

Music, Painting and Debussy: Beyond the Surface



Mary Pettis, "Largo – With Expression," 2017, oil on linen, 28x48 inches © Mary Pettis

At this week's Minnesota Orchestra concerts, Orchestra Hall's Target Atrium will be transformed into a gallery filled with paintings, as Minnesota artist Mary Pettis presents a solo art exhibition titled *Beyond the Surface*, inspired primarily by the brilliant Debussy work, *Images for Orchestra*, that will be performed at those concerts. Mary has generously shared her thoughts on her exhibition, the inspiration for the paintings, and the interplay between visual arts and music.



In my new art exhibition **Beyond the Surface**, created in conjunction with the Minnesota Orchestra and the OH+ (Orchestra Hall Plus) program, I've drawn upon Debussy's music and philosophy to create a series of paintings that celebrate his three-movement *Images for Orchestra*, which the Minnesota Orchestra performs on June 8, 9 and 10 at Orchestra Hall.

As Debussy (who always wanted to be a painter) invited his audience to look for images in the music, I invite the viewer to see music in the images. He often used nostalgic images and songs as source material for his tradition-breaking style. I use a similar approach seeking to translate my impression of the visual world into evocative sensory experiences. The result, I hope, is an intensely fulfilling visual

experience, both for the art novice and for those who are drawn to spend the time to look beyond the surface.

For several years I have been fascinated with the shared language used by both musicians and painters. Terms like balance, rhythm, harmony, color, tone, unity of effect, relation, and juxtaposition inspire me to seek out those abstract qualities in my subject and infuse them into my paintings. Music has always been an integral part of my life, and classical music is usually playing in my studio as I paint. I'm honored to have this opportunity to share my work in tandem with a world class orchestra, a heralded composer, and in this inspirational venue.

Great artists see deeply. I believe each sees beyond the surface appearance. Edgar Allen Poe said, "Art is the reproduction of what the senses perceive in nature through the veil of the soul." As an artist who also teaches, I am compelled to understand and try to explain this phenomenon. I want to know how, exactly, we transition from the facts of what we see in front of us to the wordless visual poetry inspired from our subjects. In my work I want to capture the inexplicable.

All the arts, no matter the discipline, have in common a desire for the "unity of effect" that is achieved through balance, rhythm and harmony.

There is a flow to a visual impression, a cadence that leads us almost musically from one aspect to the next, and the more logical and connected it is, the more exciting and beautiful it is for me. I am compelled to paint it. Surface appearance is like individual musical notes in a composition, but I am looking for the melody instead. For me, it's a different way of looking; it's not the parts, but the relationship of all the elements that contribute to the balance, rhythm, and harmony in my subject. It's not just describing a focal point, learning to only use the colors, shapes, and movement that are sympathetic to the whole impression or story I am trying to convey.

A painter must be like the conductor who knows how to sense the melody as it intertwines among the sections, while allowing the soloists to shine. The more awareness an artist brings to the orchestration of a piece, the more clearly viewers will understand the message.

There is a quote I love by John Lennon: "My role in society, or any artist's or poet's role, is to try and express what we all feel...not as a preacher, not as a leader, but as a reflection of all of us." This humble attitude is also how I feel. There is a perfection that lies beyond what we directly can see, yet deep within we all recognize and respond to it. I get to spend time contemplating this sublime part of life, and I do my best to share my observations with the world.

Creating this exhibition of paintings has been an incredible experience, particularly the hours I shared listening to the works of Claude Debussy with A. Catherine Duthie, whose expertise and insights into music composition and theory were invaluable! I am so proud of the new exhibition catalog that accompanies the show, authored by A. Catherine and beautifully edited by Jen Nash Kochevar. Mitch Rossow did a great job on the photography. I'm grateful to the OH+ program for making this possible.



Mary Pettis, “*The Cycle of Lilies*,” 2017, oil on linen, 29x48 inches © Mary Pettis

The **Beyond the Surface** show’s signature piece, *The Cycle of Lilies*, is a prime example of the multimedia adaptation spirit of this show. Based on the middle section of Debussy’s *Images*, *Ibéria: Les parfums de la nuit*, there is a shared sensation of liquidity between the art and the music. Like the melodic woodwinds echoing the oscillating motion of the accompaniment, the gentle movement of the water’s surface affects all of the plant life residing within it. The weeds below reveal glimpses of hidden, nourishing depths felt in the ambient bass. The floating opalescent flowers catch the eye against the strong dark reflections of the unseen trees, in the same way that the light reedy oboe and the breathy flute bring their melody to the forefront of the orchestra. The lily pads lazily dip in and out of the water in syncopation, mirroring the flowing movement within the strings. And much like *Les parfums de la nuit*, the longer you let the work wash over you, the more enriched and immersed you become.

Debussy and I have both drawn inspiration from familiar source material (such as the folk melody “The Keel Row” in *Gigue*, or the beloved St Croix River Valley) and transformed them through the use of modern vocabulary. Debussy lived during a progressive, tumultuous time in the art communities. Boundaries of subject matter, styles, and chroma were being broken within nearly all media. Barely over a century later, my tribute to Debussy exemplifies a large, ground-breaking movement in contemporary art: Expressive Realism. This movement is a fusion between the purest elements of art (such as color, texture, and balance) and representational subjects. The result is a deeply communicative style that is strikingly musical in nature.

A. Catherine Duthie, who authored our exhibition catalog and whose work in cross modal abstraction I greatly admire, has generously offered additional thoughts about the **Beyond the Surface** exhibition and Debussy’s music.

“Claude Debussy was among the composers whose works were deeply inspired by and influenced by artistic works at the turn of the century. As national artistic identities and cross-pollination between media became a priority, Debussy was at the forefront of bridging the media. Madame Gérard de Romilly, his piano student

and friend, wrote of the composer, ‘Debussy always regretted not having pursued painting instead of music.’ We need not speculate on his intentions: Debussy was open about loving visual art as much as music, and the inspiration that he received from his artist friends.

“By drawing upon the works of the past to inspire works in the present, Mary Pettis has created a temporal collaboration with Debussy, his fluency of the musical language inspiring her own works. There is a shared language between music and art. Abstract terms such as chromatic, harmony, rhythm, and tone are ideas that artists and composers have applied to their respective media. These tools are used to not only describe the pieces, but also used in the creation process, to direct how the work is experienced. Harmony, for example, refers to a pleasant arrangement of parts in a composition. This idea can be applied in a musical work (for example, through the spacing of notes in a chord), or in a painting (for example, through the interplay of colors and texture). While these applications are different, the purpose of harmony is the same: to provide a sense of interaction among the elements within a work. Mary Pettis has translated Debussy’s Images into a visual language, expressing their shared sentiment of atmosphere, tonality, and naked elegance. The result is an intensely fulfilling multisensory experience, both for the art novice and for those who spend the time to look beyond the surface.

“In a time where Wagner was polishing vast theatrical epics of programmatic drama and leitmotif-infused gravitas, Debussy’s work is steeped in elusive, consistent tonality. At a time where Wagner and Mahler were using their music to captivate their audiences through the use of unfolding stories and theatre, Debussy rather focused on creating a holistic, exploratory experience with each of his works. If Wagner’s works build upon the unfolding stories of theatre, Debussy’s works most certainly build upon the concise mood of paintings. It is only fitting that his work be placed alongside the work of Mary Pettis, who emphasizes the musicality of her medium. Her studio in Taylors Falls has a large, antiquated speaker system that is perpetually filling the building with Classical MPR radio.”

About Mary Pettis

In her work, Mary Pettis, Expressive Realist, draws heavily upon her classical training and Russian influence. Mary has been juried into and won awards in national and international painting events and exhibitions from New York City to Scottsdale and Maui to Barcelona.

Her art has taken her to the far corners of the world: China, Russia, and much of Europe. She has exhibited widely, including the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, and collectors of her work reach across the globe. Mary is recognized as an eloquent and respected speaker, teacher and mentor, teaching in the Upper Midwest, Tuscany, Venice, France, and Hawaii.

Early in her career, Mary studied with Hungarian painter Bela Petheo; Richard Lack, at Atelier Lack; and Daniel Graves, who later became the founder of the Florence Academy of Art. In the 1990s, Jim Wilcox introduced her to the “wet-in-wet” plein air approach and she moved her studio outdoors. Over the years she continued her studies with various teachers including Zhang Wen Xin, Kevin MacPherson, Jove Wang, and James Shoop.

Now she divides her time equally between the studio and outdoors. Her decades of training and the experiences from hundreds of plein air paintings are a catalyst for a symbolic visual language of expression that celebrates the beauty, dignity and worth of this world and its inhabitants.

Mary and her husband Randy live along the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway in Minnesota. Her work, along with information on galleries, exhibitions, and workshops can be found on her website at marypettis.com.

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