

# LINEA

STUDIO NOTES FROM THE ART STUDENTS LEAGUE OF NY

Q & A

## Artist Snapshot: Robert Neffson

Exploring the mind and habits of an artist in twenty-five questions

INTERVIEW WITH STEPHANIE CASSIDY | JUNE 8, 2020

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Robert Neffson in his studio, 2020

### At what age did you decide to become an artist?

At age twelve I asked to go to the Saturday classes for children at the Art Students League. I kept going on weekends during school and in the summer. In high school I was involved in literature, science, and math, but painting was always my strongest interest. At the League I took classes in figure drawing, anatomy, and painting, so by the time I got to Boston University for my BFA, I was ahead of the game. In a nice symmetry and because I still think it's one of the most important art schools in the US, I taught painting from life at the League from 1996 to 2010.

### How did your parents react when you told them you wanted to be an artist?

They were very encouraging to me. My mom had studied painting at the League. Her father had been a cinematographer, and her brother, an architect, so she was thrilled that I was interested in painting. When I started teaching at universities and became a Fulbright scholar in Rome, they were very happy. After a painting of mine was put in the League window on 57th Street as part of the faculty show, the director of one of New York's oldest and established galleries saw it and then asked to represent me. It was a real break for me and jump-started things. My family was thrilled.

### Who are your favorite artists?

I've never had a favorite artist; it goes against what art is. You want to keep your options open. However, since you invited me to think about this, I guess the closest would be the artist that I aspire to be. When I go to a museum, I usually look for American and European paintings, but I enjoy art from all cultures and historical periods.

I have been doing a series of large New York City panoramas, which I started about two years ago. Before starting these paintings, I was looking at images that were about vast and abstract spaces. Artists like Titian, Bellini, Tintoretto, Poussin, Canaletto, Turner, Hokusai, Constable, Bierstadt and others from the Hudson River School, Courbet, Eakins, Hopper, Ansel Adams, Pollock, O'Keefe, Rothko... the list goes on.

After graduate school and looking at historical paintings in Europe for a year, I was influenced by the first-generation Photorealists, like [Chuck Close](#) and [Richard Estes](#). They combined the physical presence of the photograph with figurative painting in a new and truly avant-garde manner. The lens-based technologies were used phenomenologically to wipe away decades of academic cliches for a fresh start that was powerful and new. Besides looking at different painters, I also looked at a lot of photographers like [Atget](#), [Lee Friedlander](#), [Gregory Crewdson](#), [Andreas Gursky](#), and [Thomas Struth](#).

### Who is your favorite artist whose work is unlike your own?

One of my favorite Abstract Expressionists is [Philip Guston](#) whom I studied with and got to know well in graduate school. He impressed upon me, with his work and teaching, how paint can change in an instant, as fast as your ideas and emotions. At the same time, he loved and encouraged my classical order and realism.

### Art book you can't live without?

I have a very old book with beautiful plates of Bruegel paintings that I was given and still treasure. When I was a student, I was either in the studio or the library and looked at every art book I could find. As to theory, I was influenced by the aesthetics of people like Bernard Berenson and his thoughts on the realization of forms in Renaissance paintings and by the Bauhaus ideas on abstraction via Joseph Albers... and so many others.

Now I read mostly artists' biographies, aesthetics, philosophy, art journals for contemporary art, film criticism, etc. It's hard to pick a favorite, but the last two I read, biographies of Lucien Freud and Turner, were quite good.

### What is the quality you most admire in an artist?

Those painters that draw me in and express interesting ideas and intense feelings in a compelling way. You keep going back to their paintings, and they reveal more and more and then become a part of your memories. The best ones can change your life.

### Do you keep a sketchbook?

Yes, always have, so there are many in my studio library, and I also use a computer to take notes. I am making marks with charcoal, graphite, paint, and brushes all day long, so it's a nice balance to go from one of the oldest technologies to the newest.

All the research notes and variations, sketches, and photos for most of my paintings are saved in separate file boxes, creating unintentional sketchbooks. In a sense, paintings are like journals of time spent with them.

### What is your favorite museum in all the world?

I have been working on a series of paintings of museum interiors such as the Metropolitan, MoMA, and those in Paris, London, and Rome. Some of them were exhibited recently in a solo show at the [Louis K. Meisel Gallery](#) called *Museum Insider*. In it I explored these unique spaces, discovered many new artists, and became reacquainted with others.

Also, I am lucky to live near the [Morgan Library](#), which I have a real fondness for. After hours of painting, I can walk there in ten minutes and get inspired by so much visual quality. When you go into this space, you feel inspired by the accomplishments and ideals of the entire Renaissance.

### What's the best exhibition you've ever attended?

In 2005 there was a ceremony for construction of 7 World Trade Center, the first new building at Ground Zero. I was asked to do a painting to be presented to Larry Silverstein, the owner of the Trade Center. The mayor, governor, and other dignitaries attended. I am a lifelong New Yorker, had lived through 9/11, and saw the second plane hit from my window, which was dreadful. So this was an especially meaningful and touching moment for me.

I have had many solo and group shows, but one that stood out was a traveling show that toured all over Europe. A few of the artists in the show met in Madrid at the [Thyssen Bornemisza National Museum](#), one of the venues where it was held. It was a tremendous sensation with banners all over the city, and there were lines of people around the block waiting to get in.

### If you were not an artist, what would you be?

Right now, I am painting lots of buildings, so I wonder what it is like to be an architect. In truth though, you also have to build the painting in many different ways, i.e. as a city planner, lighting designer, meteorologist, theater director, engineer, philosopher, novelist, poet, and on and on. The painting also has a cinematic, moving point of view and conception of space, so I could consider being a film director. Or I would write. Painting with words is just as fascinating as painting with paint. Though I would miss the physicality of brushes on canvas.

### How did your early artist cohort influence your development?

Art has always been a way for me to connect with people and exchange ideas. In school and after, we would visit each others' studios, go to openings, and tour the galleries on Saturdays. In Rome, I got to hang out and travel with the best young painters, musicians, philosophers, architects, and poets.

I went to school with Lorraine Shemesh who went on to become a wonderful painter. Early on, I tried to keep up correspondences and other projects with different artists in the US and Europe. I exchanged letters with the British painter Clive Head for many years about all subjects including art, the creative process, all sorts of things. We both learned much from these dialogues, and he used the edited text for the catalogue of his first solo show at [Marlborough Gallery](#), London.

My friendships with the SoHo art dealers Ivan Karp, Lou Meisel, and a few others are really important to me for their guidance and belief in my work. They were all of inestimable help in my development as an artist.

### What is one thing you didn't learn in art school that you wish you had?

I had great teachers and a good experience in art school. It was a very intense period of learning for me in and out of school. When I first started exhibiting on 57th Street, my paintings would often be on display in the front windows. Passersby on the street from all over the world would see my images in full light. It was thrilling; amazing and wonderful things would happen, but it was also a little terrifying... Well, that convinced me that I had something important to say and that there is literally nowhere to hide in a work of art. That's one of those double-edged things in life you have to experience to learn.

### What work of art have you look at most and why?

Well, I have prints in my home by Titian, Vermeer, Caravaggio, Poussin, and Picasso, so literally, I guess I look at them most often. Though I think of the painting I am working on from the moment I get up to when I fall asleep.

Right now, I am interested in cities as works of art and never tire of looking at and experiencing them. Each one has a specific personality and makes you think and feel a certain way. From a high vantage point, you can clearly and intensely feel the city as a living organism. A city is made up of people and the traces of their hands and minds; the city reflects us, and we are a part of it.

### What is your secret visual pleasure outside of art?

I work on one image at a time, and each can take months. Though they rest on an easel, you try to give the paintings sensations of movement, speed, and time. These implied suggestions and vectors are big factors in designing my compositions.

So it's a pleasure to watch films which give us sensations of movements in a different way. Movies present fresh perspectives on space, multiple points of view, narratives, and so much more.

### Do you listen to music in your studio?

Yes, but I also need peace and quiet to work. I concentrate on how much distraction I want or need in the painting process. Ultimately, it's just me and the painting even when there are things going on around me. Sometimes I shut the sound off once things start to cook.

### What is the last gallery you visited?

I recently did a painting of the fifth-century BC Greek and Roman art gallery at the Met.

### What is an underrated artists people should be looking at?

I met [William Bailey](#) and we went out for a great cannelloni lunch. He taught me much and had a wonderful way of saying that the more real you make things look, the more abstract they become. Though he was well-known as the head of Yale's art department, his mysterious paintings should be seen more. Also, [Tom Blackwell](#) was one of the first generation photorealists and was a storefront. He painted, among other things, piercingly intelligent and emotional storefront windows with complex shapes and forms

### What art materials can you not live without?

Nothing really because I know it's not the materials that make art but the mind. Art materials can be very inspiring, but part of the process of the painting is "problem solving," so I would try to find some other way to replace it and perhaps do it better.

Though I do collect a lot of beautifully made brushes...

### Do you paint every day?

Yes, it is what I do and who I am. It really is always with me.

### What is the longest time you went without creating art?

Art can give you an identity; whether you paint all day long or a half hour a day, it's going to reveal who you are and where you are at. Each project is different, but I try to keep up my usual studio hours and get up early, paint most of the day and maybe a few hours after dinner. I am in this for the long haul.

### What do you do when you are feeling uninspired?

Sometimes, when the painting is going well, it progresses rather quickly, but if not, I know it's time to get "re-inspired." It's the things and feelings about them that I am painting that inspire me, so that is where I go. If I am in New York City, I'll leave the studio and go to the site to look, draw, and be inspired. Or I change my point of view, either physically or mentally, and use a different type of brush, study the painting in a mirror or a reducing glass, etc. You try to become whatever object the tip of your brush is touching on the canvas. I never want it to become rote or mechanical, so I make sure I feel strongly about what I paint.

There are two photos hanging in my studio: One is of Philippe Petit taking his first step across the tight rope wire between the World Trade Towers. The other is of Picasso holding a beach umbrella like a halo over the head of his muse, Françoise Gilot.

I try to capture that feeling of exhilaration and existential freedom of taking that first step when I start to paint. I want it to have consequence. And I also try, like Picasso, to tip my hat and make way for the muse...

### What are the questions that drive your work?

As I paint, the image is a living, mutable thing, and sometimes it reveals the answers to the questions it asks.

The paintings are made with great respect to the ordinary and how everyday things look. I try to deconstruct and then re-combine elements of reality in order to explore non-verbal emotional states. Sometimes the city or museum becomes a metaphor, and I use the people, buildings, and natural landscape to create a mood that corresponds to inner feelings I have. Through this process they reach for an ideal.

I like the quote from Walt Whitman: "Something there is in the float of the sight of atmosphere, light, and air on forms and how they merge to create a unified whole and discrete new object called a "painting."

I really like the challenge of doing the impossible. Something that moves you so deeply you say, "How in the world could I convey this?" It's the question I like to start out with because it means I am on the right track. I do the painting because I want to see the image in my mind come alive. After I do much planning, then I try to forget most of it and just plunge in. Because my paintings are sometimes large and take so long, it's important to stay in the moment and keep things fresh and growing constantly. You want the painting to affect people with the same force as your initial inspiration.

It's all such a great mystery; you never run out of questions.

### What is the most important quality in an artist?

It's important not to confuse or romanticize crudeness or ineptitude for the real sustained emotions of art. I like artists who have clear ideas and feelings about the world but let the viewers discover it for themselves. They're not detached but passionately observant and expressive.

### What is something you haven't yet achieved in art?

I would like to continue to improve and expand my art in any direction it may take me. To have exhibitions and conversations about my paintings that demand and challenge me to push my work forward. A one man retrospective at the Met would certainly be something to strive for. I have an idea for the banner...

### What is the best thing about art in the era of social media?

It is a great way to see many images and get feedback on your work. But, while it is important to have as many people as possible viewing your work, it is just as crucial to have dialogues and reactions from those few who understand what you're doing in depth.

I like the way social media democratizes things, but it lacks so much compared to being in front of a painting. Either way, we will always need art. In particular images that see the inner and outer world clearly for what it truly is and could be.

**ROBERT NEFFSON** was an instructor at the Art Students League from 1996 through 2010. He is currently represented by the [Louis K. Meisel Gallery](#).

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