

# Objects of Contemplation

Andrea Kantrowitz at The Painting Center, Manhattan

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Andrea Kantrowitz, Seylla and Charybdis, 40 x 80 inches, oil on canvas, 2020

Andrea Kantrowitz bridges a number of fields and interests in her art. She studied art and cognition at Harvard, got her MFA in painting at Yale and received an interdisciplinary doctorate in art and cognition at Columbia. She complements her intellectual brilliance with a social commitment and has taught art in schools in underserved and underdeveloped neighborhoods. She has also done research on the benefits of art education for children born into poverty in the USA. For her current gallery show she focuses on the unfolding of and revelations inherent in patterns of complexity in smaller organisms. It is with great pleasure and honor that I present this interview with Andrea Kantrowitz, the Graduate Program Coordinator and Assistant Professor of Art Education at SUNY New Paltz.

**You paint organic structures that develop through accretion, branching and crystallization. This involves the natural or unforced repetition of basic patterns leading to growth. To me this invites questions concerning the mystery of emergent qualities. What does repetition mean to you in these paintings?**

The mathematics of natural processes fascinates me. I love this quote from the cognitive psychologist and AI pioneer, Herbert Simon:

*For when we have explained the wonderful, unmasked the hidden pattern, a new wonder arises at how complexity was woven out of simplicity. The aesthetics of natural science and mathematics is at one with the aesthetics of music and painting—both inhere in the discovery of a partially concealed pattern.*

*(Herbert Simon, The Sciences of the Artificial, 1969)*

I'm really interested in how complex forms can originate in the repetition of simple algorithms, encoded in molecular structures we cannot see with our naked eyes. If you just study what seems to be impossibly intricate closely enough, underlying patterns slowly reveal themselves. Painting becomes a process akin to reverse engineering.

**Your show is called *Objects of Contemplation*. What might some foci of contemplation be for the viewer?**

For me, the activity of painting is a meditation on nature, a form of non-religious spiritual practice. The paintings themselves are meant to help the viewer stay centered and focused on the awe and wonder that is potentially available to all of us at every moment of our lives. Living through a time of profound uncertainty and global crisis, some solace lies in the experience of beauty: color and light captured in paint on canvas.

**The names of some of these life-forms come from ancient Greco-Roman mythology. Scylla and Charybdis, Leto, Cybelle, Plato's Cave are some examples. Should these labels guide one's contemplation of the organic forms? Are you suggesting already established metaphors or challenging folks to go beyond them?**

I make oversized paintings of small objects, depicting them at 10 or 20 times their actual size. Years ago a critic wrote that I make too big a deal over nothing. I am of the school that you can find the universe in a drop of water or grain of sand if you just look hard enough. I aim to draw the viewer's attention to the beauty and splendor of my subjects by invoking the philosophical and mythological traditions inherited from Greco-Roman times mediated and enriched through the history and culture of European painting.

The specific titles are based on the form and feeling of a particular painting once it is finished, its emergent qualities. For example, *Cybelle*, was the name of an Anatolian goddess, assimilated into Greek culture, was considered to be the mother of wild nature, and was always partnered with a lion. She was understood to both cure and cause disease. I began the painting titled *Cybelle* just before the pandemic hit, and as I was finishing the painting I was thinking about its spherical leonine form, eerily reminiscent of the depictions of Covid-19, but which, at the same time, seem to radiate positive emotion.

On a side note, I have also been very influenced by Chinese painting; an earlier work was titled *A thousand peaks and myriad ravines* in homage to the 17<sup>th</sup> century painter Gong Xian."

**Can you talk about how your painting process mirrors the organic processes being depicted? Was this important to you before you began or did you realize after you started that what you were doing mirrored natural processes?**

That's hard to say. It feels inevitable. Making a painting, any painting, for me, is a mirroring. It is an externalization of perceptions, internal feeling states and cognitive processes, a process of seeing and attempting to understand through repeated mimetic acts.

**Can you tell me about your mental state as you created these works? What were the cognitive or emotional processes involved in repeating patterns or depicting these organisms?**

Even though I determine the overall form and composition before I begin, painting involves an iterative process of inquiry and discovery, as I look closer and face up to the inadequacy of my understanding. It is a constant confrontation with the mystery of being.

**You are currently working on a book called *Drawing Thought* for MIT press. In a nutshell, what do you mean by "drawing thought"? Do you think that we primarily conceptualize thought as being verbal? What attitudes do you hope to change through your book?**

The underlying message of my book is aligned with the purpose of my paintings. I aim to show the reader how drawing enables us, as I write, "to come alive to experience, (to bring what is far away close at hand.) Drawing gives us a way to cultivate deeper relationships to our own internal thoughts and to the world in which we find ourselves. We find out that there's way more than initially meets the eye. We come to realize that we know and understand less than we think we do, but at the same time, we gain access to ideas and perceptions otherwise hidden from our conscious minds. We learn to surprise ourselves. Through a regular practice and reflection we can develop habits of mind, heart and eye so that the journey of life remains ever interesting."

**You have done research concerning how an interdisciplinary art curriculum might beneficially affect students in areas of poverty. Can you tell us about this and the importance of such a curriculum?**

I have taught PK-12 art, and now I teach future PK-12 art teachers for the same reason I am writing *Drawing Thought*. I believe art and artmaking can enrich everyone's life and should be accessible to all. There is a substantial body of research (including ours) that art, particularly art that is integrated with other subjects in a co-equal manner, has a significant positive impact on



the academic achievement and overall school success for children growing up in poverty. It has less of a measurable impact on the success of middle-class or upper-class children, and so can be a powerful tool in helping to level the playing field, addressing issues of equity in educational opportunities.

Art can illuminate and transcend academic, intellectual, and socio-cultural boundaries in a wide variety of educational settings. Art educators can unleash students’ self-expression, allowing them to tell their highly personal stories in ways that words alone may not. My research, and that of others, also demonstrates the art-making process can be highly effective in cultivating spatial reasoning skills essential to success in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) domains, and in creative innovation more generally.

One of my fourth-grade students in the Bronx once said: “I never realized before how art was not just making things, but about learning and understanding stuff. How everything is connected.” Making visible the specific character and substance of those connections helps tie together the loose ends, reinforcing learning across disciplines.

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Daniel Gauss is the Proletarian Art Snob. He is a graduate of The University of Wisconsin and Columbia University.

Author profile



















- 1. Andrea Kantrowitz, Leto, 30 x 30 inches, oil on canvas, 2020
- 2. Andrea Kantrowitz, Metis, 30 x 30 inches, oil on canvas, 2020
- 3. Andrea Kantrowitz, Asteria, 18 x 18 inches, oil on canvas, 2020
- 4. Andrea Kantrowitz, Tethys, 30 v 30 inches, oil on canvas, 2020
- 5. Andrea Kantrowitz, Cybelle, 36 x 36 inches, oil on canvas, 2020
- 6. Andrea Kantrowitz, Stellae, 30 x 30 inches, oil on canvas, 2020

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