

As a painter, Howard Fonda ([Issue 7 cover artist](#)) focuses on the “big questions” in life: What is love? Why are we here? Though he draws from myriad influences, including the emotion of Romanticism and the material and form of Modernism, he works with a high degree of introspection as well.

Fonda has a varied body of work that ranges from portraits, to musings on nature, to pattern-based paintings. Ultimately, he says, he’s trying to come to a point of understanding, allowing intuition to guide him. Highly influenced by literature and music, Fonda draws from a range of sound bites, snippets, quotes, and historical references, which he then weaves into a work of art.

Fonda joined ArtMaze Magazine to discuss his many sources of influence and his painterly quest to find meaning and understanding.

AMM: What kind of traditions in painting influence you today? How does your work converse with the past?

HF: I have a real attachment to Romanticism, its themes and genres. I dig on the unapologetic interest in real emotion, our interconnection with nature, and a sense of individualism that seeks community. Though, when it comes to the act of painting I tend towards the unfinished business of Modernism as it relates to mark, material and form. If you can strip away the Greenbergian dogma and exhausting white-male bullshit, a poignant conversation remains.

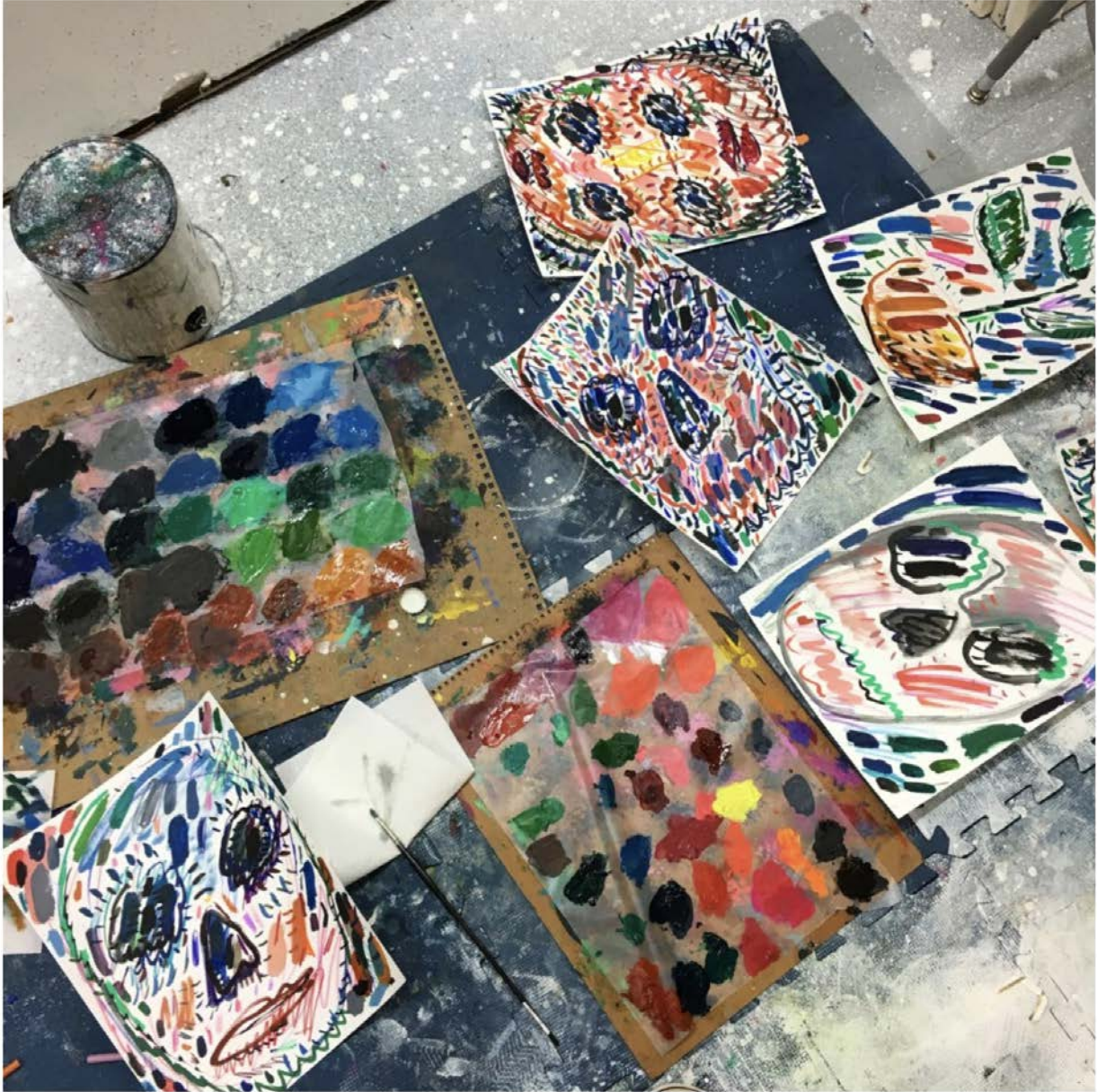
AMM: Tell us a bit about what characterizes your work. What do you hope viewers take away from it?

HF: I guess the above sets the tone for a broad point of entry to my work on a philosophical level. Introspective, nuanced color, direct with a penchant for contradiction could well characterize things, too. I’m a painting dork. I’ve been told more than once, I’m an odd brand of painter’s painter.

I like the “big questions” – What is love? Why are we here? What does it all mean? I say this a lot, but my studio really is a little philosophical sanctuary. A safe and reliable place to find meaning and understand the world.

As far as viewers go... I’m afraid I gave up on that years ago. I’m just grateful when people take any interest!





Vieux
jeune



Back of
heads, but
w/ eyes



Navajo
1850-61
Savage



Navajo First phase
Chief blanket
1850-1860



Fo
Fo
CO
CO
AB
LePR

AMM: You have written about the differences between abstraction and representation, and your work varies between the two. Can you elaborate on your thoughts on this? What exactly characterizes the debate between abstraction and representation?

HF: I just don't see that much difference or hierarchy between the two. Both methodologies are adept at describing the human condition and I try to employ each appropriately – sometimes simultaneously.

What's that great Picasso story? The wealthy Texas oil tycoon visits Picasso's studio and after seeing a number of works asks him if he can paint something real. Amused, Picasso says he doesn't understand the question. The tycoon pulls a picture of his wife from his wallet and says, "like this!" Picasso promptly replies, "Your wife is rather small and flat isn't she."

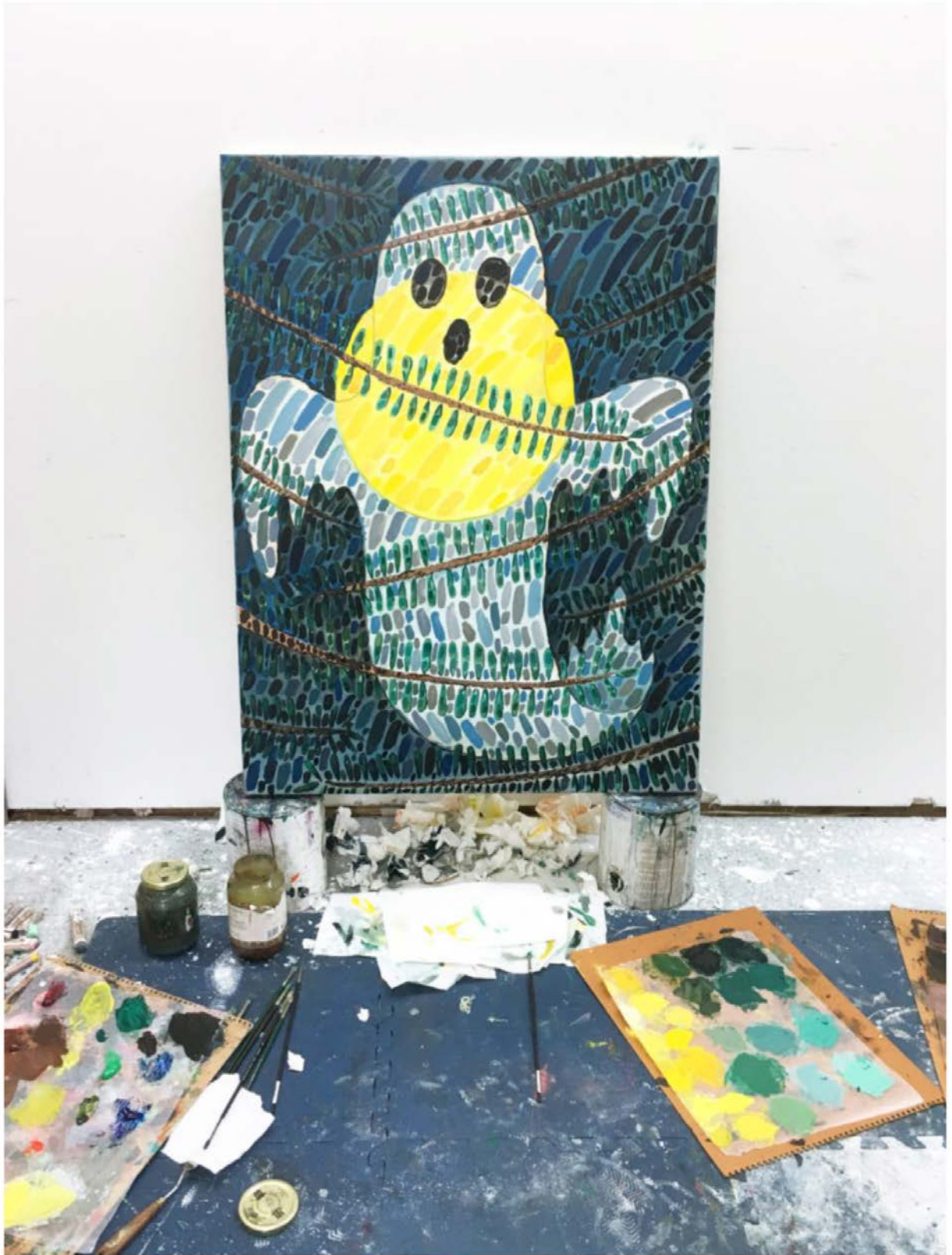
AMM: You have a number of written and musical works listed on your website under the title "Why." How do literature and music play into your art?

HF: Music and literature play a big role in my practice. Of course I look at loads of visual art, but much of my inspiration and sustenance comes from reading (and, honestly, misreading) and listening. I first began to understand freedom through poetry and sincerity through music. It's not particularly au courant, but are core tenets of my practice.

AMM: Who are the figures in your work? Are there specific influences, people or otherwise, that come through in your paintings?

HF: Ha. I get asked that one a lot. I have been very fortunate to have had strong, inspiring women influence my life. So women, or female figures feature naturally. They're often based on my amazing partner, Remy, but also simply "her": a stand in for power, beauty, intelligence, life... Sometimes I'll paint my idols, but more often I'm making some esoteric reference that adds context or points to a larger intent in the work.

I grew up in a little farm town in upstate New York and am still influenced by this history. The Underground Railroad, the Haudenosaunee and the birthplace of the Women's Rights Movement all intersected for me there. And I'm still inspired nearly 40 years later.





AMM: Your work is prolific and quite varied – works on paper, paintings, images of animals, nature, people etc. Where do you draw these ideas from?

HF: Though a shitty marketing strategy, it makes for a fulfilling art practice. My interests are carried and I'm willing to follow them wherever they lead me. I'm very fortunate to get the opportunity to spend a lot of time in the studio. I work hard. I fail a lot. Sometimes I end up with art.

AMM: I'm interested in your thoughts on creating vs. finding meaning. You said you're interested in finding meaning. Can you tell us a bit about this?

HF: Sure. I'm fascinated by the complexity and connectedness of the world. I'm entranced by its contradictions, its nuance, its synergy. There is so much to find and discover. On the other hand, the notion of creating has an air of hubris to me. As if one could be god-like, or worse, privileged creation over intention. Everything I need is already here!

AMM: Can you walk us through your creative process?

HF: When it comes to content and subject, I have a large collection of notes, sketches, quotes (misquotes), and half-baked ideas – snippets of conversations, a chord progression, an overlooked moment from a photo, an oblique historical reference... This is all fodder for understanding a moment. I revisit these thoughts and replay them in my mind, often for weeks, before I actually paint.

I really privilege the act of painting and try not to sketch or conclude my thoughts too much. I wade through thoughts and try to connect distant narratives, articulate formal relationships and show respect for the historical references I'm attracted to. I hold these things loosely until I sit down to paint and enact my flimsy plan.

I work hard to allow intuition and the moment to take over. The act of painting almost becomes performative. Presence is key.

AMM: Are there specific artists or artistic movements that you count as influences?

HF: Wow. So many. I'm a big Jazz fan. I have a pretty extensive collection and am always looking for parallels there. I really like the idea of a loose structure that can be improvised upon to define a specific moment. I suppose that's why I'm a Deadhead, too.

I was a history major in undergrad, concentrating on American social history. I dork out on all the historical references found within Jazz in the 20th century and the counterculture that took hold in the 60s. We could use a healthy dose of this militant love now, no?

I wanna paint like Thelonious Monk plays piano and e e cummings writes.

Manet is omnipresent and Twombly is why I started painting in college. Mari Eastman, Maureen Gallace, Karen Kilimnik, Rebecca Morris, Laura Owens and Sue Williams are idols. Straight OG's.

Katy Cowan, Austin Eddy, Alicia Gibson, Shara Hughes, Adrienne Rubenstein, Emily Mae Smith, Michael Stamm, Tricia Treib, Cody Tumblin and William J O'Brien all continually astound me. Always humbled when I see any of their stuff. Rock stars. All of 'em.

AMM: Would you be able to share with us any upcoming plans or projects in your career?

HF: Lots of good things to come! But perhaps more importantly, it's the continual attempt to make a painting good enough to keep and to steal a glimpse at understanding.

Find out more about the artist: www.howardfonda.com

Introduction text and interview by Maya Chung for ArtMaze Mag.