

PROMOTING THE ARTS IN THE BERKSHIRES SINCE 1994

THE ARTFUL MIND

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VIRGINIA BRADLEY
Photograph by Tasja Keetman



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VIRGINIA BRADLEY

Interview by Harryet Candee

Photography of Artist by Tasja Keetman

I enjoyed visiting your studio and I am grateful to Joe Goodwin for introducing us. How long have you been living here? How did you discover the Berkshires?

Virginia Bradley: Yes, a big thanks to Joe Goodwin. He is a very interesting painter. It was great to have you visit the studio and hear your insightful comments about what I do.

We moved to the Berkshires from Center City Philadelphia in May of 2017. We left a noisy four-story town house without a speck of grass and moved into a beautiful and quiet 3.5-acre property just north of Great Barrington.

We have winter studios in a small fishing village in the southwest corner of Puerto Rico. We became acquainted with two artist couples in Puerto Rico about five years ago and they introduced us to the Berkshires and the Hudson Valley. After looking at about 80 houses in the Hudson Valley over two years, we were fortunate to land in an 1894 renovated barn. The house had been on the market for

five years. It took the vision of two crazy artists who fell in love with the property for it to finally sell. Ours is an unusual upside-down house that needed updating. We first saw the property after a huge snowstorm in March and made an offer contingent on selling our house in Philadelphia within two weeks, which we were able to do, and here we are.

Has your art changed since living here? What has living here given you?

Virginia: Previously, I have lived in Pennsylvania, California, Florida, Texas, Wisconsin, Minnesota and Delaware. For the first time I feel like I have finally found my genuine home in the Berkshires. Life here has led to a calm that translates into studio contemplation.

I would say being immersed in the natural world of the Berkshires has enabled landscape to become an unconscious departure point for abstraction. The thin layers of oil washes in the paintings refer to water, the richness of the air and the unknown. One

of my favorite Magical Realism writers is Gabriel Garcia Marquez; I love how you can feel the lush magnetic air in his writing and story-telling. The Berkshires have the same lush air, which I try to embed in my painting.

Another shift in the work is a full-time commitment to painting and a studio life. After teaching at the university level for 36 years, it is a pleasure to be able to dedicate my time to painting. As I look back, I wonder how I managed to get any studio work accomplished with the hectic life and time schedule of academia.

What have you fancied in particular about the Berkshires?

Virginia: First of all, the extremely interesting people. Everyone seems to have arrived here with captivating and varied histories. And of course, the beautiful landscape as well as all the cultural activities. Jacob's Pillow is our favorite summer activity. It's amazing to have the most sophisticated dance



Virginia Bradley, Landing 4,
40"x 36", oil on canvas, 2019

festival in country at our doorstep.

Has it been fun and interesting finding friends you can network and share in art discussions with here?

Virginia: Participating in the Open Studios sponsored by the Guild of Berkshire Artists has introduced our work and studio to many visual art admirers. We shared our studios with figurative sculptor William Casper. The result was great dialogue, festive afternoons and new friends. We are organizing an evening art salon on contemporary abstraction featuring four painters for May 2020.

In other ways my studio life has become more reclusive since moving to Berkshires. After spending years talking about art in the classroom and on campus, I'm more interested in dedicating my time to researching and making the work rather than talking. Karen Dolmanisth (a Western Massachusetts painter and installation artist) is someone I respect and am friendly with. Karen and I have far ranging conver-

sations about process, art and life. And of course, ongoing dialogue with Chris is a stimulus.

Your studio is beautiful, full of natural light. What was important for you when you ran down the list of needs for a studio?

Virginia: Building the studio was our first priority upon moving to Great Barrington. After a couple of false starts we broke ground in October of 2017. The building was finished in June 2018. The studio is an 1800 square foot metal structure. Chris and I have separate studio spaces in the building.

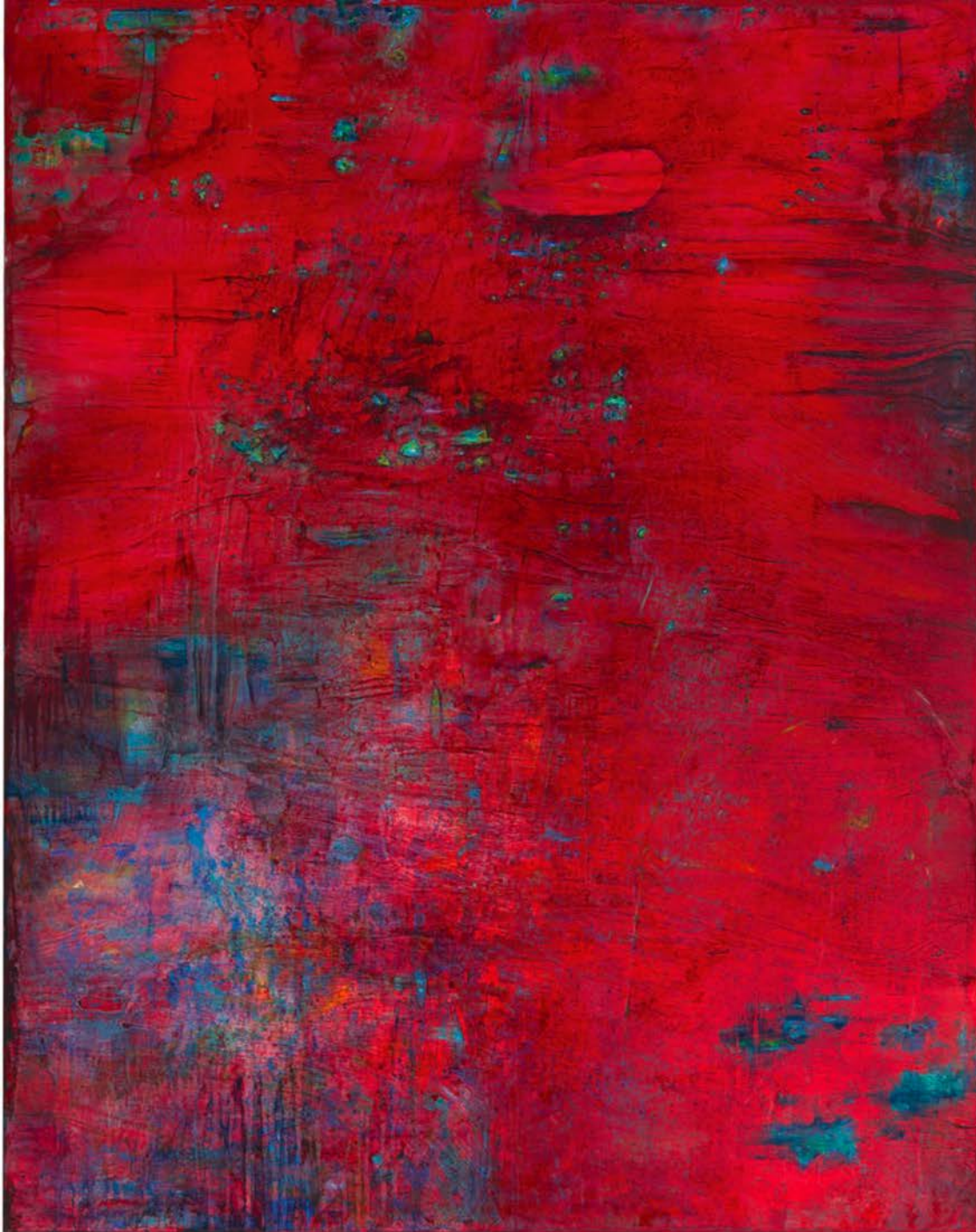
We had a long list of needs. My top priorities were floor space to pour paintings and wall space to edit the work. The one thing we did splurge on was the wall material. The whole studio is lined with ¾ inch plywood, which I am thankful for every time I drive a nail into the wall. We went with a metal building to make the cost manageable, but constructing something this large is very much like building a house

from scratch, lots of details.

As I look at your art, I see there is so much more than brush work involved. It's almost hard to call you a painter, more like an alchemist, or scientist. It's pouring, shifting, making layers, waiting, repeating processes in order to create your desired tension and endlessness of colors in atmospheric mists and shapes. What makes you feel a finished piece of art has become successful? Complete? Gallery worthy?

Virginia: I think of myself as a maker and an experimenter as much as I do an artist. And yes, I am interested in the relationship between science and art. I am not an expert in alchemy, but I have a long-standing interest in it as it relates to my studio practice.

During Medieval and Renaissance periods, the alchemists endeavored to produce prima material, the base material for the creation of gold, as well as
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Virginia Bradley, Long Pond 8,
oil /resin on stretched silk, 5'x4', 2018

searching for personal enlightenment and contemplation. The alchemist's work in the laboratory was thought to purify chemicals as well the artist themself. The 16th and 17th century engravings of Michael Maier, a German physician, alchemist and artist are amazing examples of the alchemical principals. There is a long tradition of artists' use of alchemy in the 20th and 21st centuries. Sigmar Polke, Leonora Carrington, Roni Horn, Max Ernst, Anish Kapoor, Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer are some of my alchemical heroes.

Last week I viewed the work of English painter Rachel Howard at Blaine Southern in Chelsea. Her paintings use alchemy to explore the slippage between chaos and control. Matthias Meyer's exhibition "Silent Water" at Danese Corey was also of particular interest. His work is an alchemical synthesis of representation and the abstract.

Alchemical investigations with materials and mediums are constant ingredients in my studio/laboratory. The studio becomes the athanor or an oven for the interaction of diverse materials, painting me-

diums and paint to coalesce into realized images.

The process is intuitive and improvisational. I try to work in equilibrium with a painting rather than control the process and destination. Decisions are often spontaneous and risk is constantly waiting to be engaged. The Surrealist's practice of "chance and order" also directs the path of a work. The "chance" is the pouring of the paint and experimenting with mediums. The "order" comes into play when the work is placed on the wall and edited through drawing, painting and sanding onto and into the surface. These steps are often repeated during the evolution of a work.

In the Puerto Rico studio, the sun becomes an alchemical agent that transforms the oil pours on archival duralar film (www.virginiabradley.com/playa-santa-works-on-paper/). While the work dries in 95-degree sun, the oil paint coagulates and leaves unusual residues. This process is sometimes replicated up to fifty times.

I begin a series by working on several pieces at

the same time, I move from one work to another as they dry. At some point, I start to concentrate on a single work and stay with it until I am satisfied with the outcome.

How do I know when a work is finished?

Virginia: If I have to ask - then I know it's not finished.

What surfaces do you like to work on? Do you choose one kind over another because of the materials and process? What goes best with what process?

Virginia: Last spring, I started to work on canvas after a hiatus of about 25 years. I was working on birch panels and more recently on stretched silk and archival film. The support structure changes in relationship to where the painting process leads. The birch panels were perfect for large-scale mixed media paintings that could fit together modularly. The newer canvas works are lighter and easier to manipulate and to direct the flow of thin oil pours.



Virginia Bradley: Yellowstone II, mixed media on wood panel, 14" x 11", 2019

What part of the art process for you is the most challenging?

Virginia: The entirety of painting is complex and challenging. I still learn something new about the process every time I enter the studio. Patience is another demand. The pours are not static until they are 100 percent dry. Sometimes an ephemeral pour transforms into a disaster an hour later. I don't take myself very seriously, but I do take the making of my artwork seriously. For me, painting is about continually arriving at new destinations.

I'm looking at Long Pond #8: The colors, Virginia, are deep and alive! I may even imagine you have created colors that never existed before! How do you get such color? It almost seems like this series contains an inner visualization technique for creating good karma.

Virginia: The French Surrealist painter Yves Tanguy came to mind as the form of #8 emerged. The biomorphic forms refer to Surrealist landscape painting. Some of my paintings do enter the Surrealist realm.

Maybe that's why "inner visualization techniques" came to you.

Agnes Martin always compared painting to "slaying the dragon". Long Pond #8 was a beast to develop and slay. There are probably 20 different paintings under the final rendition. It was one of four pieces I worked on when we first moved into the studio and is a transitional work. The color atmosphere is created by the thin oil pours layered upon one another. It's often difficult to go backwards and decipher how I got to a particular palette or color. Sometimes I think I need to make my own version of a color recipe book.

Long Pond #8 is an example of the process dictating changing materials. The structure is on stretched silk with rabbit skin glue. The silk was used for transparency, as water was an ongoing theme in the series. After finishing #8 it was clear the silk wasn't necessary anymore because of the heavy use of oil paint. I then moved to canvas for the next works.

I am a fan of Yellowstone # 11. Well, actually all of them, but #11 more so. Please explain this series.

Virginia: The Yellowstone Series (www.virginia-bradley.com/yellowstone-series/) is inspired by the Fountain Paint Pots in the Gibbon Geyser Basin at Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming. Thermal features in the basin include over 50 springs, geysers, vents and mud pots. The Yellowstone paintings depart from photographs I took at the Basin after the first snow had fallen in late October. The very cold nights were contrasted with warm days and created a rich and steamy world to investigate. The larger works refer to the mystic world of the geyser steam and smaller works relate an intimate view of the Paint Pots. #11 is one of the smaller detailed works (11"x14").

The behavior of the thermal activity changes in relationship to seasons of the year and the amount of subterranean water. Half of the approximately 1000 geysers in the world are located in Yellowstone
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Virginia Bradley, Soudan 3, oil on stretched silk, 30"x22", 2015



Angus en Herba, mixed media on birch panel with inlaid steel and silkscreen, 8'x6', 2010

National Park. Climate change is having an adverse effect on the geysers. The Yellowstone geysers are fed by Madison River. The water flow of the river has dropped by 15 percent in recent years due to climate change. Less rainfall leads to less pressure on the geyser reservoirs, which mean fewer eruptions. Eventually the geysers could disappear. Already the duration of time between geyser eruptions has increased.

The ephemeral nature of the Yellowstone blue paintings speaks to breathing and the suspension of time. The works are reminiscent of my favorite passage from Agnes Martin's book "Writings SCHRIFTEN":

**The ocean is deathless
The islands rise and die
Quietly come, quietly go
A silent swaying breath**

**I wish the idea of time would drain out of my
cells and leave me
quiet even on this shore.**

**Just curious, what determines the prices for each
panel, since they do have a range.**

The price points of the paintings are based on what my paintings have sold for previously and on the size of the piece. Right now, I am establishing my practice in the Berkshires and building relationships directly with art consultants and interior designers. Individuals are also welcome to arrange studio visits. I was with a gallery in Philadelphia that unfortunately closed.

**Images of animals are seen in your art work.
What period of time were these your focus?**

Virginia: From about 2001-2015, my practice focused on mixed media painting utilizing natural history imagery and environmental topics. In the Natural Histories Series (www.virginiabradley.com/natural-histories-series/), I was interested in merging animal imagery as represented in natural history with the present. I am intrigued by the "instinct" or "sixth sense" that animals possess, as well as their primordial sense of purity and beauty. An animal's innate instinct for survival correlates to the intuitive process that is active in my painting.

The Jeopardy Series (www.virginiabradley.com/jeopardy-series/) ex-

plores imagery found at the Zoological Society of London library in this new body of mixed media painting. Imagery ranging from the menagerie at the Tower of London paired with Anne Boleyn and Jane Grey to contemporary imagery of the Okapi addressing endangered species emerge in these layered works. Imagery is printed, drawn and sanded, paint is poured, surfaces are waxed and carved to form hide-like tapestries on khadi paper and birch panel.

The use of printmaking and mixed media in the earlier works create a dialogue between the printed image, the natural handmade mark and the alchemy of disparate materials. This combination serves to question the history, origin, meaning and authenticity of the image.

In 2015, I relocated to a new studio in Philadelphia's Italian Market. Through a natural progression my practice moved to abstraction. The Soudan Series was the bridge to abstraction and is based on recent geological findings in the Soudan Iron Mine in Tower, Minnesota. The ancient waters in the mine host organisms that formed 2.7 billion years ago and the water is similar to the water found on Mars (www.virginiabradley.com/soudan-series/).



Photograph of Virginia in studio
by Tasja Keetman

The abstract work is comprised of thin layers of poured oil paint and does not use representation imagery or silkscreen. I am trying to erase the evidence of my hand in the abstract works, while the juxtaposition of hand work with the printed was a vital part of the earlier works.

Looking back to when you sold your first piece of art, did it excite you?

Virginia: I haven't thought about this in years, but I remembered the first painting I sold was to the administrative assistant in the Art Department at University of Miami. It was a work that was recognized in the annual student juried art exhibition at the Lowe Art Museum; the sale validated my efforts.

You have many experiences with selling your art. Has there been one or more important thing you have learned about being an artist that you continually remind yourself to follow?

Virginia: An artist produces artwork because one needs to; the process is more important than any sale. The making of the work is my identity.

What would be one challenge you face on this amazing road to artistic enlightenment?

Virginia: Acquiring self-knowledge and all the complications of every-day living.

And, have you decided whether you like working on small or large sized canvases? How do you decide which to use?

Virginia: The research behind the start of a series dictates the size of the works. I prefer larger works as they demand more physical action and the scale envelops the viewer. My process does acknowledge both action and color field painting. The small works often fill pauses between larger ones. The earlier mixed media paintings were often 8'x 9' or larger. I haven't jumped to that size point in the ab-

stract work, as much as I would like to.

While you were an art professor at University of Delaware, what did you enjoy about teaching?

Virginia: Most of all I enjoyed the students and their artistic development through the use of new processes and critical thinking. Large-scale mixed-media drawing was my favorite class to teach.

Did you make any breakthrough discoveries while teaching regarding your own art?

Virginia: Over the years of teaching my work evolved through experimentation, research and travel. The biggest factor was having a steady paycheck that allowed me freedom for artistic exploration. I was never overly concerned with selling work while in academia. I exhibited at many alternative spaces and completed Percent for Art Projects for the State of Minnesota.

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Virginia Bradley, *Landing I*, 16"x20", oil on silk, 2019

What do you remember that you repeatedly told your students about art that they must never or always be mindful of?

Virginia: Negative space. I am big on students acknowledging and working the negative space and the whole surface of a painting. My favorite story is when I had a previous student stop me at an art opening and tell me he thinks of me every time he puts the pepperoni over the whole surface of a pizza. Also, students should avoid the Masterpiece Syndrome; they should experiment!

Part of your life was spent living in London. Tell us about your time there. And this was where you met Chris, your husband. How did you first meet each other? Was it love at first sight? Was it Art at first sight?

Virginia: In 2003 I moved from Minneapolis to the University of Delaware to be a Professor of Art and Department Chair. Chris and I met at Fundación Valparaíso in Almeria, Spain in July of 2004. I arrived a few days late and was introduced to six other artist fellows. I remembered thinking they didn't seem too engaging and I would accomplish plenty of work in the next month. Later that day an

Englishman parted the beaded curtain to my studio door and asked if I would like to go swimming. That was the beginning of our relationship, founded on a shared love of swimming and painting. And no, I didn't get much work done that month!

We were married six months later next to a Christmas tree on Christmas Eve at my sister's house in Shelburne, Vermont. Chris emigrated from Notting Hill; we lived in Wilmington and moved to Center City Philadelphia after I finished my term as Department Chair. We spend a lot of time in England as Chris has three adult children and grandchildren in London. But I do have a longer history with England as I collaborated with English Artist Paul Clifford from 1987 until about 2002. You can read about our collaboration at www.virginiabradley.com/land-of-milk-and-honey/.

I am wondering, since you are both artists, do you critique each other's art? How does that work?

Virginia: We try to keep our practices and visual voices independent of one another. Although our studios are next to one another, we are respectful of

each other's time and space. We only comment on each other's work when asked. With that said we spend much of our time discussing all forms of art and culture.

How do you see the next five years, while enjoying life, to be like for you and Chris and with art?

Virginia: We are planning on painting, swimming, reading and traveling for inspiration. Chris has never experienced the Southwest United States so we are planning a trip there next spring. Most of all we want to enjoy our friends and life in the Berkshires.

Thank you Virginia!

For further information see www.virginiabradley.com or contact Virginia at virginiabradleyart@gmail.com Instagram #virginiabradleyart

