

Pat Lipsky

AN INTERVIEW WITH PAT LIPSKY

Pat Lipsky has dedicated herself to painting for several decades. Lipsky graduated from Cornell University with a B.F.A. in 1963, following which she received an M.A. in painting at Hunter College. There, she studied with sculptor Tony Smith.

Lipsky's paintings have been reviewed by David Cohen (*The New York Sun*), Ken Johnson (*The New York Times*), Alicia Turner (*The Miami Herald*), Karen Wilkin (*Art in America*), and Alexi Worth (*The New Yorker*)—among others. Her paintings are in twenty-four public collections, including the Whitney, the Hirshhorn, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and she has had twenty-eight solo exhibits.

We caught up with Lipsky in her studio in downtown Manhattan. We talked ten floors above the Hudson River, seated in paint-splattered chairs, with her large simplified color paintings leaning against the walls.

We found Lipsky tall, quirky, and elegant, at ease in her signature t-shirt and jeans.

Lalitamba: What kind of images influenced you as a child?

Lipsky: As a child, I was interested in images that came from what I called *olden times*. I loved the rooms from Colonial America at the Brooklyn Museum. I thought that life had been better then. I liked the displays of people doing homey things, like churning butter or milking cows. I would also look out

the window onto our backyard and imagine Indians running around out there.

I was interested in birds, too. Their different colors attracted me. I tried to memorize some of their names. Scarlet Tanager. Robin Red Breast. Blue Jay. Baltimore Oriole.

Then, one of my uncles returned from somewhere in South America—Venezuela, I think—after the war and brought back a tray made of butterfly wings. I was intrigued by their exotic patterns. Another uncle who'd survived the Bataan Death March came to stay at our house. He'd done a painting of a red horse that really impressed me.

Lalitamba: Was there a moment or event that inspired you to become an artist?

Lipsky: I studied painting for a summer at the Brooklyn Museum Art School. I was sixteen. Rather than go to camp, I decided to take classes there every day. I was overwhelmed by the act of painting full time—like a real painter. It felt right to me, not like school, where art classes were punctuated by forty-minute bells.

The instructor, Moses Soyer, took me seriously. I set up a mirror in the class and did a self-portrait in a large studio. This picture won first prize in the Scholastic Art Contest for high school seniors. Hallmark Cards acquired it, and it was also shown at what was then the New York Coliseum. My photo appeared in the *Brooklyn Eagle*. That was it.

Lalitamba: At what point did you realize that you were an artist, that this would be your life's work?

Lipsky: As a short aside, I don't like the word artist. It sounds pretentious to me. Matisse considered himself a painter, and Picasso thought of himself as an artist. I prefer Matisse.

In graduate school, I still thought of myself as an art student. I studied with Tony Smith at Hunter College for four years, instead of the necessary one, just to keep the classes going. It was towards the end of this period that I started thinking of myself as a painter. I had gone to the studios at Hunter almost every day, as a painter would, and produced a body of work. I had my first solo show two years after graduating.

Lalitamba: Your paintings are often compared with and even titled for music. What kind of music would you say your paintings reflect? How is sound a part of your life?

Lipsky: Bach. I constantly listen to Bach and have for many years. I like other classical music, but Bach's work has actually influenced my painting, particularly his fugue format, his counterpoint, and his polyphony. Bach's music, like the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, the *Goldberg Variations*, and the *English Suites*, is abstract and not taken over by melody. The art critic Ken Johnson guessed that I was influenced by Bach without ever having talked with me about it. He included it in a review he did of one of my shows in New York.

When I was a teenager, in the late fifties and early sixties, there was a lot of jazz around. I particularly liked Thelonious Monk, who surprisingly turns out to have been influenced by Bach. I used to go to the Blue Note often, to



Lipsky in the Studio

hear him. The improvisational aspect and freedom of jazz appealed to me. I found it inherently American.

One of my favorite things is going to concerts, where I'm often soothed by music. Proust was right. Music provides "spiritual nourishment."

Lalitamba: You've also been translating Proust. How does your work with Proust's writing emanate from your life as a painter?

Lipsky: Good question, although I'm not sure it does. It may be the other way around. I did a painting called *Proust's Sea*, which came out of my translation work, because the author mentions the sea so much. Also, the triptych *Oceans* came directly out of a passage I was translating, in which the writer describes a Nereid frolicking in the ocean. I think I'm influenced by the poetry in Proust's writing. My father was an amateur poet, and he read poems to me when I was a young child. Somehow, among other things, the language of Proust evokes that memory. His work is also very visual. He writes scenes and describes things that one can see.

Lalitamba: What is there about Proust's writing that calls you to translate his words?

Lipsky: I have been captivated by *À la recherche du temps perdu*. During some crisis or other over the last forty years, I've managed to read all six volumes three times. I first became acquainted with *Swann's Way*, when I was nineteen.

In 2004, I got the idea to look at the original French of Book II, *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, which, for personal reasons had taken on special meaning for me. That was surprising. The English translation seemed unnecessarily different from the French. Words were added and phrases altered. To my mind, the translation wasn't entirely honest. I thought perhaps it could be done better? For a work that has changed every part of my life, that has become a filter for

my thoughts and opinions, a prism through which to view my existence, it seemed a worthwhile attempt.

Lalitamba: Christianity seems to appear frequently in your work—*Episcopal Pandemonium* is a title of one of your early paintings and more recently there is the series *Les Vitraux*. What's the connection?

Lipsky: The title *Episcopal Pandemonium* and my series *Les Vitraux* have nothing to do with Christianity. *Episcopal Pandemonium* is a title that I lifted directly from a line in a play by T. S. Eliot. The phrase represented the over one hundred colored squares that made up my ten foot painting. Maybe my father's thought would have been better. "To me, it looks like dancing."

My series, *Les Vitraux*, "stained glass windows" in French, has to do with color. I was strongly influenced by the 12th and 13th century windows in French cathedrals like Chartres, Bourges, Le Man, Troyes and others that I visited between 2000 and 2004. I was impressed by the *fauve* colors that these glassmakers invented. I thought that they were the true Fauve

painters. I decided to do a series entirely different from my other work, based on these charming medieval images that were clearly inspired by religion. I learned a lot about the *Bible*, both the Old and New Testaments, from this project. Almost all of the ancient windows, with the exceptions of those of the Zodiac and Charlemagne at Chartres, are derived from religious topics.

Lalitamba: What role does God, the transcendent, or the sublime play a role in your art?

Lipsky: God plays no part. I don't think in those terms, though it is possible that I am going for a transcendent effect in my painting. I think of getting an image that resonates, that has some magic to it, that creates an aura. It's that "there it is" feeling. Really, it's not something you can put into words. If you could, you wouldn't have to paint it.

Lalitamba: What is your personal theory on art?

Lipsky: I don't have a personal theory of art. With me, it's all practice, intuitive. I remember hearing about Mondrian that he would ask anyone who walked into his studio if a line or division was in the right place, or whether it should be moved. For me, painting is experimental. Trial and error. I keep trying things until something finally looks right.

Lalitamba: What makes good art?

Lipsky: What makes good art? That's a tough question, I don't know if I can answer that. Maybe some of the ingredients are cohesiveness and feeling. It's about creating something that adds to the language of art, while maintaining the standards of the past. This includes the painter's ability to successfully resolve problems she or he has set out in the work's structure.

Lalitamba: What is the purpose of art?

Lipsky: "The purpose of art" is a long and contentious question. So many different painters and writers have weighed in on it. I like what Proust wrote about artistic expression in *À la recherche du temps perdu*:

"By art alone we are able to get outside ourselves, to know what another sees of this universe which for him is not ours, the landscapes of which would remain as unknown to us as those of the moon. Thanks to art, instead of seeing one world—our own—we see it multiplied. As many original artists as there are, so many worlds are at our disposal, differing more widely from each other than those which roll round the infinite and which, whether their name be Rembrandt or Vermeer, send us their unique rays many centuries after the hearth from which they emanate is extinguished."

Finally, there is aesthetic experience. For the time that you are looking at the work, or listening to it, you are



Lipsky on Madison Avenue

connecting with the creator in a disinterested way. Nothing in your life is going to change, but you are allowing yourself to be moved. You are exercising your unique humanness.

Lalitamba: Is there an underlying philosophy to the way you live your life?

Lipsky: Probably there is. I believe in art, in making art. That, along with being a mother, has been the focus of my life.