her friends, and artists she admires — like Ying Li, Ruth Miller, Jane Rosen, Sam Thurston, Marjorie Kramer, Jake Berthot, and Francesca Woodman.

Susan Jane Walp

She makes small-scale still life paintings that depict both likely and unlikely combinations of objects: halved citrus fruits, teacups and porcelain bowls, blueberries, tulips and poppies, along with Xeroxed pages, chewing gum wrappers, and “scrunchie” hair elastics. The deliberate placement of objects, and her subdued palette, direct our attention to the range that is possible among close tonal relationships, and the integrity and power of small things.

Walp was born in 1948 in Allentown, Pennsylvania. She received her BA from Mount Holyoke College, followed by studies at the New York Studio School and Brooklyn College. She is represented by Tibor de Nagy Gallery, where she currently has an exhibition of paintings on paper, on view through October 17, 2015.

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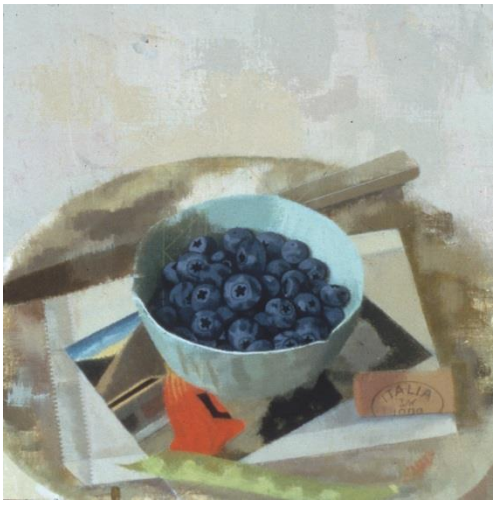
Jennifer Samet: *You grew up in Pennsylvania. Do you recall any specific early experiences with art making?*

Susan Jane Walp: Yes, I grew up in Allentown, in southeastern Pennsylvania. My earliest memory of having a talent that was recognized was in the third grade. School was very hard for me, and at that time, I don’t remember having any friends in the school itself, although in the neighborhood I was part of an adventuresome group of kids. The class was in charge of decorating a bulletin board with a fall theme. My teacher asked me to make a hunter. It was an incredible experience. I don’t remember doing it for any kind of approval — only for the pleasure of making it — and I loved how it turned out.

The teacher really liked it too, and asked me to do a second one. This time, I had terrible anxiety. I couldn’t get it to look the way that I wanted it to. That was my first experience of what feels like a familiar pattern. Perhaps I was trying to improve the anatomy. You move forward and learn, sometimes at the expense of the inspiration, vitality, and life that come in the beginning of the process.

We were living with my grandparents at the time, and I talked my mother into allowing me to stay home to work on it. I remember working in my pajamas at the kitchen table. I was agonizing over it, but my grandmother and mother were sitting there watching in awe. They could not believe I was able to do what I was doing. My mother's family was very musical, but they had no visual abilities. In my father's family, there was a lot of visual talent. My paternal grandmother worked full-time at the family business, and was a very disciplined Sunday painter.



"Blueberries in a Bowl with Bean Pod, Cork and Knife" (1999), oil on linen, 9 x 8 ¾ inches

In the third grade I also started taking classes at a very old-fashioned art school in Allentown. It was a beautiful old building with north-facing skylights. It was such a different era back then. My parents would drop me off in inner-city Allentown, and I would walk down the block myself to buy snacks, then come back and buy my charcoal, paper and erasers in the school store. We drew from plaster casts of Greco-Roman sculptures. I felt like such an adult, and very special.

JS: *I noticed the small altar in your studio. Does religious practice and meditation play a role in your work?*

SJW: Since childhood, I have been interested in religious ideas and practice. My mother's Austrian family was Lutheran, and I was raised Lutheran. When I was eight, I had a Sunday school teacher, the young wife of the new assistant pastor, who was discussing the idea of the Trinity. She spoke as if she were addressing a group of college students. She presented it as a mystery, as something that she herself was grappling with: how there are three different parts, and yet they are one. These are the things I most remember from childhood, the times when I was taken very seriously by adults.

My paternal grandmother was from a Mennonite background, and I went to a high school run by the Moravians, another Protestant group who established a religious community in Bethlehem, PA, in the early 1700s. Like the Mennonites, they were pacifists and oriented towards education and music. Their motto was “In the essentials, unity; in the non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, love.”

“Heart of Winter Blood Orange” (2010), oil on linen, 8 x 8 inches

In New York, I became involved with Gurdjieff’s philosophy, and I had a wonderful teacher. After he died in 1983, I moved to rural Vermont with my husband, Michael Moore, and then I spent a long time looking for something. In 2006, I found my way to a recently opened Tibetan Buddhist center in a neighboring town, founded by Dzigar Kongtrul. I have been closely involved with that community for the last ten years. When I go into the studio, I usually begin with a brief meditation. It is a reminder that the inspiration for the work is not so much about me, as it is about being receptive to something that could move through me.

JS: *You went to Mount Holyoke for college. Were you studying painting at that time?*

SJW: I went to Mount Holyoke in the late 1960s, and there was so much turbulence. I wanted to drop out at a certain point; I was not happy there at all. I had a situation that required surgery, and I missed two and a half months of school. To make up the credits, I went to a program at Tanglewood, run by Boston University. Miraculously, Lennart Anderson was teaching there. The students from BU were very serious, and only because the beginner class was full, I was placed in Lennart’s advanced class. That summer completely changed everything. I saw that my life was going to be devoted to becoming a painter.

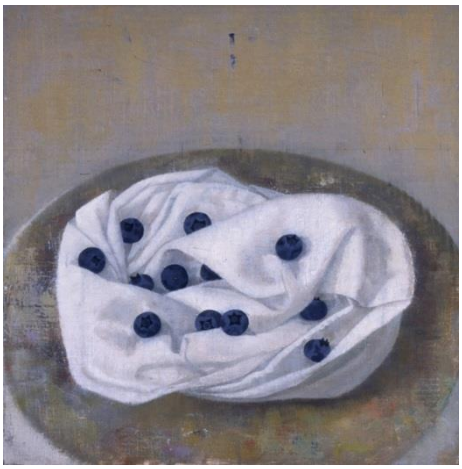
Lennart painted in class; he didn’t talk much. But I understood that he was teaching an approach to seeing tonal relationships. It was a very sensual, felt response to the motif. It was about discovering the beauty of these relationships and the thrill of translating them into paint. At the time, he was recommending a Dover book by Charles Hawthorne, *Hawthorne on Painting* (1960), which we all read and reread.

"Melon with Two Xeroxes, Cork and Knife" (1999), oil on linen, 9 x 9 ½ inches

JS: *You also went to the New York Studio School in the early years of the school. What was your experience there?*

SJW: I was at the Studio School for about five or six semesters, both during and after Mount Holyoke. It was a wonderful and very intense experience. The daily schedule was very strict — a four-hour session in the morning, another four hours in the afternoon. And many of us continued working well into the evening. The door was locked by 9am, so if you didn't arrive by then, you couldn't get in. You worked until 1pm, and then there was a break for lunch. Mercedes Matter would send the kitchen team to Balducci's for breads, salamis, cheeses, and salad ingredients, and so we had the most amazing, abundant lunches Beginning students spent all eight hours drawing from the model. Nobody spoke in the studios; everyone worked with focus and concentration. I loved the feeling of being part of a like-minded community.

The teachers came in two days a week. Initially I studied drawing with Mercedes, and then I switched over to Nicolas Carone's class. Mercedes's teaching was about sensitivity to neighboring relationships, with the image growing out of an accumulation of careful observations. The way that Nick taught was working in the opposite direction: first defining the limits of the plane and the space it contained, and then working from the big forms down towards the detail. Nick taught a kind of metaphysics of space that was not always easy to understand. For me it was about becoming aware of possibilities that existed beyond what one's habitual mind could ever imagine.



"Blueberries on a White Cloth" (1997), oil on linen, 9 x 9 inches

Philip Guston was also teaching at the Studio School at the time. He would make the rounds, moving from studio to studio of the more advanced students, but the beginning students were allowed to follow along and listen in. He hardly ever talked about the students' paintings! One day, he was visiting the studio at the top of the main stairs; I remember this so clearly. He had brought in a book about Piero della Francesca. I had never heard of Piero della Francesca. He spoke at length about a detail in one of the Arezzo frescoes — an image of hill town rooftops.

I understood Piero immediately — you could say it was love at first sight — and I have since spent a lot of time looking at his work, at first in books and later travelling to see the actual works in Italy and London. The elements in his paintings are so deliberately arrived at—they are spatially and mathematically measured—yet there is simultaneously a strong pattern of shapes moving across the surface. Piero trained in Florence and must have been familiar with the Florentine advances, in terms of three-dimensionality, especially the work of Masaccio

What is interesting to me is that at a relatively young age he returned to his hometown of San Sepolcro, a place that was isolated from Florence and whose church art was influenced by the flatter, more stylized qualities of Sienese art because of trade routes. He chose to retain these qualities that came more from the early Renaissance, even though he could have gone in the direction that eventually led to Leonardo and Michelangelo. The other thing I have found so compelling in his work is how a certain restraint actually intensifies the emotions.

I also remember sitting in the library of the Studio School and looking at a Morandi book. Leland Bell came in and launched into a diatribe, saying I shouldn't be wasting my time with Morandi. I was fond of Leland and was aware even then that his strong opinions came from how passionate he was about painting and wanting to share that with students. After he left the room, and I started looking at the book again and thought to myself, "I don't agree with him." This seemed momentous to me. For the first time it felt like I had confidence in my own mind, and no one was going to talk me out of my inspirations and responses. And I still do love Morandi's work.

I have gravitated to painters who have lived in provincial settings, like Morandi and Piero. I'm very interested that Agnes Martin moved to an isolated place. Georgia O'Keeffe is another example. I have always been interested in a solitary life, and what that means for an artist who also wants to be part of her time and era. I think, if they could do it, so could I.

"Apple with Tangle of Black Thread" (2001), oil on linen, 8 ¾ x 9 inches

JS: *I read that you begin paintings in relation to the cycles of the moon. That is fascinating; I have never heard another painter speak of doing this. Can you tell me more about it?*

SJW: My Austrian grandmother grew up on a farm and taught me about planting seeds with the phases of the moon. You plant things that grow above ground with the new moon, and things that are harvested for the root, with the full moon. At some point, perhaps after I moved to Vermont and had my own garden, my friend, the painter Helen Miranda Wilson, told me she had been using the cycle of the moon in relation to starting and finishing paintings. I tried it out, and it appealed to me.

With the new moon, which is good for beginnings, I work on finding the motif, painting very freely and openly, trying to get the big gesture and structure of the composition. With the full moon, which is good for completing things, I shift to the fine detail work. When I started working this way, it took away a lot of frustration and confusion. It simplifies things: there is a time for different kinds of activities.

JS: *Your still lifes contain certain recurrent objects — blueberries, halved citrus fruits, teacups, and other vessels. Do those objects carry certain personal meanings or significance to you?*

"Pummelo with Spoon" (2014), oil on linen, 10 ¼ x 10 inches

SJW: The objects do play a role, but the only way to allow them to truthfully manifest is by seeing them in relationship to all the other elements in the picture. Sometimes, after a painting is complete, meanings are revealed to me. But if my mind moves toward a narrative as I set up the objects, I would resist that.

The thing about working from observation is how abstract it is. We live in a world where we are constantly labeling things and keeping them separate: there is the tree, the fence, and the lawn. But when you get into the painter's mind, the labels drop away. You are seeing how interconnected everything is, through color and light and space. It is a very wonderful place to be.

A main thing for me is the setting up: arranging and rearranging the objects and waiting for things to come together as an image. With the new moon, this seems to happen reliably. That is the inspiration, and I wait for that moment. I can't start a painting unless I have that huge feeling of inspiration from the motif. It is very specific; I feel it in my body.

JS: *What kind of measuring do you do, as you compose and plan the paintings?*

SJW: You could say I am obsessed with measuring. Once the image is there, I want to get as close as possible to the feeling that I have about the motif. At first, I don't measure at all. The beginnings are very free and spontaneous, and often I will get very accurate measurements intuitively. But nevertheless, for the coming weeks, I measure and re-measure, and draw and redraw. I am not only measuring the forms; I am also measuring the tones, and trying to bring them into a harmony. One might think it is cold and mathematical, but for me it is a very sensual experience.

"Late Summer Berries" (2009), oil on linen, 8 x 8 ¼ inches

The big underlying mystery that carries me forward still is how we have this three dimensional experience with the world, and how we put that onto the flat plane of the painting. I have a picture in my mind of how I want that to look in my paintings, and I hardly ever have gotten there. But I still hope that someday I will make a painting that will satisfy me in terms of finding that relationship.

I feel I have always wanted to understand more how shadow and light create form. It hasn't been very present in my painting, in part because I set up the motif with an even, north light. The light illuminates the form, but it's subtle, not dramatic. The dramatic use of light and dark to create form is something that has interested me in Euan Uglow's work. He painted a lot at nighttime, so he had a directional artificial light, which clearly defined areas with beautiful cast shadows that carry so much feeling.

"Two Eggs in a Bowl with Burdock Root and Bar of Soap" (1997), oil on linen, 9 x 10 inches

Recently I read something about Morandi that I found to be a revelation. Early in his career, in terms of the other artists he looked at, he really studied chiaroscuro. But in his paintings, as they developed, there is no chiaroscuro, almost the opposite. Everything is bathed in even, inner, mid-tone light, without shadows. And yet that deep knowledge of light and dark is somehow there in the work.

I bring this up as an example of new territory I want to explore. This is the way I have moved forward: responding to these kinds of questions. I am imagining that someday I will set something up and recognize this quality of light and dark I am looking for, because of an Uglow painting that I can't get out of my mind, or because of a passage I read about Morandi.

Something will trigger a question, and it can take months for me to even articulate it, and more months or years to figure it out. But I feel that conceptual groundwork is so important. As human beings, thinking about things, figuring them out, and putting them into language is central to us. How does that work with this other part of being a painter, which is without language, and without thinking?