

Artist Resources – Pat Steir (American, b. 1940)

[Steir at Lévy Gorvy](#)

[Steir at Locks Gallery, Philadelphia](#)

“I’ve tried to show you what you see when you don’t know what you’re seeing. Anything, if you never saw it before, would be abstract.” Steir told *BOMB Magazine* in [a 2003 interview](#) about the spiritual underpinnings of her practice, the power of color, and relationship between text and image. “I’m walking a thin line between image and not image, between flat and deep space. I want to help the viewer see the picture. And the poetry of the title is part of the picture for me, it’s absolutely the same thing.”

Steir spoke with the Smithsonian Archives of American Art in 2008 for [an oral history](#) in which the artist reflected on, among other topics, her childhood, student days in New York, teaching, second wave feminism, and her influential friendships with artistic mentors and peers.

“The spiritual in my art is giving up control. My paintings are based on what I can do, and what I can do is not controlled...The control is in the weight of the paint, the temperature of the air, the movement of the air.” Steir explained to *Interview Magazine* in 2016 as she prepared for a survey at the [Dominique Lévy Gallery in London](#). “I’m making art because I want you to look at that painting and I want it to affect you in some way, to change what you see, to change how you see it...[I want] the viewer to take it away to enhance, embrace, and elevate life.”



Steir, 2016

Photograph: Victoria Stevens



Lévy Gorvy debuted Steir’s first exhibition of new work in three years in 2016 exhibition. [Kairos](#) departed from earlier series but maintained the artist’s commitment to non-objective art that communicates between intention and chance.

Steir was the subject of a [feature documentary in 2019](#) from author and film-maker Veronica Gonzalez Peña, which was filmed over the course of three years and followed the artist as she worked in her studio and reflected on her career, inspirations, and process.

[The Hirshorn in D.C.](#) unveiled Steir’s largest exhibition to date in 2019, a suite of thirty large scale new works that spanned the perimeter of the second-floor galleries. Steir joined senior curator Evelyn Hankins for [a talk on opening night](#) to discuss the project, artistic influences, and the medium of painting. “I got sick and tired of people saying painting is dead...painting is the only form I know, I wanted to prove painting is just a material, so it can be conceptual art...it depends on the concept, not the materials.”

Steir also completed a series of 11 seven-foot-tall paintings, an expansion of her [Waterfall series](#), for [The Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia](#) in 2019.

[Studio International](#) spoke with Steir about the film-making process for her feature documentary in 2020. “What I’m trying to do is not tell you about my painting or what I’m feeling. I want the paint to tell me something. It’s more like researching, experimenting. I want the paint to tell me something about the nature of art, about the secret of art, the secret of nature, about the universe that we exist in,” Steir commented. “That’s why I let the paintings make themselves.”

Steir, 1990

Photograph: Eric Boman

Pat Steir (American, b. 1938)

Summer Night, 2003

Oil on canvas

Private Collection; L2020:88.1

Pat Steir considers herself a non-objective painter, disregarding the weighted terms of “abstract” and “abstraction.” Her nuanced appreciation of visual art and creativity makes her one of the most critically acclaimed painters of her generation. A diverse set of influences include her lifelong love of poetry; time as a professor at Parsons Institute of Design (now The New School), Princeton, and CalArts in the 1970s; the experimental compositions of musician John Cage; the pale grids of painter Agnes Martin; East Asian philosophy and religion; Japanese woodblock printmaking; and Chinese Literati painting.

The paint-flecked space of **Summer Night** expands on Steir’s celebrated *Waterfall* series, begun in the late 1980s, in which she developed her characteristic aesthetic: the pouring, splattering, and dripping of paint onto canvas. Steir resists comparisons to generations of Abstract Expressionist innovators through her resolute focus on medium and the element of chance. “I was trying to take my ego out of the art, my body out of the art,” she explained in 2018. Her idea “was not to paint but to let the paint itself make a picture. I want the paintings to express something in the will of nature...I was looking in color and paint for what makes the universe hang together.”

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