

# AUDREY ANASTASI: CREATIVE BREAKTHROUGHS

## interview with Michael Corbin, "ArtBookGuy"

Audrey Frank Anastasi is a brilliant artist. She's SO committed to her vision and not getting caught up in "perfection" that she paints with her non-dominant left hand <http://www.audreyanastasi.com/>. You sure can't tell by looking at her work. I love it. Here's our cool chat ...

**"Can painting, in the traditional sense ... continue to exist as a valid/relevant art form? There seems to be a part of us, hardwired to find magic in the simple image captured by the human hand ..."**

MICHAEL: Hi Audrey, Your work is killer. Let's start with your paintings. They're dark, moody and very expressionist. You don't shy away from using the color black. What does black do for you as a painter?

AUDREY: Black suggests infinity. When I want a subject to be removed from a time and place reference, I often drop them into a black ground. In this dark continuum, even gravity loses hold. Psychologically, the viewer can share in this sense of floating or falling, as one does in a dream.

Working from a live model, I can sometimes turn a representational image in a different direction than originally depicted, and while the figure may exist in an indeterminate space, the emotional weight remains. I also love the graphic dynamic. Cutting some rich black paint into a figure work feels (to me) like a leap from academic description to a much bolder world.

MICHAEL: It also looks like you sometimes choose fairly large canvases. What do you like about working large scale?

AUDREY: Yes, I do love working on large canvases. There is a presence one senses when looking at a painting of a figure that is larger than life, even if it is just slightly oversize. It has a psychological weight that excites me. Most of the large canvases are completed in one session with a live model and I like maintaining that immediacy. My process is to work quickly, with large brushes, and to further circumvent getting seduced into perfectionism by painting with my non-dominant, left hand.

MICHAEL: Seduced into perfectionism. I love that. What happens when you do get seduced into perfectionism? Do you ever actually finish a painting? LOL.

AUDREY: The flippant answer to your question is "When you have the experience to recognize a seduction, one is not powerless to resist."

MICHAEL: Oh, I like that too.

AUDREY: That said, being objective about one's own work can be difficult. And yes, sometimes it is necessary to put work aside for a period of time to look at it again with a fresh eye. I confess to enjoying that sense of validation when someone responds positively to the work. However, I think it's an artist job to persevere beyond that "comfort zone" and dig even deeper. I am excited by the creative breakthroughs that occur when there is a sense that there is nothing to lose.

MICHAEL: What role do you think painting on canvas plays in our digital world today?

AUDREY: I do recognize that in today's reality, painting, drawing and art creation of the physical object is a somewhat dying/irrelevant form. The digital world is astonishing. Yet, unlike the millennial generation, for whom all things digital are second nature, for me, technology does not spark a creative impulse.

I resent every moment I have to spend harnessed to the computer or iPhone, answering email, correcting the bizarre and comical permutations of spellcheck, formatting press releases, correcting image files, etc.

Can painting, in the traditional sense, of pigment mixed with a medium, applied upon a canvas or panel, continue to exist as a valid/relevant art form? If we look to the "clean slate" of the mind of an infant, there's no question that they are drawn to light and all the moving images the digital screen offers them. And yet you can also see their wonder when one draws a simple circle with two dots and a curved line, as they recognize this represents a face. So, for me, the role of painting on canvas is inexplicable and primal. There seems to be a part of us, hardwired to find magic in the simple image captured by the human hand.

MICHAEL: I love your Dark Figures and Stations of the Cross series. How do you determine whether something will become a series?

AUDREY: You selected some of my favorite bodies of work. The "Stations of the Cross" are inherently a series by definition, specifically because there are 14 of them.

Though not a religious theme, the dark figures also have a sense of spirituality for me. The figures appear to be floating, falling through a timeless void with only an occasional suggestion of an environment, such as a fish or an eye peering through the darkness.

I don't really work in "series" in the sense of moving on to something completely different at different periods of time. I work impulsively, so the different bodies of work are parallel, and continue, depending sometimes upon practical aspects, like having a model, and sometimes on pure whim.

MICHAEL: While you're actually painting, what's going through your mind? Is your mind meditatively empty? Is the process more emotional, intellectual or spiritual? Do you listen to music? What kind?

AUDREY: Another interesting question. I am always trying to keep the motivation predominantly intuitive. There are moments, especially with the more observational work, where I'm analyzing, visually measuring, evaluating shapes, lights and darks, color values etc. But for the most part, work progresses along its own flow.

The first few marks are the most conscious decision making part of attacking a blank canvas or sheet of paper. Then the dialogue or maybe I should say tri-ologue between 1. Subject, 2. Me, and 3. The developing artwork itself as it progresses with its own momentum. So, in other words, the process involves responding to both the controlled and surprise elements as they present themselves.

Lately, the music runs concurrent with working. I shuffle on Pandora. My genomes are mostly old timey, soulful rhythm and blues, including Sam Cooke, Etta James, but also Mozart, Willie Nelson, Patty Smith, Robert Cray, Lou Reed, Bomba Estereo Bombino, Olatunji ... a fairly eclectic mix.

MICHAEL: Do you come from an artistic family? When did you first become aware of yourself as an artist?

AUDREY: This question has unleashed lots of memories for me. The short answer is no, there wasn't anyone involved in the arts or culture in my immediate family.

However, my parents had an innate sense of style and balance. My father's side of the family were immigrant Jewish merchants. They owned what was called, in those days, a junior department store. My dad would sometimes get involved in the window displays. And he was quite a snappy dresser, looking surprisingly elegant in his patterned or pastel sports jackets.

My mother, on the other hand, came from a more rural upbringing. Although her mom was from Eastern Europe, her dad was born in the USA. "Mr. Jew Arthur," as he was referred to by locals, owned a tavern in a predominantly African-American community, Fairfield, Maryland. Not only did he sell spirits, he definitely partook of them, as well.

While still a teenager, my mother, Rose Gussie, changed her name to Joyce and headed to the big city to be a cosmetician and hosiery model. She also had an impeccable sense of style. And in her picture albums, besides the photographs, were page upon page of charming ink drawings of stylish ladies. I'm forever grateful that when I was a child my mother indulged me with regular outings to the library and weekly visits to the Baltimore Museum of Art. There I would pass the gorgeous bust of Queen Nefertiti and scary mummies on the way to my art lessons. So, to answer your second question, there isn't a single moment of my conscious life when I didn't think of myself as an artist.

MICHAEL: When you're working on a piece, how do you know when it's done? Is it possible to overwork something?

AUDREY: Yes, It is always possible to overwork, but much of my process, with the intention of overriding self-conscious inhibitions, such as working quickly, using my left hand, etc., reduces the likelihood. Deciding when something is "finished" is instinctual. I prefer putting work aside, and looking at it at a later time, with a fresh perspective, rather than grinding away whenever a piece feels unresolved. And, I must admit, some of the most creative breakthroughs happen when I think a work is hopeless, and with that sense of surrender, making the mark liberates me.

MICHAEL: What do you think about the contemporary art world/art market and how they function today? What do you think needs changing?

AUDREY: I think there are two distinct art markets. There is the rarefied tier where blue-chip art is traded, almost as its own currency. The buyers at that level are happy to pay enormous prices, because the rest of their collection of similar works also gains value.

However, the vast majority of work that's produced and shown in contemporary galleries does not fall into that category. Artists often think that their sales are influenced by trends in the economy, but I don't see it that way. Occasionally, collectors, including other artists, just love an artwork so much, they feel they want to have it in their possession and look at it every day. That said, even those who occasionally collect, are far outnumbered by those artists who are consistently and constantly producing more art. In simple "supply and demand" terms, selling art is not the most viable business.

Although I don't have any big solutions for the art market in general, I do feel that many artists would benefit by purchasing artwork with their own hard-earned money to determine value, prior to setting prices on their own work.

MICHAEL: Finally Audrey, Long after you're gone and your work is still here, what do you want your body of work to say on your behalf? Is there a message?

AUDREY: I think the best legacy one can hope for (if the work exists in future generations,) is that it has achieved dual truths: 1. That it reflects something which expresses insights that are particular to our culture and our times, and 2. that it captures some timeless aspects of the human condition/soul/existence that transcends the specifics of an era.

MICHAEL: Thanks Audrey. This has been a lovely chat.