

# exploring abstraction

AN INTERVIEW WITH SHERRIE LOVLER

Opposite:  
Embracing Eternity  
Sumi ink, watercolor, gold leaf on paper.  
17 x 12 inches  
2017

"When I made this painting, I was well into writing poetry and my paintings had taken on a clear Asian influence. This was the result of working with brushes rather than pens and more ink than paint."



The True Mystery  
Sumi ink, acrylic ink, pastel, gold leaf on paper.  
18 x 12 inches  
2021

"Beginning on partially wet paper, I didn't know what would happen when my ink-filled brush touched the page. The chop is my name in Chinese."

By Christopher Calderhead · Sherrie Lovler has been an active calligrapher for decades. Not only is she well versed in traditional letterforms and techniques, but she has continued to explore a rich, painterly approach to making work. I recently caught up with her for this interview, which has been lightly edited. Sherrie also provided commentary for the captions.

Q: You have been developing an approach you call "Lyrical Abstraction." How would you define that way of working?

SHERRIE LOVLER: As a calligrapher doing abstract paintings, the calligraphic line is always with me. I have been referring to my style as "Lyrical Abstraction" because that genre carries the calligraphic mark, the gestural movement, and the intuitive work that calls to me. "Lyrical" evokes poetry, and "abstraction" refers to abstracting calligraphy to a point beyond using words or even letters; something personal, and always in flux. It has evolved from writing poetry, but the aim in my paintings is nonverbal.

Q: How long have you been exploring this approach?

SL: Almost a dozen years. Writing poetry opened a door to my creativity in a new way. The poems came quickly and easily, and I wanted my paintings to have that same quality. To move myself in that direction I started a blog with one rule I devised—to post only paired poems and paintings. At first, the paintings were simple, but both the art and the poetry have become more sophisticated over time. There are now over 125 entries on this blog.

Q: You studied with Dick Beasley, who was noted for his abstracted, additive approach to calligraphy. Tell us about studying with him.

SL: My own work brings calligraphy into abstract painting. What Beasley did was just the reverse. He brought the principles of abstract art to calligraphy. He was a pioneer in this. I first saw Dick Beasley's paintings at the International Calligraphy Conference in New Jersey in 1986. It was one of those life-changing moments—the first time I saw calligraphy as pure art.



Letter Arts Review 35:3

Right:  
Red Beas  
Gouache and ink.  
8 x 6 inches  
1988

"This was painted during my time studying with Dick Beasley, who was often known as 'Beas.' When I showed it to him, he said, 'I can't believe I didn't do this myself.'"

Opposite, top:  
XY  
Gouache, ink, and sink art on paper.  
7 x 10 inches  
1988

"When I showed this one to Beas, I asked if it was too Beasley-esque. He loved that term, and told me that it's natural for a student to work in the style of their teacher until they develop a style of their own."



The subject was letters, but it was painting without words. I knew then and there I had to study with him.

I lived in upstate New York and already had plans to move to Arizona, where Beasley lived. I had been teaching calligraphy for nine years, and had a BA in Studio Art. Within three months of meeting Beasley, he hired me to take over his beginning calligraphy course at Northern Arizona University. I studied with him for a year and a half in an advanced calligraphy class of just four students, which included individual time with him on a regular basis. He was an excellent

teacher, very generous and enthusiastic. He loved calligraphy and readily shared what he knew. There I learned how to use color and to understand the Munsell color system. He taught us to use gold leaf, to file pens, make manipulated letters, and do sink art (pouring water on areas of wet ink to form marbling patterns). He taught how to create abstract paintings following the elements and principles of design and gave me the tools I needed to feel like an artist. I think that was his most precious gift to me.

As Beasley mentored me in my teaching role, he gave me access to his vast library of art and



calligraphy books, and his slides on the history of lettering. I had the honor of visiting him in his home and developed a friendly relationship with his wife, June.

Q: How would you characterize his approach to calligraphy and lettering?

SL: Whatever work Beasley did, he approached it with novelty and creativity. He described his work as having two categories: the straight stuff and the "other stuff." Even the straight stuff was recognizably his. The certificates he did were outstanding, with his bold use of color and original design. He was a brilliant illustrator and would incorporate that into his calligraphy pieces.

His creativity had a humorous side to it, which was present in much of his art. For example, his row of perfect Roman caps in squares would have one square dropping out of line. But he was a serious artist and student, as well. He sought the guidance of other calligraphers to improve his work and continued to study, even later in life. He hated hierarchy, and I remember him saying, "We are all on pedestals, and they are all the same height."



Homesteaders News  
A magazine by Norm Lee and Sherrie Lovler.  
Offset printed.  
8.5 x 5.5 inches  
1985

"We self-published this magazine from 1978-1986, 53 issues in all. This is where I put in my 10,000 hours, hand lettering most of it."



Opposite:  
A New Spring  
Sumi ink watercolor, and  
gold leaf on paper.  
9 x 6 inches  
2021

"Using dirty water along  
with ink, many values  
of gray arise. The solid  
red circle creates contrast  
with the wabi-sabi  
nature of the painting."

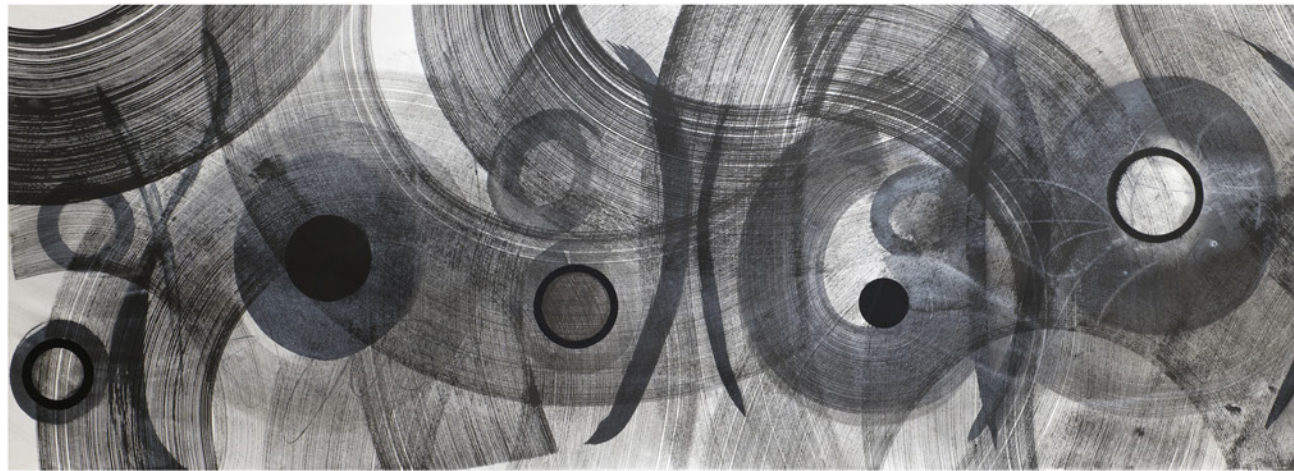


Above:  
Unraveling (detail)  
Photo by Bruce Shippee.



Left:  
Unraveling  
Sumi ink, gouache, acrylic  
ink, and palladium leaf;  
paper on foam core.  
58 x 58 inches  
2017

"At the opening of my solo  
exhibit at the Sebastopol  
Center for the Arts. The large  
painting in the background  
is a paper weaving glued to  
foam core. I am on the left  
dressed in black."  
Photo by Adrian Mendoza.



Top:  
Caught in Time  
Sumi ink and black gesso on paper.  
21 x 57 inches  
2017

Photo by Bruce Shippee.  
“After painting around 20 feet, I cropped the paper, selecting the best area.”

Above:  
Caught in Time (in process)  
Photo by Adrian Mendoza.  
“Using wide brushes and other tools, I am working on the floor on a large roll of watercolor paper.”

Q: How did you incorporate his teaching into your work?

SL: For several years my work was much like his: I created abstract paintings using letters as the subject, using bold colors, filling in shapes with letters, or incorporating sink art. The real work for me was in separating from his style. I periodically stopped painting during that time. Gradually, I did move on, but still I find strength in my work that reminds me of him. At times, I incorporate his direct teachings, like how to go from one color to another, but now it does not overpower my work.

Q: What’s the exhibition you sent a picture of?

SL: In 2017, I had a solo exhibit at the Sebastopol Center for the Arts in Northern California. I had been in their juried shows many times, and even won an award, so they knew my work. I titled the show *Calligraphic Abstractions*; the theme was “Caught in Time”—my response to political events and how we live in the time we are born into. One painting was a large square called *Unraveling*, a three-dimensional paper weaving. Political pieces were interspersed with paintings and poems reflecting the beauty of the world around us. To complement the exhibit, I created an evening poetry reading with live music, including a slide show of other pieces.

Q: What’s the working process you use when working with abstraction now?

SL: I often start with a poem I’ve written, without putting the words in the painting, just the feeling of the poem. I usually make an expressive mark and respond to that, keeping the thought of contrast in mind. So, if the painting has a lot of fluid areas I would add some straight blocks or lines. It becomes a conversation. I often work on large paper, which later gets cropped down. This gives me the freedom to make marks that I might not use, yet contain the energy of the full stroke. Typically I begin with ink—that is my calligraphic heritage coming through. Most of the paintings include gold leaf—a theme from illuminated manuscripts. Lately, I have been gluing mulberry paper over my initial paintings, providing another layer to work on, and also exploring the richness of pastels.

Q: Your work seems to show an Asian influence. Would you say that was true?

SL: I took classes in bamboo painting and Chinese landscape painting. I also studied Chinese abstract painting, creating large works on mulberry paper by dipping the paper into ink and watercolor. From these lessons I learned the importance of empty space and *qi*—the energy or life force of a painting. I also took several workshops from Kaz Tanahashi in Chinese calligraphy. For three years, I studied T’ai Chi and began to understand the connection between calligraphy and martial arts. It seemed like the whole class, everyone dressed in black, moving in unison, was calligraphy in motion. I loved it.

Another way to describe my work is *wabi-sabi*, a Japanese aesthetic with characteristics of an earthy, unpretentious process. Beginning a painting by putting water on the paper brings a natural quality to the work. I often use the *enso*—the Zen practice of drawing a circle—both as an



Turning Point  
Gouache, walnut ink, gold leaf on paper.  
22 x 14 inches  
2017

Created as a class demo using a four-inch-wide brush for both vertical strokes. The asemic writing was done with a hand-made folded pen.

Unfolding Beauty  
Sumi ink, acrylic paint,  
gesso, watercolor, pastel,  
and 12k gold leaf on  
paper.  
14 x 8 inches  
2019

Painted with a palette  
knife. In the background,  
white gesso was thinly  
spread and topped  
with pastel to create a  
mysterious quality. The  
asemic writing was done  
with a folded pen.



element of design and as a symbol of oneness and presence.

**Q:** How does scale come into this work?

**SL:** The scale does affect my process. The small book pages are quick works to keep my creativity flowing. I do these almost daily. They are so small—four inches by three inches—they are complete with one concept and usually one tool. The larger paintings are more complex. They demand more attention and they infiltrate my life more. They can take weeks to finish. I work with them until they speak to me, until they tell me their story. Neither the book pages nor the larger paintings are planned. I come to them ready for an adventure, and they provide that.

**Q:** Are these works essentially visual compositions, or do they explore other themes?

**SL:** My paintings come from an emotional place, and I am looking for that connection with the viewer. They are not conceptual art, and the paintings don't need to be explained. Also, they are not meant to be read literally, which is one

reason I leave the words out. But sometimes it takes a poem for me to understand the story behind the painting.

**Q:** Given the fact that abstraction has been thoroughly explored in the fine arts in the last century, and has been part of the calligraphic mix for some time, what do you think abstraction brings to contemporary calligraphic practice?

**SL:** As artists, we are always building on what has come before. There are painters, like Brice Marden, who made wonderful large works with calligraphic lines, or Georges Mathieu (one of the fathers of Lyrical Abstraction), who painted while listening to music. Although abstraction may have been thoroughly explored in the past, it has not been exhausted. Abstraction is always about renewal. Every artist has something new to contribute, and brings new interpretations to the field.

**Q:** What other abstract artists do you particularly admire? With whom your work is in conversation?

**SL:** I love the work of Toko Shinoda (1913–2021),

Just Dance  
Sumi ink, watercolor,  
and gold leaf on paper.  
8 x 10 inches  
2019

The horizontal pattern  
was made in one stroke  
using an eight-inch-wide  
flat brush dipped in  
multiple colors of paint.  
The calligraphic lines are  
made with a folded pen.  
Additional painting and  
gold leaf was added later.



Triumphs and Challenges  
Sumi ink, watercolor, and conté crayon on paper.  
Each painting is 9 x 6 inches  
2021

This diptych is inspired by the idea of a book page spread where two facing images communicate with each other.

Opposite:  
The Winter of My Coming  
Sumi ink, watercolor, mulberry paper, and 12k gold leaf on paper.  
16 x 10 inches  
2020

"This painting began as a colorful collage. As I worked on it, I felt my anger rise around the pandemic. I scraped and dug into the paper and wrote in wordless words how I was feeling. The final circle (enso) creates a sense of peace within the storm."

a Japanese painter and lithographer who merged calligraphy with Abstract Expressionism. Her works have the presence of one who knows the importance of every mark. I am also drawn to the paintings of Zao Wou-Ki (1921–2013), a Chinese-French painter who combined the calligraphic line with the mystery of abstract paintings.

But, what excites me even more is what is happening today. The expressive paintings of Kitty Sabatier from France are stunning, combining the fluidity of the calligraphic line with muted colors. The Northern California artist Chiyomi Longo brings together the calligraphic form with spirituality and nature. Other painters I have seen on the Facebook group *Asemic Writing: The New Post-Literate* include Karla Van Vliet, whose asemic writing dialogs with her images to form a beautiful conversation that can only be felt with the heart, and Mami Kawasaki, whose paintings are supreme examples of wabi-sabi, empty space, and qi. These are the people with whom my work is in conversation, and there are many more to discover. I look forward to that journey. ♦

