

Interview with Angelina Nasso

Maxine: You're originally from Sydney, and I was curious about when you first came to the U.S. and what initially brought you here. How you got started painting here.

Angelina: Well, personal reasons really. I was married at the time and my ex-husband and I moved to San Francisco together. I had always painted and always made art ever since I was a child. It was something I always would turn to to enter my own world. And when I got to San Francisco, I went to see the San Francisco Art Institute and did a summer program there, and they said to me, 'why aren't you doing this full-time?' And it never really occurred to me that I could follow my dream like that—that I could make a living being an artist. So, I decided to stay, and I went and studied full-time there.

M: What's your earliest memory of making art?

A: It's the first time I realized I was good at something. I think I was like four years old, and in the local shopping center, it was Mother's Day, and all the children had to draw their mothers. And I adored my mother, and I drew a very fashionable rendition of her, with her handbag and her stiletto heels, and you know, very stylish. And, I won a teapot for her, and a box of chocolates. When I heard my name called, that I had won it, I was four and I was like, "oh, I'm good at something," you know and so that really encouraged me on some level to just keep drawing.

M: How did you get connected with Winston Wachter?

A: I was living in New York, and I moved to Chelsea and I had my studio in the West Chelsea building, and was one of the first people in that building because Chelsea was not anywhere like it is now. A lot of the galleries were still in Soho, and I watched how Chelsea developed and changed, and I used to be—well, Silverstein Gallery used to be in this area, and that closed down, and then I was with Stux gallery. And one of the things that really drew me to Winston Wachter was that I wanted feminine representation. I wanted to work with a female gallerist that had a sensitivity to my work, to beauty, I was feeling a real lack of an appreciation for beauty in the art world, and I felt that with Christine, and with some of the exhibits that I saw here. I think I just walked in, because I was showing at Stux, and it kind of happened like that.

M: Do you think that in your time as an artist, you've seen the art world change in terms of how female artists are represented?

A: Definitely there are more female artists being represented. I was very disillusioned for awhile, and then I started teaching students- children- I would take them on tours of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and it was called "Learning from the Masters" so we would go and sit in front of an artwork and I would ask the children what they felt, or what did they think the artist was thinking. And they would say things like "I feel the wind" or, really sensitive, incredible insights into how painting, or a work of art speaks, and how children can receive that so purely. It just reminded me why I made art. Because the New York Art World started to get caught up in some kind of trend and fashion and all of that. And I started to feel myself being sucked into that vortex. And then when I started teaching the children, I was like, that's why I love making art. That's in my heart, why as

a child, and now as an adult, that's why I'm drawn to being an artist, that profound quality that the children reminded me of in the most pure and simple way. How they relate to life and nature.

M: You recently became a mother, how has that affected your art?

A: it affects your life! So how can it not affect your art? It affected my life, and wow, in so many ways. In very practical ways where I've had to carve out time for myself in the studio, where I have like an hour here and two hours there and three hours here, where normally I would be in the studio 8 or 9 hours a day, or at night, any time I wanted. So I've had to really structure my day in a different way, and carve that time out. I needed to find a way of working that suited that. And then you know, my little boy's only 21 months and I feel like I'm still being shaped, but it's making me—well, one of the biggest lessons I'm learning is being in the present moment. Don't worry about tomorrow, don't be ambitious about next week, next month, next year. Everything is going to be taken care of if you take care of today and be present in the moment today. Because in taking care of a little one, they demand that you be present with them in that moment, and it makes me pay attention in a different way. And pay attention to everything around me in a more immediate way.

M: I think of your works as having this very meditative quality that is very centered in the present.

A: The technique of working with these circles and building up the layers and the depth, it is very—I liken it to how Tibetans do Mandala painting. It's the same practice every day and you build upon it and it grows and grows from within itself. It's really a profound journey of discovery of what is it that wants to present itself, what is it that wants to emerge. And just following that. It's almost like a meditative practice every day, you know, two hours, one hour, whenever I can work.

M: When did you first start working with the circles?

A: Maybe 6 years ago, and I was reminded of, well, I grew up in Australia, in the countryside and there were no streetlights. I was on a farm, so we didn't have neighbors, so it was dark, like, really dark, and at night, particularly when there was no moon, there was a blackness. You couldn't see your hand in front of your face, but the blackness was alive, like I could see the molecules and the particles in space. It vibrated. I would lay in bed at night and just look, look at what was before me in the blackness. I couldn't see the wardrobe, I couldn't see my hand, I couldn't see how to get off the bed, it all dissolved into this oneness of space, and so I started painting that, and so my first paintings were very dark, of these confetti, molecular-like circles in and out of space. And then the more I was working that way, I realized that what I was really interested in is how the light is in the darkness, and so the works have just grown from there.

M: You now work in upstate New York. Is that a landscape that also influences your work?

A: Not so much as a visual landscape, but as an energetic landscape. We're very fortunate to have property up there, and again, there's only one other house, or two other houses on our street, it's a private road. And we have a stream and it's alive. You know, being in the city and then moving up there, I was reminded just to put my feet on the earth and feel the vibrations of the earth, to plant seeds in my garden, and watch a radish grow and eat it. Nature is alive and growing and pulsating and vibrant and full of potentiality, and so just being there, just now with Spring, the trees are just about to pop and you can feel the pregnancy of spring about to burst through with the colors so vibrant and the blossoms and so, definitely.

M: We're so excited to have your show here for Spring because it feels like you're bringing a little bit of the outside into the gallery. Could you talk a little bit about the process from start to finish of making one of your larger paintings? Do you start with sketches?

A: No, It's interesting. I stretch a canvas, I have an idea of sizing and whatnot, and I do a lot of gesso coats and sand it so that the surface is somewhat smooth, and then I just intuitively have a feeling about it. One of the paintings, I had a very vivid dream before I started it because I wasn't sure of how to approach and I was in this force field, like this cosmic force field of vibration and I was moving through it, and I was shown how everything is pulsating in life, and so, I wanted to paint that. So that's the green painting here called "action reaction." From there, normally I just start with one mark, like the drawings, I have no idea what it's going to become, it has a life of its own. I start with one mark and then that creates another mark and that creates another mark and another mark.

So I just have this exchange going on, and it's a relationship that develops between myself and the painting and the more I get in the way with preconceived ideas or even other things that I have seen that I admire, it kind of influences it in a way where I control it. But it's better that I don't, that I just keep it open and let the painting speak as I'm working on it. And I find that it finds itself. It's like raising a child, you don't want to get in front of the child, you want to bring out what's best inside the child, so you get behind them and you support them. Now that I'm a mother, I'm starting to see the similarities between making art and raising a child.

M: Does that apply to your colors as well? That you don't know beforehand?

A: No, I'll have a lot of colors that I have and I'll go and shop for things that attract me, and then sometimes I've bought all these new paints and I don't use them, so it's just, it's a big trusting relationship, and it's kind of like life. You have to trust it. You get up in the morning, you go to work, and you get on the bus and you go home, or you get in your car and you trust that life's going to take care of you, so it's just trusting that what is going to present itself is going to present itself and just follow more. I feel that's a real big teaching for me in my life is Don't Control so much, surrender more, and follow. Because something else is guiding your life and if you get in front of it with thoughts, ideas or conditioning, then you kind of cut yourself off and the mystery doesn't present itself.

M: Is there one part of the process that's the most challenging?

A: Bringing it to the gallery. It's all nice and safe in the studio, and then bringing it to the gallery and my doubting voice comes in: "are they going to like it? How's it going to look? Are the paintings going to fit well? Is it going to support my year? Am I going to be able to live in the next year? I have to really work on trusting again and just letting it go and it is what it is. Just having faith that I've done with this what I can do at this time. And that's all that can be asked of you.

M: Are there any specific artists or artistic movements that you are most attracted to? Or that you think have influenced you?

A: Well, one of the earliest memories I have, when I was again, very young, five or so, my mother would allow us, my brother and I, to choose a piece of music that we wanted to listen to and I would choose this piece of music and she would put it on and I would just lay down on the floor and listen to it and be carried away because it was so beautiful and profound to me. And then later in life, I heard the music again when I was an early teenager and it was Beethoven's 9th symphony, and I never realized what it was when I was a child, I just remembered the color of the record, it had a certain pattern on it and that was the one I wanted, and it moved me to tears, it opened my heart, it swirled me (swelled me?) that life was so beautiful and overwhelming in its magnitude. That was a profound influence into the beauty of life, that art is about for me, so that was one of the very first memories I had that stayed with me my whole life. And still music moves me like that and fills me with, and it's like also of course, having a child, the love, the love and the awe and the wonder and the magnificence of life, that influences my work, everything like that influences my work. There are many artists that I truly admire and

respect, but these other experiences—it's what art comes out of. My travels, I've spent a lot of time in the Amazon forest and it's incredible.

M: Do you ever think of your paintings as telling specific stories?

A: They're not specific stories like Aboriginal paintings that speak of "the dreaming" that are very specific to the myths of their culture. Mine is a different kind of dreaming, but it's a dreaming all the same. They're very abstract paintings in that way and people will see what they see in them. Certain ones have particular influences. The one "Ever and Everywhere" is based on my interest in Tibetan painting. I studied painting in China for a summer many years ago so that aesthetic, that sensitivity has certainly been an influence. And I've always been interested in the Oriental arts.

M: You've studied painting in Australia, in the US and in China, were there any distinct differences in the approach to teaching?

A:

Well, in china, it really taught me a lot about touch because we were working with rice paper and ink and these really soft soft brushes and when I went, I was working very gesturally, very abstractly, very energetically and I thought "ok, that's how energy is transferred, that's how you make energy in your paintings" and then when I went there, and this was traditional Chinese painting—you have to sit on your chair a particular way with your back upright, with your hand at right angles with the brush held a particular way and you have your rice paper so you put the brush into the ink with *just* the right amount of water and then you have to move it in a very consistent and fluid way and ever

so slightly it touches the paper because if you went heavy, it would just bleed everywhere and the paper would fall apart. It taught me about how to touch the surface and I felt “wow, we work with oil paint that’s so thick and so heavy and they work with these inks and these very fine brushes and they make masterpieces. We had three categories: bird and flower painting, landscape painting, and calligraphy. It really made me more sensitive to the touch. It was really wonderful.

M: What are your thoughts on permanence and impermanence in art?

A: There are different kinds of mandalas. You have the Tibetan sand mandalas, Native American sand painting kind of mandalas and you have yantra paintings that come out of Hinduism, so, the yantra paintings are more meditations and they’re not made out of sand, they’re based on sacred geometry. So I was very much influenced by the yantra paintings of Hindu mandalas. I saw a wonderful exhibition years ago at the Drawing Center of Emma Kunz, where she actually had a pendulum set up and she would do readings for people and she would work with the pendulum and it would give her points on the large piece of paper and then from those points that the pendulum gave she would make these sacred diagrams and so that really captured my attention. And then at the same time I was doing these—I had spent some time in India as well—and it did influence my drawings and the drawings are really something that I’ve just started. They’re very time consuming, but they’re really fascinating to me. Again, they start with a dot and in Yantra paintings, it’s like every drawing starts with the center, and from that dot, the universe unfolds. So it’s very representational or metaphorical for how life begins and grows on terrestrial level and a cosmic level.

M: Could you describe your studio? Is there anything that you always keep around that helps inspire you?

A: The strange thing that I find about myself is that before I work, everything has to be clean. I cannot work in an untidy space. I have to have order. It's on the first floor of our home and it has windows that overlook the forest and there's nothing in particular that I feel like I would need if I went elsewhere. I mean, I have my books, and my music that I listen to sometimes, but sometimes I don't. It takes me awhile, when I haven't been in the studio for awhile to just go in there and sit and be there and wait for something to arrive, and it's more the invisible that I feel that I connect to that gives me the impulse to make art than the visible. I have a statue of shiva in there, and I have some small pieces of art from friends that I really love, but it's really that waiting for something invisible to arrive that makes me feel like I have the creative juice to make art.

M: In your ideal world, how would you want people to interact with your work? Is there an ideal setting that you imagine your works being in?

A: You know I had this really wonderful experience a number of years ago. I was in Houston, Texas and a collector of mine had commissioned me to paint two paintings for their bedroom. Very big room, two very big paintings on opposite sides of the wall of their bedroom. And I had a lot of judgement inside myself about these collectors and their wealth and their excess and the jobs that they had or the companies that they ran, you know it's a Texas kind of thing. And I went to their home and they wanted me to see the pieces installed and I went to their home and then the person who's house it was, he

said to me, you know, “thank you for making these paintings because I wake up in the morning and they give me hope.” And it almost made me cr-y, I was like, wow, that’s all I can ask for, is just to touch someone’s life like that in a real human way. They end up where they’re going to end up, but for people to have an experience of their own humanness, that’s what is important to me.