

## In One Breath

### A Conversation with Helena Foster and Leo Asemota

Leo Asemota: It's a fulfilling art, painting, as it's both the activity and its outcome.

Helena Foster: The process of painting and the final outcome is certainly fulfilling, but it's not without its challenges. As enjoyable as it can be, it often requires a level of discipline that I'm not always fully prepared to commit to. The need to engage and disengage with the world around me is incredibly difficult. On one hand, all that I see around me feeds the work I make and therefore, I need to dip my feet in the material pool in order to create. On the other hand, it's about knowing when to pull away, to forgo everything else but the very thing that is needed for the process to begin with all the information that I have acquired.

Lately, as I begin this new body of work, I find myself wanting for silence, craving for stillness that I seem removed from, but attainable when I paint. In these moments of complete silence when I paint, I attain my most precious paintings. You know, those moments when you are completely absorbed in the thing which you are doing that time escapes you.

LA: I am taken aback though that you don't want to always commit in this way especially knowing that this is when you realise your most precious works. I wonder though, if the silence is low or high pitched, internally.

HF: I'd say the silence is interchangeable, but increasingly becoming high pitched the more I recluse. I want nothing more than to commit to this way, but I'm aware of what it would cost me. At times when there's an internal battle going on between my mind and emotions it requires a great deal of focus to be in that space. That discipline is very necessary to have the capacity to go the distance. There is always slight hesitation, resistance on my part when I get a glimpse into these moments after painting. There is this sense of concern about not being able to reach into that space ever again to achieve what I know had occurred during that very act of making a painting. As a result, I've found that returning back to basics is usually a good place to start again to feel my way through painting. Letting go of feeling precious about the surface or scale I'm working on seems to help. I create a set of limitations, like choosing to paint on paper, on a smaller scale, and slowly build my confidence back up. It frightens me to an extent.

This silence is also locked into realising the new paintings, such as 'Notes on Tones', 'Under the Frangipani Tree' and 'Behold, The Dreamer Cometh' (all 2022). The more I look, the sharper the pitch internally. Inevitably, it's allowing me to be present and tuned in, as I paint purse lipped - in one breath. Recognising also that what might seem to me as my best painting yet of today is creating room for my best painting for tomorrow because I'm evolving. I am gradually training my muscles and learning the best way to articulate all that informs my being through the ideas that hold my attention and spur me on to the next.

LA: So that these ideas that hold your attention, especially those derived from cinema, your rendering them in paintings, is not just depicting a still from a moving image but the intense feeling of your viewing of it.

HF: Absolutely. It's an emotionally-driven response before the spatial architecture - composition, form, colour. Perhaps in those moments that resonate with me at that particular time, the image becomes a catalyst or trigger of a similar experience. Whilst the

reference material is relevant, it's important for me to pay attention to how it made me feel. I tend not to spend too much time assimilating all the information within before translating into painting as a way not to answer why and how before I begin the work. I don't know that a single image is sufficient enough to satisfy or lay to rest the unrest that I'm feeling. It takes multiple workings of various images that don't seem obvious at the time, until a common thread starts to emerge and become more apparent. Effectively, I'm working backwards by doing the thinking, understanding and answering my whys at the end of the process.

Thinking about this reminds me of the proverb about the need to guard one's heart. It is about being aware that with everything we do, our heart is in it...

LA: As in the phrase "to have one's heart in" as a measure of commitment.

HF: Yes! The heart has to be in it. It's no different with painting. The same can be said of that process of having an encounter with an image that you can connect to, which leads your hands to transcribe that precise feeling onto paper or canvas. One of the pleasures of working on paper, or small scale, is it feeds the urgency to capture that direct response with immediacy, like writing down ideas that come to you. In such moments, if new ideas linger in the background, you risk allowing them to disappear or become a distant memory and you may never quite articulate exactly how you felt. I am aware of the implications of time passing. I am choosing to be present instead of allowing the present to lose its function and merely become the past. Regardless, the heart has to be and remain in that very thing one is trying to translate in painting, for without it that transfer can't take place. It would lack the very thing you hoped to encapsulate.

LA: As keenly involved as the heart can be, great restraint is essential too, I reckon, to depict the very thing you've set your heart on in a clearly expressed way.

HF: Stories that touch the heart! That's a classic Nollywood ingredient. Perhaps so, but I like a bit of emotional leakage, where the work you're creating meets in the middle with where you are emotionally. I think this is the logic I apply to moving images, comparing theatre performance versus real life, or staged versus that which is not staged. I value the things that serendipitously happen in the background of a scene that the camera captures, but the director is not necessarily looking out for. I know this is what particularly appealed to me about Ousmane Sembène's 'Mandabi' (1968), which I make reference to in 'Afternoon Blue' (2022).

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There have been subtle shifts on this journey. For example, it has become less about the original image. I cease to think and just do, as my subconscious and memory kick in to drive the process. I've also observed that the atmosphere seems silent and you can almost imagine all your senses alive to what the air might smell like, or hear the hum of a character's concerns. If there is a light breeze blowing, you can sense what the texture of their clothing might feel like. These are the sensualities that paint lends itself so well to capturing - the intangible. There is something organic, pure and unhinged about these moments that I find beautiful.