

# The Little Artist That Could

Jane Davis talks to artist Julie Green

**Do you remember learning to read?**

No, I don't remember learning to read. I remember looking at books with my parents. I don't remember the day I started to read but maybe the process, I remember *The Train That Could... The Little Train That Could...* Do you know that one? There was another one about a truck and a state fair, they were positivistic books. I think I'm a positive person and I related to that *Little Train That Could*. I felt that you *could* do anything, and my mom really believed in me too, and so between that book and my mom I developed a thick skin, which is really helpful in fine art because there are a lot of rejections when you apply for things.

**'The little artist that could'.**

Yeah! I say to students, I always apply for ten things and I'll be pleased if *one* thing happens out of the ten. I don't just put things out once; and that's all part of it.

**You were born in Japan...**

Yes and we lived there for a year; I didn't speak Japanese so English is my first language.

**Though some Japanese must have gone into that early brain?**

I think so, I think there is a consciousness. I've heard that where you are born influences you and I think that's true. When I went to the Pacific North-West a few years ago to take a job, it's very similar geographically to Japan and I felt at home immediately there despite having never been there, really at home. Also I have been back to Japan as an adult and lived there for a year and a half.

**Your life has become visual art, but is reading important to you?**

Reading is hugely important, it is one of the major influences in my work and it's our entertainment; we don't have a TV, I've not had a TV since I was twenty-one. Reading is my entertainment every evening. I get the *Sunday New York Times*, I read every section, every article,

so that takes days, and then I read other things as well. I'm reading a story by Ann Pritchett right now – I read a lot of non-fiction; it's about her life and her relationship with her friend who had cancer.

**Television: did you never develop a habit of it? Is it a political choice? Are you afraid of it? Do you not want it to take up your space?**

A couple of those reasons and other ones too. I turn into a critic, I don't like to be around myself watching TV; I turn very negative and I don't like that. More than that, to me it's anti-creativity, I can feel my creative brain cells dying when I watch it. I try to set up my life for painting: every decision I've made, every major decision, like a decision not to have children and who to marry, what to do for a living, where to live, is always related to supporting the painting. TV is an anti-support and I don't need it. And I don't even like the objects.

**Do you remember being an adolescent? Did you read then?**

I always read, we had a lot of library books; more than having books we used the library. I'm American and I read *The Childhood of American Presidents*, I read them all, I loved them. There was a series called 'You Were There' and it was like you were there at the Boston tea party, and so on, so I read all of those – 'the little president that could'!

**What about novels?**

I haven't read many novels lately, I've been more interested in non-fiction and I read a bunch right now on the death penalty because of my research for the *Last Supper*. I read *Madame Bovary* when I was in college, and *The Scarlet Letter* is one I'm really fond of and I'm really fond of Henry James, and Willa Cather.

**Was there a particular period in your life when you read novels?**

Fairly recently Henry James, the other ones a little earlier. I kinda go in spells. I like James' writing style. For me a lot about reading is set and structure and, beside the content, how they form sentences, and I love the way he forms sentences. For me when I read a good book then I go walking, say if I'm reading Raymond Carver and I'll go walking and think in Raymond Carver's sentences, and then I know I'm reading a book I really love, because my thought processes will be in their sentence structure.

**That's almost turning it into something visual, the syntactical structure, something spatial.**

It's almost text. I almost think I can see the sentences as I'm thinking them, I turn them into type.

**Are there great art books?**

Books about art? One of my favourites is *Writings* by Agnes Martin; it's her essay on beauty, and I agree with her. She's one of my favourites. Also there is Ann Truitt who writes really well. She has a book called *Daybook* and it's her journal. It's about the process of writing as a woman, the process of making art. Interestingly enough they are both women minimalist painters and Western and I think they write well – that's their narrative and maybe that's where they fill in the rest because they are very minimalist paintings.

**You said before that you're a narrative painter. I don't really know what that means.**

The paintings can illustrate an idea or a story. There's one called *Dead Candidate*; the background was of a Japanese landscape and then I scraped it off. It didn't work, but I liked the green that was still there and so I floated a red curtain and then there's that dead man below. I was living in Oklahoma at the time which was a weird place, not much fun, but I got a ton of ideas for paintings because of the problems of the place. In the newspaper I read about this man, the dead candidate, who had died, but six months before he was on the ballot and so he won the election even though he was dead. That happened a number of times in the States around that time. So that's a narration, and then other times the narrations are personal, things I see; I've just done one of my cats, three cats, and they're in the house, doing things as they do. So there are little stories – mostly from observation, but sometimes things I read from the newspaper and sometimes books will inspire me – not very often, but sometimes they inspire the *way* I think. Reading for me is part of my process. It's like an exercise, to make sure I read a lot. Some writers are so observant and it helps me to observe better; I think the way that the writers think.

**I'm interested in the relationship between narrative, story, observation; is the painting a snapshot, a *part* of a story, or does it hold the *whole* story?**

I look for the moment. There is a word in Japanese, *kehai*, which is a feeling that something has just happened, like the feeling of a shadow or a bang or a scent, something that implies something else, something bigger and fuller, but you can't capture it. So in my painting, my egg tempera and oil painting, my goal is to capture a snapshot, a moment in time, which suggests to me a larger story – knowing that the viewer will have their own interpretation. Sometimes people think a painting is negative when the event was actually positive or

*vice versa* and that's fine with me. I don't spell it out, I don't put it on the title, I like the mystery and like people to have a chance to play with it. I think the potential of narrative painting and writing is the engagement, the idea that it's different for the viewer.



Julie Green, *Dead Candidate*, 1999 (13" by 9", egg tempera on panel)

**If you were to translate that into literature you'd be talking about short stories. Small moments where there's a bigger picture that you can't see though you feel it or guess it or anticipate it.**

I do love short stories, maybe because I feel a relationship to the genre. Like the Japanese writer Yasunari Kawabata's *Palm-of-the-Hand Stories*. Then he went and did *Snow Country*, elaborated those three pages into a whole novel, which is exquisite, but the three pages, the fact that you could get all that... I'd write short stories if I wrote because they are sort of a quick fix; economy of line or of words is so interesting. I like to do small paintings, and sometimes I'll try to not have too many marks on them, to try and get them with economy.

**Have you got any books waiting to be read?**

Yeah, just before I travelled here to England friends gave me books. I've gotten a little behind on my joy reading, so I've got a stack. Lisa [Kronenburg] gave me a book on creativity, we both like reading about artists of all kinds, painters, writers and composers and their work process. A painter whom I really admire, Gerhard Richter, I have all of his writings that have just been translated from German into English. I tend to be fairly excessive when I get into something: the Fluxus catalogue is about a thousand pages, but I read everything. But the Bible I didn't get through, I was illustrating the pages whilst reading. I was interested in painting over the page after I read it.

**Turning it into a picture? With what – what materials?**

That was part of the problem, because you could just do a page a day and then it had to dry – a water-based medium, so I could do egg tempera or watercolour. I would do symbols of that page, the narration of that page, almost an illustration or a response. I'd notice how many times a word was repeated. Blood and sperm are mentioned a lot, and so I might do little drawings of the object of that page.

**When was this?**

About two or three years ago. I'd still like to finish it.

**Did you start that as an art project or a reading project?**

Well, sort of an exercise, as I hadn't read the Bible. My mom went to church and I had to go but I'd always skip out. I'd go to the attic and explore the church or something – that was my truancy as a child. I was a really good kid in the most part but I didn't like church, so I didn't go and I didn't read the Bible, which is actually an important piece of literature, and I should read it.

**Is religion part of you now?**

Not religion. A colleague says that religion is fine as long as it doesn't involve more than two people. That's basically my theory too, but I'm very spiritual and I think that the ten commandments are great things to live by if they are taken in a broad sense. As well as many of the ideas in Buddhism, and all Eastern religions I actually feel more connected to. So I borrow from religions and ideas but actually don't go to any services. I do yoga and for me that's a spiritual thing. I like to read about yoga too, to read what yogis have written. I have spiritual and religious influences in my life. I love to go to churches and I love the architecture. As a kid I always wished I was Catholic because they have such good stuff.

**Tell me about *The Last Supper*...**

*The Last Supper* is an on-going project of mineral paint on porcelain plates, illustrating final meals of US death row inmates. The premier showing was at the University of Liverpool Art Museum in 2001, and since then it has been exhibited extensively in US museums and galleries. This is the Oklahoma newspaper piece that sparked the project:

His right food, clad in a blue slipper, shook nervously... After officials began administering the drugs at 12:09 a.m., Johnson blinked three times and let out a breath through puffed cheeks. His foot stopped shaking. His eyes slowly dimmed, became glassy and closed to a crescent... He asked for a final meal of three chicken thighs. 10 or 15 shrimp, tater tots with ketchup, two slices of pecan pie, strawberry ice cream, honey and biscuits and a Coke.

To date, 234 plates from all thirty-eight death penalty states have been completed. The menus are modest, and often provide clues about the region, race, and economic status of the prisoner. Since 1976, we have had over 1,000 capital punishment executions in the US. Because of DNA testing, a number of innocent individuals were recently released from death row. In 2005, death penalty convictions reached a thirty-year low. More people are questioning capital punishment. It is my hope the plates will encourage dialogue. Each time the plates are shown, there is a comment book. At Copia, in California, three hundred viewers responded to *The Last Supper* with thoughts on capital punishment. I became interested in final meals because, for me, they humanize death row. *The Last Supper* combines a life-long passion for cooking, consuming, and reading about food, combined with a strong anti-death penalty stance.



Julie Green, *The Last Supper*, ongoing project, plate, Florida, 7 June 2000

Vanilla ice cream, Coke, 1 quart whole milk, BBQ chicken, BBQ beef, French fries, salad, Spanish rice, rolls, Pepsi, cherry vanilla ice cream, butter pecan ice cream, mango, banana pudding