



# ELIZABETH HUEY

the human touch

**STEVE MILLER:** *What prompted the move from New York to LA?*

**ELIZABETH HUEY:** When I finished grad school in 2002, I moved to Williamsburg, Brooklyn. There was a palpable creative energy in that neighborhood. As the years went by it seems that pulse shifted, as it always does. The art world here in LA is reminiscent of that time of metamorphosis in New York. Galleries are opening every week. Yet, there are differences that impact this scene. LA is the holistic health capital of the world. People casually talk about sound baths and meditation at openings. Even the Hammer Museum has a Mindfulness Meeting once a week. Perhaps the sunlight and sprawling space here encourages a supportive and inclusive atmosphere.

**STEVE:** *OK, you're telling me there's an energy shift and there's a healthy lifestyle that you like in LA?*

**ELIZABETH:** I don't know if I would say it that way. I would say that there's a sort of dogged optimism and untiring humor, even in the face of this political and environmental mess we are in. California is the capital of communication, with new technologies and entertainment, and I feel the affect of that underlying openness on the art world.

**STEVE:** *That's a good segue to mention that this issue of Musée is entitled Humanity. That's a large container that can include a lot of artists but, in your case, your work strikes me as deeply human in its portrayal of relationships, sexuality, and narrative. You also studied psychology. I see a deep connection between the psychologically charged internal world you portray and its coexistence with external reality.*

**ELIZABETH:** In the 90's, as a student majoring in Psychology, I was conscious of the continual debate - nature vs. nurture; genetic predisposition or life experience - which one determines our behavior? Initially, my representation of interiors-- both architectural and psychological-- arose as a question and a visual metaphor. This relationship between the world of emotion and our external surroundings has remained a preoccupation of mine since then.

**STEVE:** *Can you offer us an example?*

**ELIZABETH:** Well, research has proven that both nature and nurture are determinant. Humans are

Portrait by Samantha Marble. Following spread: Elizabeth Huey, *Night is Deaf and the Morning Remembers* (Alexander Graham Bell), 2017.







diverse and complex and it's absurd for us to imagine pointing the finger at any one factor to justify motivations. Yet, there are events - people and places - that alter the course of our lives. Recently, I've been considering how pain is an undervalued resource, particularly the role it plays in driving invention. My painting "Night is Deaf and the Morning Remembers" alludes to Alexander Graham Bell's discoveries. The home fractures and the living room spills into the grass. Isn't it profound that the man who invented the telephone and dramatically improved global communication was unable to be heard by his own deaf mother?

**STEVE:** *So back to school.... you were studying psychology?*

**ELIZABETH:** Let me clarify: I was making art. I had the equivalent of a double major. I was painting and drawing while I was studying psychology. I've always been interested in both.

**STEVE:** *Of course, they're not mutually exclusive. So, what directs you to the location that seems specific to each painting?*

**ELIZABETH:** When I attended the Marchutz School in Aix-en-Provence, France, my painting class toured a host of post-impressionist landmarks such as the hospital in Arles that treated Van Gogh's ear and Cezanne's beloved Mount St. Victoire. My teacher held over-sized laminated copies of paintings adjacent to the original location and invited us to imagine the artist's vantage point. At the time, I didn't realize how influential that would prove to be. It offered a first-hand glimpse into their symbolic color and dynamic composition. Weather, light, and location can set the mood. Painting allows me to take liberties with nature.

**STEVE:** *For a decade, you were focused on the history of psychiatry. How did you make the transition from painting asylums to pools?*



**ELIZABETH:** In 2009, I had an artist residency at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC. It's a labyrinth of information was mind-boggling—both in its accuracy and imperfect. It is curious to recognize how aspects of the past get magnified and misconstrued and sometimes simply lost. It's easy for me to see a correlation in psychology...the similarities in the phenomenon of remembering, exaggerating, and forgetting.

This intensive research also led me to mine imagery from a stockpile of early medical trade cards. Water as a curative substance began to emerge. For centuries, water has been used as a medicinal salve and a symbol for the intangible. The pool is a realm of therapeutic cleansing and I think living with an image of water encourages a feeling of freedom and restoration.

**STEVE:** *Any other influences?*

**ELIZABETH:** In the mid 90s, I moved to the East Village to attend the New York Studio School. I had the good fortune to study with Mercedes Matter, Esteban Vicente and other abstract expressionists who shared so many stories from their own experiences in the New York art scene ...waltzes with Calder, Mondrian painting trees just to pay the bills, and Giacometti known for being ornery at the bar. Those early years in New York were so pivotal. My best friend at the time was Allen Ginsburg's young boyfriend and he introduced me to the beat poets. I've been thinking lately how much their way of compiling phrases has impacted my process in constructing a painting.

**STEVE:** *Well, let's talk about piecing together a painting. What's the draw of photography for you in your painting practice? For example, when I interviewed Eric Fischl, photography and Photoshop were useful tools to compose his images. How do you bring diverse material together in one canvas? What is the process of composing narratives?*

**ELIZABETH:** Collage is a way of cobbling together images to forge a new construction. This has been a thread in my work since I began making art. I make a lot of drawings and paper collages as well as digital photo montages. I frequently shift between mediums; I am now working in sculptural collage and digital prints. There has always been an inclination and a desire to mash-up disparate elements together. However, when I am making a painting I allow the painting to dictate what it wants to be. If there is any sort of preliminary draft before I am halfway through, I let go of it. I'm aware that the painting has its own ideas, and paying attention to this is imperative. I'm always humbled by this practice because I always see things I wouldn't have anticipated. Painting, to me, is really a conversation. I'm talking to the painting, and the painting talks back. I listen.

**STEVE:** *Instagram is a platform you effectively use (37K followers) to communicate visual images. Some photos you take and some photos you collect. How do you "discover" photos?*

**ELIZABETH:** I started taking photos exclusively as a way to gather source images for paintings. When I needed a lake view, I would visit Central park. If I was depicting a patterned blouse, I would find one on the street. Around the same time, I started collecting photographs from estate sales and thrift stores. Ebay and Etsy are now 24-hour flea markets. Every "found" image I upload to Instagram is an actual print in my ever-expanding archive.

Naturally, through this process of searching, I have discovered movement, color, forms, and compositions as I do while making a painting. The photographs began to take on a similar resonance while becoming their own entity. When I started Instagram in 2012 it was the perfect venue for presenting this material together. I began to see the source images operating as artworks in and of themselves.

**STEVE:** *Is there a difference for you between found photos and what you shoot on the street in relationship to your art?*

**ELIZABETH:** Photos that I collect from the past inevitably carry a certain wistful nostalgia. I'm aware








many of the people are no longer alive. There is a certain resuscitation--breathing life into the past--and a reimagining of history that occurs when I work from those images. Frequently, they are black and white and I'm infusing them with color. With the ones I take, there is an element of surprise, an unexpected intimacy. There is a division I'm attracted to, an idiosyncrasy that highlights the fleeting nature of life.

**STEVE:** *There is reoccurring iconography in both the paintings and photographs. One thing I've noticed is your use of windows.*


**ELIZABETH:** Should I talk about this? Um, well, when I was a teenager I was placed in a "tough love" treatment facility. In this windowless warehouse, there was no music, books or television and when rules were broken harsh punishments were administered. Isolation, food and sleep deprivation, and verbal attacks were all used to persuade change. Therapeutic environments, like other institutions, have the capacity to manipulate and coerce, for better and for worse. When there are no windows the mind develops alternate portals for seeing. It's similar to prisoner's cinema where the mind gets in a heightened state of imagination after being isolated from society. That complete withdrawal from visual stimuli might have been my initial motivation to create windows.

**STEVE:** *Makes a lot of sense. I'm glad you added that because it gives the notion of how a window can offer greater meaning.*

**ELIZABETH:** The window is perception [...] the link between the mind and  perceived reality. A window is also a passage, a shift in space and perspective; a morphing of time [...] the painting itself is a window. So, it is a frame within another frame. Maybe all art is a window...

**STEVE:** *I had the good fortune to see your last exhibition at Harper's Books and eavesdrop on a discussion about one of your paintings. You were describing a story about a sexual initiation that added content to a particular painting. Where did you find this story and do you consciously search out these strange rituals?*


**ELIZABETH:** These people and places seem to naturally find me. The painting you are referring to, titled "Of Duty and Desire," references the 19th-Century Oneida community from upstate New York. An NPR segment on Ellen Wayland-Smith's book *From Free Love Utopia to the Well-Set Table* initially piqued my interest.

**STEVE:** *In your paintings and photographs there are groups of people having conversations with each other. What are these figures talking about?* 

**ELIZABETH:** It really depends. They **are talking but I don't** consider the work to be an exact or literal depiction. They are more a reflection of mood and feelings. These conversations supersede language. I feel like I'm painting things that are beyond words. It's a challenge answering questions; having to put visuals into vocabularies. I think great paintings defy words.

**STEVE:** *A great artist friend of mine said making art is an accumulation of fitting; it's all about how it fits.*

**ELIZABETH:** I relate to that. I may be using figures, landscapes and interiors, but it's the same. There's something that happens late at night in the studio, when my mind, heart, and vision align, when everything seems connected, and it's an indescribable joy. It seems to surpass being human. Guston talked about how there's a moment when you're painting— I'm not going to quote this verbatim—when your teachers leave the room, and then your friends leave the room, and your family leaves the room, and you actually leave the room, too. There's that space of ... it's an incomparable space of connection.

Elizabeth Huey, Top: *Century's Swim*, 2014; Bottom: *Cher*  2015; Following spread: *Duty and Desire*, 2017.





