

Suzanne Unrein, Painter

June 5, 2018 | Kathryn L. Williams



Harlem-based artist Suzanne Unrein is known for creating breathtaking, vivid environments where the animality of humans interacts with lions, monkeys, hyenas, birds, and dogs – a world of beasts colliding in imagination and in bold, gestural brush strokes. Essentially uninterested in narrative, and inspired by the Baroque and Rococo “Old Masters” pushing the edge between representation and abstraction, Suzanne forms bonds and breaks connections, deconstructing and reinventing on canvas to reveal captivating, perhaps Edenic jungles with fierce rhythms, feverish dreams, and dramatic tension. All to say, they’re spectacular to look at!

A California native and current New Yorker by way of Florida, many of Suzanne’s paintings draw upon her travels, including “Art of the Pride,” her collaboration with famed South African Lion Whisperer Kevin Richardson. She has had numerous solo shows in New York City and across the US, and her paintings have been featured in films such as “Being John Malkovich,” “Sex and the City 2,” “I Am Sam,” and the film short, “Hands & Eyes,” that premiered at the Hamptons International Film Festival.

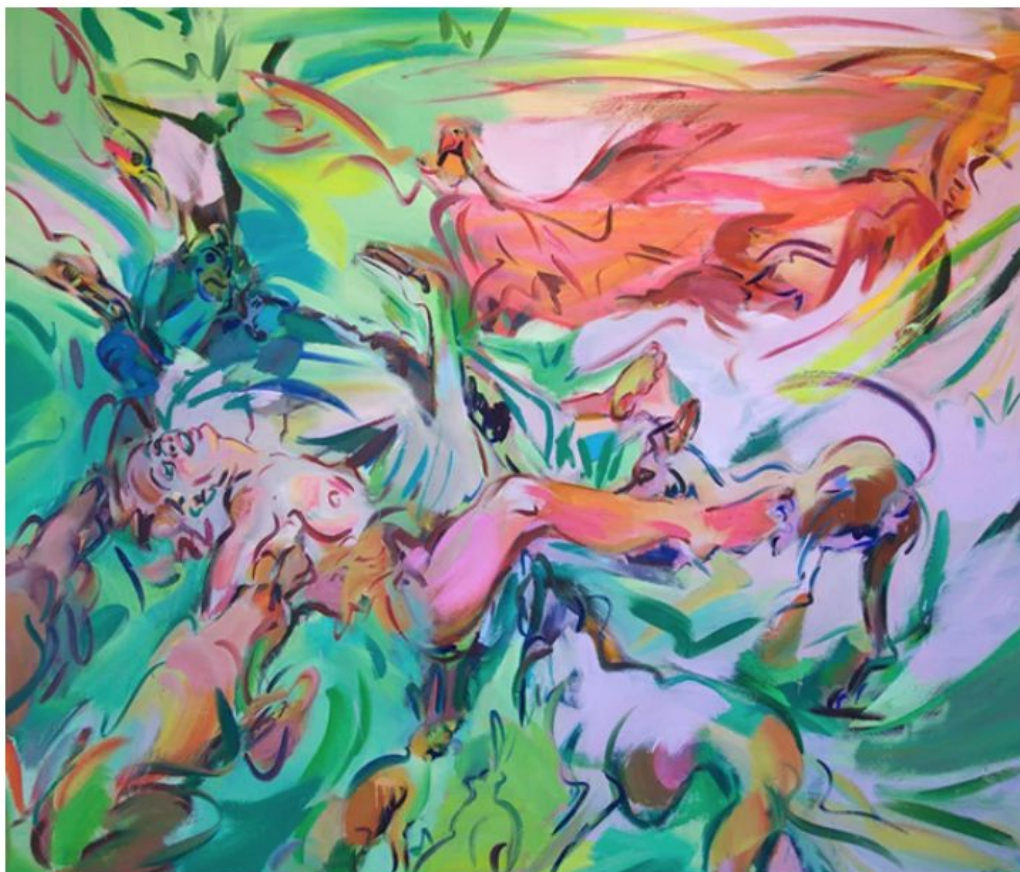
We cross wide, wild and wonderful paths in this Q+A, as Suzanne discusses painting, animality, and artistic surrender, along with meditation, rituals, and even a spirited interaction at the Rothko Chapel!

RG: I'm here with Suzanne Unrein in her terrific New York studio in Harlem, and normally there's beautiful northern light coming through the windows but today it's all gray and rainy. But it's still very cool!

SU: OK, good!

RG: I'm super excited to talk to you. I have never interviewed someone who's a close friend, so this is going to be interesting! We're here to talk about your art, your paintings, creation, imagination, inspiration, and spirituality and how you see all of those fitting together, or whatever ways you relate to that. Let's start with describing your art - if you had to describe your art to someone you knew was never going to be able to see it, what would you say to them?

SU: That's such a good question. It's so hard. I would describe it size-wise as large format, oil on canvas, somewhere between abstraction and representation, where hopefully the representation sort of goes into abstraction and lets you sort of go with the energy of what I'm representing. My inspiration comes from the animal world and from nature, the natural world, anything from Baroque and Rococo artists in terms of energy in their compositions and emotions and some of the subject matter, to images I've found on the internet, and inner visions I have, and then I look for images to either correlate to that vision or I take pictures.



RG: Can you give me an example of how the internet part works, where you have a vision of something you're looking for? Do you go look for it, or are you just browsing and waiting for something to hit you?

SU: I'm looking for something specific. In this painting that we're looking at right now, based on Leda and the Swan, I had this vision of Leda with Zeus who becomes a swan and seduces her, with all of these animals sort of getting in the action, this energy of all these

different animals together. I wanted these different birds in the sky, for instance, and I wanted a swan swooping in where his mate is seducing Leda. I was looking for a flying swan, so I would Google that and then find an image I could work from. I'm fascinated when animals end up in mythology, or when mythology uses animals to create stories. The visual of this swan fucking this woman is a fascinating visual to me, not in a bestiality way, but that it's supposed to be a man and he has to appear as a beautiful swan to get her attention. I also like how animals react to situations – I find that fascinating.

RG: Your work is incredibly powerful and bold – energy, as you said, nature, wildness, representation, abstraction. Where did that come from, that you embraced both abstraction and representation? Are there specific influences that brought those two things together for you, and did that change over time?

SU: I was working, years ago actually now, in a very minimal, monochromatic, truly abstract, no representation whatsoever, way and there were these very 'silent' sort of paintings. They were almost meditative. They were very calming when you would look at them, the energy was very sedate, and I probably was feeling that way at the time. And then my whole life changed, turned around. I was sort of living everywhere – I was married, we were gypsies, and at the time I was in LA working on a film, and then with my ex husband, and then we went back to Mexico and we ended up splitting up and it was a shock. I was blindsided and it sort of destroyed my entire life. It turned my world literally upside down and through that the only way I could manage to paint was I no longer had any 'silent' painting, because there was nothing silent inside me, and there was nothing calming at all. In fact, the first paintings after that were very gestural, they were almost like language, almost like writing, but they were nonsensical. They weren't words I was writing down, but they were gestures that were reminiscent of words. Probably because I couldn't communicate even how I felt.

RG: Were you trying to scream?

SU: Probably, probably! I was trying to at least communicate how I was feeling but without any words. Then I started painting these gestures, and I started erasing them, painting them and erasing them, and painting over and erasing them, almost like if you'd written a page of whatever and you started editing it, so there were scratches out and adding, scratches out and adding. As I was erasing them I realized they were getting really sculptural looking, because you know when you're erasing the lines, you're not completely erasing, they're three-dimensional.

I went to London shortly after that and I saw Peter Paul Rubens' painting, 'Massacre of the Innocents,' across the room, this very large room, and it reminded me so much of one of these gestural things that I'd been doing on paper, oil on paper. It hadn't occurred to me before that they almost had this effect, they were almost like abstract versions of Old Master paintings because they were so three-dimensional, sculptural, a lot of movement. It reminded me of those Rococo and Baroque paintings without any detail. So I thought, 'Oh, it would be interesting, I should copy one of those paintings, but try to copy it without any of the details.' I tried first to do 'Massacre of the Innocents,' I tried to paint that and leave out the details, and then from there I started working with other paintings I liked and I started recompositioning them. I'd take these different figures from different Old Master paintings and re-put them together. So I got rid of the actual narrative, there was none of the mythology or the stories they were telling. It was just purely the emotional

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quality of the paintings that I was after.

RG: What did it feel like when you first did that?

SU: It felt I was part of a whole, it felt like I was part of a thread of our history. I felt sort of one with those guys that were painting back then, and I liked that I was using them and they were coming more to the present to create a contemporary, not narrative, really, but to put them in a contemporary light.

RG: Where did you go with formalization after that? A lot of your work, you still feel a formal structure in a certain way.

SU: You know, I do love composition. I do love the sort of traditional form. I do add elements now that weren't taking place back then so much, from the film world, because I actually worked in the film world a lot, too.

RG: From a size perspective, do you have the idea for the painting before you figure out the canvas? Is the canvas ever sitting there blank and stretched and ready to go and then you're deciding?



SU: Well this one, for instance, this woman with the alligator, that was a visual I saw that actually had to do with this relationship I had with this alligator in Florida at the same time as my big breakup happened. I had gone back to Florida for a little time and I was staying at this house in Viera, Florida. There was this alligator that would hang out in the canals and I would see the alligator and it would make my day. I was talking to this friend of mine, Hampton (Fancher, screenwriter and actor), on the phone and telling him about the alligator and he would ask about him so I felt I had this relationship with this alligator. I knew one day that alligator was going to be in a painting.

RG: Is this the first time the alligator has shown up?

SU: It is. I think I was looking at some images on the internet and an alligator appeared

and I think that brought it back. It's sort of like in this painting, are they in a loving relationship or are they fighting, is an attack going on? And I think that a lot of my work is that. Is this a happy scene or is this not a happy scene? It's taking two different things and working with that.

RG: Do you have that worked out for yourself?

SU: No. I feel we don't ever have that worked out, you know? It's like, if you really don't love somebody you could never really hate them. I think there's always two things happening at the same time.

RG: Which is interesting from the viewer perspective, because it's open to so much interpretation. It's not a closed story. Or a closed world.

SU: Yeah. And I don't want it to be.

RG: Let's talk about the nature part of who you are, and where a lot of these paintings have come from. Obviously animals have played a huge role, wild and tame, and you've done a lot of still lifes, so it's a huge part of your world. If I say the world 'wild' to you, what does that mean?

SU: Well, a lot of things. I think it depends on who you're talking to, are you talking about animals, are you talking about human animals?

RG: I'm saying about your work.

SU: Oh, my work is wild?!

RG: You've got a lot of wild animals, there's a lot of nature, potential for conflict, mayhem, cacophony, trouble, murder, and you put humans in the midst of it, and it's not a safe environment.

SU: Right.

RG: By any stretch of the imagination, it's all about conflict in a certain way.

SU: Yeah.

RG: So where does that wildness enter in?

SU: Well I think that is our world, you know? I mean I really don't think we live in a very safe world at all. Probably when I was doing those very silent paintings my world seemed pretty darn safe. I think maybe I never thought about that, but perhaps when your world turns on a dime and it becomes something completely the opposite of where it had been, where you thought it was heading, maybe that is where that came from too. Everything seems like it can change on a dime, and that's a great world to depict that, the animal world, because that happens more often in nature than it does necessarily with us. Things change for us absolutely on a dime, too, but not as an everyday occurrence the way it does with animals.

RG: Where does sexuality fit into the midst of all of that? Your recent paintings have couples and women alone, but from a sexual standpoint I don't know if it's overt and not direct or direct and not overt. It's not bestiality, as you were saying. It could be, but it's not.

SU: Right. I think one place, at least for me, that one tends to be very present is when you're having sex. It's also where you're not hiding behind your own identity, or how you see your own identity, or behaving a certain way that you want to present to the world. This is my relationship to sex, which is that I feel it's freeing, it's when we're our complete animal selves. I mean, maybe not complete because you do have some sort of hopeful mystique going on that animals may not have, but I'm not so sure about that, that they don't, you know? But I do feel there's this sort of unmasking of the civil things, how one behaves on a day-to-day basis. I think that sort of goes away when you're naked. I think that same energy also goes with the animal world. It's this very instinctual way of behaving that doesn't bring in a lot of intellectual qualities.

RG: How does that fit in with the inherent potential of danger or violence that can happen in some of these works? Are the people safe?

SU: I don't think so!

RG: Do they know they're not safe?

SU: I think so.

RG: Do they care that they're not safe?

SU: I don't think so! They've reached the point of abandoning their, you know...

RG: Is that being submissive?

SU: Oh, abandonment! Abandonment, abandonment! 'It happened when I was abandoned!' How interesting! OK, Dr. Freud.

RG: It is interesting, because you went from silence to the ultimate screech effect. What part of this is being submissive to nature?

SU: I don't feel it's necessarily being submissive to nature. I think it's just embracing our nature, embracing our animality, embracing going back to, 'We are animals,' you know? I think it's sort of the joy of that, the joy of being animals, and realizing we're one with these other animals, that we're not so dissimilar to them.

RG: The conflict, the pain, the death, the relationships, the war, the whatever it is, when you're painting them, is there a natural feeling about those emotions? Are you aware of them, or are they just kind of up on a shelf somewhere?

SU: What I hope to achieve when I'm painting is that the brush strokes and the actual process of painting will mimic what those emotions are. I'm hoping for a frenzied sort of action in painting it. When I'm thinking sensual, that line is a different line than when I'm

thinking frenzied. So I'm aware of that.

RG: How does that come out in the brush stroke?

SU: I think it's almost like you would be if you were being sensual with someone as opposed to frenzied, you know, it's a very soft line, making the line is slower paced and more sort of voluptuous in the gesture than if it was hurried.

RG: Is there a story throughout the body of your work that you think about telling?

SU: I think it's changing all the time. Originally when the animals came into my work it was when I was looking at these Rococo and Baroque painters and there were a lot of dogs. Dogs are supposed to mean faithfulness, they say, anyway, the art critics. And you know, there's a lot of dogs. One of my favorite painters back then was Frans Snyders who did all the animals for Rubens' paintings, or the majority of them, and he did a great job with the animals. The anatomy is incredible and they have so much personality, and they're not faithful in those paintings – the dogs that you hear about, a lot of them are in hunting scenes.

RG: So they've been trained to do that, too.

SU: Yeah, and they're hunting, so they're not supposed to be faithful in those, they're animals. But I was struck by them and wanted to draw some of them, and I started noticing other dogs in other paintings. Some are kind of hidden, you don't even necessarily see them. I think there's a Caravaggio painting, I can't remember which one, maybe taking Christ off the cross, there's a little dog in between the legs and you don't even notice. I was going around the Met one day trying to find the dogs, so I think I started painting animals then, when I was looking at all the Baroque, because you could abstract animals pretty easily and they're very interesting to me.

RG: How far do you take the symbolism, and is there an allegory? Some sort of Eden gone in a different direction?

SU: I do think about the Garden of Eden because that's so prevalent in the Old Master paintings, and I was brought up Catholic so it's a story I'm hugely aware of. I think it's sort of a funny idea, especially in these masterpieces, that these animals are all hanging out together and they're all so happy. I don't know that even if there were a Garden of Eden, that my idea of a Garden of Eden would be animals that are just sitting around, docile. You would want them to be doing some fun things.

RG: Come to life.

SU: Yeah, come to life! So in my images they are coming to life. They're still keeping their animal nature.

RG: Are there wild animals that speak to you more than others? Do they represent something for you in the same way that the dogs represented faithfulness way back when?

SU: So far, I've noticed that the majority of animals I'm dealing with, other than this

SU: So far, I've noticed that the majority of animals I'm dealing with, other than this alligator, are dogs and monkeys and birds, and I think it's because they are the animals that are close to us and they're half domesticated, not half domesticated, they say only 10 percent domesticated, 90 percent wild, which I believe is probably true. I think they're our gateway to the wild animals because they're around us, we relate to them. We often have pets that are any one of those animals.

RG: They're familiar but we don't necessarily know what they're capable of.

SU: Right, they're familiar but they're wild. I had a dog who is now dead (Diva, a Weimaraner), but she and the other dog (Higgins, a Dalmatian) – when I was married we had two dogs – would go after an animal, be all sweet and loving, and then they'd see a squirrel or something and they'd go after it and Diva used to knock on the tree and sway the tree and Higgins would wait for the squirrel to fall and catch it and murder it within 5 seconds.

RG: And then probably brought it to you!

SU: Yeah! Brought it proudly, with blood coming out. So you're thinking, 'Oh, they are so domesticated,' when they are not domesticated at all! I mean they are to the degree where they realize how to interact with us and how they survive in this world.

RG: Do you want to talk for a minute about the history of animals and painting? Animals from cave paintings, from the very beginning?

SU: I've heard different things about them. I've heard they were simply illustrating what they were trying to get, or believing that if they drew a bison they would get a bison, or that if they got a bison they would then draw the bison.

RG: From the spirit standpoint that is a very powerful thing. You are visualizing what you mostly have.

SU: Right, so there is that, or a narrative, that I don't think they really know. That was thousands and thousands of years ago, and how did they know why they even did it?

RG: But animals showed up right away (in historic paintings), and then you talk about all the dogs, Caravaggio, the dog with Christ, all the way to the animaliers in the 19th century, and then it became really important. Although the animaliers were mostly about sculpture, weren't they?

SU: Well animaliers, I was looking that up and actually the Frans Snyders and all the people that called them animaliers, that was a derogatory term for the animal painters so I no longer use it. It was a derogatory phrase that was used in the Rococo time, I believe, about the French, in particular. The French animal painters.

RG: Do you see yourself painting in any of those historic traditions? Are there any artists from that time period, other than the ones you mentioned, that you were especially drawn to?

SU: I'm drawn to some specific ones from that time period, Frans Snyders, and Paul de Vos

is another one. I love Tiepolo, the son, he did a lot of animals in his paintings. He really gets the personality of them and I think they're really beautiful. I guess I feel I'm carrying on the tradition of using animals in my work that a lot of those guys did, and not a lot of people do use animals.

RG: How did you find your artistic voice and what was that process like, gaining confidence for that voice and letting it shine? How old were you when you started painting?

SU: When I was young, and I don't remember what years it was, maybe 6, 7, 8? My mom made us. An hour a day we had to play the piano, for a year, and then if we didn't want to continue we could take up another artistic endeavor, and I switched to the clarinet, and then I didn't like that and switched to the guitar, and then I didn't like that so I switched to writing poetry and then I didn't like that so I started painting, or I started doing drawing around the poetry, and then I really liked that.

RG: Your mother was saying, 'Thank God she picked something!'

SU: My mom actually gave me some classes outside, there was some talk of talent. I guess I wanted to take some outside classes, and then also did in school throughout junior high and high school. And then when I went off to college.

RG: Which was where?

SU: University of Florida. I came through a very middle class background that you had to make a living doing something, and so I went to study graphic design. And then I was not good at that at all! I just kept drawing and painting and when I graduated I moved to Los Angeles and got a job and I would just start painting at night, and started looking at what was going on in the art world in LA. I went to LA specifically because I read one article about these artists that were working in LA, and they were all doing something that was outside of what was sort of going on in New York, they were describing them as sort of outsiders that could do whatever they wanted because they weren't in the center of the art world.

RG: Who was doing that at the time, do you remember?

SU: It was probably somebody like John Baldessari or Ed Ruscha, or not even people I necessarily related to, but I related to the idea that I was probably not going to be doing something that everyone else was doing because I didn't really see that I was interested in the same things that I felt were very popular at the time.

RG: Were you connected to the artists that were there at the time or were you by yourself?

SU: Not really, I was painting by myself. I did live in an art complex and there were some artists that lived in the complex, and I also did an internship at Meyers/Bloom Gallery, which was a very popular gallery at the time, they showed Robert Longo and Gretchen Bender and some internationals, who wanted to see what was going on, but I didn't quite relate to any of them either. I didn't really feel I was going in that vein. I was just sort of painting in a black hole, looking at what was going on, but I just wanted to do what I

wanted to do and I didn't feel that I had a voice yet to show to anyone. So that lasted for a really long time and then finally I moved to New York about 10 years, or 8 years, later and then I showed a little bit here and there but nothing major. When I moved to New York, I still was painting sort of in a black hole, but I started kind of feeling more confident about what I was doing and that I had some interesting things I was saying, and then when I came back to LA a few years later I was in the LACE Annuale, the Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibition, and I got in that and started showing more then in California.



RG: A couple of years ago you began a project, Art of the Pride, painting famed lion whisperer and animal conservationist Kevin Richardson in South Africa, with Kevin interacting with the lions and lionesses and the hyenas. You were really focused on a person interacting with animals.

SU: Yeah, I was working on a painting and I was looking for images of lions and I kept coming across these images of Kevin with lions. I didn't know who he was, and I kept thinking they must have been Photoshopped because he was literally riding a lion, swimming with the lions, and it was completely unbelievable to me but exciting to see and an amazing visual. I researched it further and saw a documentary on him, he had written a book called 'Part of the Pride,' which is how we got our name, Art of the Pride, and I was fascinated by him. I was fascinated with what he was trying to do and he seemed to always need money to help these lions. He didn't necessarily want to be housing lions, but when there were lions that had issues he would take them in and so they needed to be fed and they needed land and he was constantly needing money for all these things. I thought it would be amazing to do a series of paintings that would not only help him but also where I would actually be able to go and see, because doing paintings I had animals and people together, but they were always made up and I thought, well wouldn't it be interesting to actually see what that would be like, what would that energy be like, between the sky and these animals, particularly these predators.

RG: They are downright dangerous.

SU: Right, downright dangerous! And so I emailed him and he said sure let's do it and it was an amazing opportunity. I still think about that time, being there. Literally my idea of

the Garden of Eden. I mean, you could still see the wildness in these animals, but you are surrounded by these people who were just thrilled to be there and loved it and it was beautiful, stunning, in the African savannah.

RG: What was it like painting their engagement? You weren't painting while you were there, but you were sketching or photographing the engagement of Kevin with the animals.

SU: It was just incredible to see the possibility of the relationship. Not that anyone could just go up to a lion and engage. He's worked years to establish those relationships and learn the behavior of what they do, but to actually see a human interacting with these huge predators was shocking and amazing, and I hate using the word surreal but it had that feeling to it.

RG: Was it a changed vision from what you thought it was going to be?

SU: They are much more powerful in person. It's not that I didn't think they would be, but to hear the sound of the earth being crushed by their limbs... You put your hand next to the cage when he would move them from where they lived to the wild and they would jump up into these big cages and he would cart them off to this area and he let us put our hand right on that. They would just rub up against you, and to have this mammoth, a domestic cat but mammoth size, seeing their muscles rippling... I mean, they're just extraordinary. It was incredible.



RG: One of my favorite paintings is of Kevin with hyenas and I want to talk a little bit about scale. You've done a lot of pieces on paper, you often start with them and some have extraordinary impact and don't even necessarily need to go to canvas. But there are other pieces, like with Kevin and the hyena, that the scale is so critical to it, and that sense of danger, and what the possibilities are and what can happen. How do you think about that when you're prepping an idea or starting to formulate where something might go?

SU: I think if I had all the money in the world and all the space in the world I would be creating large canvases only. My dream would be 10 feet by 15 feet, 20 feet. I want to create a big huge world. I like using big brushes, I like using my whole arm instead of my little fingers. I want to move my whole arm. It is so much more powerful to me, and the energy I want to come out and to go onto the painting, I feel it's able to do it on that size better than any other.

RG: Let's talk about how you decide what you're painting, and how you're making choices. Is there an inner voice that you hear? Is there something telling you, 'Do this, don't do that?' Is it instinct? Is it animalistic? Is it something else?

SU: I think it's instinct telling me while I'm working on something to do this or not do that. I think when I first start the painting, when I first get the vision, that is coming from something else entirely. Something will set it off. I feel there is this universe in which there is all this energy going on, and all these visuals, and these paintings just out there to be painted, and it's tapping into this big creative cloud. You just sort of dip in there every once in awhile, and you get the visual and then it's, 'OK, now I want to make this visual, but how do I do it?' Because it's murky, you're not really seeing the whole thing laid out. I think some people did. Picasso for instance. I have a feeling he saw the whole thing laid out. I have the trouble of seeing that well!

RG: You know I'm particularly interested in the artistic space in conjunction with the spiritual space. It's kind of art within a spiritual framework and a spiritual self within an artistic framework. How do you see it? I think I may see the universe as an art project!

SU: Well it's interesting, I was working last night on these different categories in my life that I want to move forward. And one of them, I can't remember what I labeled it, but it was the soul. Elevating the soul, or something along those lines. I was thinking I want to do more things that make my soul feel good, and normally what I would put in there is meditation and maybe some yoga and reading some Pema Chodron or something. But I thought, it's not really uplifting my soul. The meditation does, but I thought what would really uplift my soul is listening to a beautiful Vivaldi guitar concerto, in fact that specifically because I listened to one this morning. Or reading Hemingway's time in Paris, 'A Moveable Feast,' when he was writing in cafes. That actually is what makes me really happy, that's what would uplift my soul.

And I do meditate every morning, I meditate for 20 minutes every morning and often times a vision will come out of a painting when I am meditating. Just as well though, I think, even if I didn't meditate, if I was focusing on a blank canvas, the same thing happens. When I'm painting the same thing happens, so I'm seeing it, I'm always seeing it ahead of time. It's not a stream of consciousness necessarily, it's really like I see the thing and then I draw it. What that thing is that's made that happen, I don't know. But I also see color. I'm changing colors all the time, but I definitely see the color, I'm looking at it and I say, 'Oh no, that's actually going to be this other color,' and I see that other color. It's already there for me to just paint it, it's not that I'm trying it out. It's not like I do 10 swatches of color and go, 'Oh, maybe I'll choose this color.'

RG: Do you think of the paintings having a soul unto themselves and it's your job to kind of bring out whatever the spirit is in each one of these paintings? It's

interesting to me that art and spirituality are both rather subjective in their own way.

SU: Right. I don't know if the painting has a soul. I'm not sure I look at it that way, exactly, however I have been known to say, 'When we finish this painting,' and someone would say, 'What do you mean, we?' and I'm saying, 'Me and the painting.' So I obviously do personify it to a certain degree. I don't know that I use the word God, but I do think I'm working with something to create this thing, whether it's the universe, whether it's all the artists that came before me, whether it's a specific artist who's dead, who wants to have a little fun today! I sometimes do conjure up these people.

RG: The way you describe it, it's that you are in concert with the painting itself. It really is sort of a mirror. It's you and the painting.

SU: Right. It is me and the painting. I don't know what it is exactly – I do feel I'm being possibly informed by this other energy that is going on.

RG: Do you feel it in the painting after you're finished? Is there a sense of something metaphorically or metaphysically that speaks to you at that point? I often feel a very strong spirit, energy, heart, soul from a lot of your paintings.

SU: I feel the painting is working if there is an aliveness to it at the end.

RG: That's interesting.

SU: And I often kill it! And then I have to build the aliveness again and then I kill it again and I create it again and then I kill it again.

RG: On purpose?

SU: No! But you know, I'm trying to fix a certain thing and then it just dies, and then I have to embed it with life again through these gestural brush strokes or whatever, and then I get rid of some of it because it's just too much, or it's just too obvious or something, and then I get rid of it and I have to add to it again. My process is one of creating and erasing constantly and the end result, I'm hoping, is that it has this aliveness from that creating and erasing.

RG: Is art a spiritual undertaking for you in any way?

SU: I think so...?

RG: She said with a question mark...

SU: Well, it's one of those words and I'm not sure. I mean, it's my meaning of life for sure. It is the meaning of life for me, and I think it's my purpose in life. I think it's what gets me up in the morning. I don't know what that means, exactly, the spiritual part. Am I talking to a higher plane?

RG: I don't know, you tell me. I think it's different for everybody.

SU: It feels like a miracle! It feels like a miracle when a painting comes off! You know, it really does. It really does feel like I'm not the only one involved. I feel this painting wants to be in the world, and I'm helping make it happen, and I'm like a conduit for it becoming in the world. It's not, 'Oh, I decide that I'm doing this.' I do feel I'm helping to push this along.

RG: It's interesting you feel you're helping push it along, which can mean that there's some other energy force that wants it to be created.

SU: Yeah. I do think there's this big huge creative thing going on. I think we are co-creators, we're all here to make that happen. I think that our purpose is to make that happen, these things that want to become something.

RG: So what do you think is out there? Is it God?

SU: Lord knows!

RG: Is it not God? Is it god that is metaphor? Is it god as storyteller? Is it god with the little g? Do you think about it when you're painting or approaching painting or meditating?

SU: No, I don't really. I used to be very religious and very very religious when I was a kid. I was Catholic.

RG: What did you do? How did you show that?

SU: I prayed all the time. I went to Catholic school. I loved the rituals, and I loved the incense. I loved eating the bread, body of Christ. I loved all of the Stations of the Cross. I loved that story and the visual images to tell that story. I loved all that stuff. And then when I went to college I realized I could never become a priest because I was a woman. I just hated that. I thought, yeah, this whole Catholic thing is not for me, and since then I've spent a lot of my life trying to find a religion that might work for me and never found one. Buddhism probably was the closest I found, I like what they have to say about things, so I do think about Buddhism, which is sort of a better way of living and a desire to end suffering. That really is the part about it that I relate to.

RG: Have you ever used any Catholic, Biblical, or liturgical iconography in the work that you've done?

SU: Definitely. I used to years ago, back in my early 20s when I was still playing with religion. I had angels, I had an angel-slash-guy. I sold that painting, actually. It looked like Jesus on the cross but then instead of the arms they were wings, angel wings. I did a lot of angels, I used a lot of religious motifs.

RG: Do you believe in angels?

SU: I believe, probably?! I don't know if I call them angels, but I do believe there is energy that's helping one. I do think that's true, in the paintings – are those angels or are they people that have died, is that the same thing or is it an energy that hasn't been finished with this world, is it a ghost? I don't know what it is.

RG: There's this great quote, Philip Guston famously said, 'I go to my studio every day because one day I may go and the angel will be there. But what if I don't go and the angel comes?'

SU: That's great!

RG: Do you think about your work in a similar way and do you paint or draw or intentionally do something artistic every day?

SU: Well it's definitely, 'Oh, I've got to go paint today because if I don't then...' I do think there's times when I feel, 'Oh yeah, I'm ready to go and if I miss this opportunity then it could go away.' That there's a finite time in which I have this energy to create that's going to be good. Then sometimes I feel, 'The energy is really bad today and I probably shouldn't go to the studio,' but I go anyway because I want to paint, and then it just is horrible.

RG: You show up.

SU: I show up.

RG: You're being Philip Guston! You mentioned meditation. Do you have any other rituals or talismans?

SU: Many, many rituals.

RG: And is it about trying to tap into that creative socket?

SU: Yes. I write stuff in the morning, 'The Artist's Way,' three pages. I'm trying to clear my mind, everything is to clear myself so that I'm completely prepared to paint. I'm clearing my mind, clearing the intellectual part of me, clearing up any bad thinking or feelings. I try to get rid of that, so I write that down, then I meditate for 20 minutes. I have to take a shower before I paint because I have to clear out any dirt that remains. I have to be just a pure thing coming to the canvas.

RG: Do you do anything once you're in the studio?

SU: I sit down and start staring at the painting. And going, 'OK, what do I need, what does this need?' If the place is a mess I'll clean it first, or clear it enough. I don't want anything to distract me.

RG: But you don't meditate in front of the paintings before you start.

SU: Sometimes I'll look at it and try to figure out what it needs, or I'll have to get into the mode of, 'Where is this going to go,' or 'What's my first move,' you know? And either that could take 20 minutes to figure out, or it could take two seconds. It just depends on that inspiration or whatever, if it's here or not.

RG: Is art like a prayer for you?

SU: I pray a lot during painting, which is, 'Oh God, please work!' But then if the painting works I always thank God, which is so funny. I don't know if that's a Catholic thing. It's, 'Oh

My God Thank You So Much!!'

RG: Is that from gratefulness or fear, that if you neglect to say thank you it won't be given again?

SU: It's thankfulness, it's gratitude, but it's more than that, it's, 'I knew I'm supposed to be doing this!' It validates what I think I'm supposed to be doing, too.

RG: That has to feel good.

SU: Yeah, it does.

RG: Have you ever wanted to go somewhere with a painting and something wouldn't let you? Writers talk about this, you build a character and then all of a sudden that character is doing something and saying something that you had no intention of the character saying.

SU: I would say that happens all the time! But in the past I would keep it from doing that thing, I was able to not let it do that thing, but then I realized those paintings were terrible. So I should've just let it do its thing.

RG: So there's a surrender.

SU: Right. So now I'm surrendering more. I still don't surrender as much. I think the key to the best painting would be to surrender completely. Maybe not completely.

RG: Why don't you do that?

SU: Well... that's a good question, Kathryn! I'm trying! I think I'm getting the closest with these than I ever have.

RG: This concept of surrendering, if you just go with it do you actually hit some moment of transcendence? You can watch singers perform on stage and you know they're not there anymore. They've gone somewhere else.

SU: I feel there are moments, and then it goes back, and there are moments, then it goes back. I feel there's a constant ebb and flow of that happening.

RG: Do you find it more lately?

SU: Probably, probably. I'm having a lot of fun with these, and I think as I'm getting older there's a lot less that things have to be a certain way. In the past I wouldn't allow things, I'd think, 'Oh, this is my style, so I should keep with this, cause this is my style.' Whereas now I think, 'Oh what the hell, I'm just going to do whatever comes up.'

RG: Do you find yourself ever being led in a direction that in a million years you couldn't have envisioned that that's where you'd go?

SU: Yeah, yeah.

RG: And so surrendering to that.

SU: Yeah, I think that's what's happening now.

RG: And trusting. Which is what faith is to me, that things will turn out.

SU: Right, yeah. I think that you always have to have faith it's going to turn out. You know, I've never been certain a painting's going to turn out, ever. In fact, I never do, still. I once read somebody said something about a painting's done when you abandon it. And I always thought, 'No, that's not true!' But I actually think that might be true.

RG: As you're about to abandon this...

SU: Yeah! Back to abandonment! Because there's so many different fun things to do, I can see so many different things to do. I see that color and I see that color and I see that color, but then I also look at it and think, well wow, it's really alive right now and do I really want to do all of those things? And is somebody fucking with me up there? Is somebody on psychedelics?

RG: And then it's like life and death, too. You don't want to kill it.

SU: Right! Exactly! I don't want to kill it.

RG: Was there a moment when you had a sense that there was some energy or spirit or connection to something other, or was it just always there? Because of the Catholic upbringing?

SU: I don't know. I have read some things, I've had experiences, not just with my art but with other art. I remember being at the Rothko Chapel in Houston, did I tell you this? There's all these paintings, his dark paintings, they're dark maroon going on black, brownish black, and it's dimly lit, and I had the opportunity to be in there one time when there was no one there, for five minutes or something. It was amazing. It just happened, some people had just walked out. And I was staring at his paintings and I wanted to grasp them and I heard this booming voice that came out and said, 'I have nothing to say!' And I was so astonished, and it just kept saying it over and over again. Was it Rothko I was conjuring, was it somebody else, was it the artistic process, was it creativity, I don't know.

RG: Was it outside of you?

SU: It was outside of me. I knew nobody actually said that, I knew if somebody else was in the room they wouldn't have heard it. But I remember it was coming from the paintings. The paintings were saying, 'I have nothing to say.' But I don't believe they had nothing to say, I think they had nothing to say further than what I was getting, could get from them.

RG: Who do you think that voice was?

SU: I don't know! Was it Rothko? Was it somebody else? I also had another experience with Rothkos, there was a Rothko room at the Phillips Collection in DC. I wrote about three pages of what I was hearing from the paintings, and they were from Rothko.

RG: From the paintings?

SU: Well it was coming from the painting but it was Rothko. It was definitely Rothko talking to me. And whether I was making that up in my head I have no idea but it was interesting information.

RG: What did he say?

SU: I can't remember really, but I remember it was about my artistic process and he was giving advice and then he was talking and then some people walked in the room and he said, 'Don't pay attention to them! Listen to me!' And it was a very demanding voice. It was like he had things to say about painting and creating and what you should be doing and not listening to people. It was sort of older artist advice, or something.

RG: Like a clairaudient moment with Rothko.

SU: Yeah, it was interesting. I study his things a lot. I mean, not studying the color or anything, but I definitely have moments in front of his paintings where I had very emotional connections with his paintings or spiritual connections or whatever they all are.

RG: Was that true before the voice?

SU: Yeah, I always have. His work has always spoken to me in that way. It probably is a spiritual level because there's not a lot of imagery in there, but it's also emotional or maybe a combination of both.

RG: So perhaps Martin Kippenberger's going to start talking now! I know you love his work.

SU: Well I do feel like Kippenberger has talked to me! He was, 'Go bolder, don't be such a wimp,' and stuff like that. I don't know where it's coming from.

RG: Do you take his advice?

SU: Yeah! I do. I think these paintings have gotten bolder.

RG: They are bolder, it's true. There are different slashes of colors and brush strokes, in some cases it's a potential for annihilation and at the same time there is a potential for sunshine and you don't necessarily know which way it's going to go. Which is pretty breathtaking in and of itself to be able to do that in each painting. Do you read a lot of spiritual, self-help, artistic stuff?

SU: I read a lot of everything. It depends on where I am in my life. I just started re-reading Hemingway. What I was really interested in, early on I suppose this was, he didn't have much of an ego at all in this book. He talks a lot about Gertrude Stein and what ego she had and he kept his mouth shut about a lot of his stuff. He said this one thing, and this is what I really really related to because I have done this all my life. She said to him, 'Oh, well, you shouldn't be writing like that,' or something.

RG: Like what?

SU: I forget the words she used but I think she was talking about his short, clipped simple dialogue and she was saying no one wants to read that, and so rather than taking offense at it he said, 'You know, I shouldn't be telling people this anyway, it's my own business, it's much more interesting to listen to what she has to say than to tell her what I have to say.' Which doesn't sound like Hemingway to me at all!

RG: No, it sure doesn't.

SU: So it was fascinating. But I thought this is what I always do, I don't really talk about my paintings that much usually with people because I feel I'm going to get jinxed or something. I feel I have my own relationship with Martin Kippenberger or with Rothko or whatever. If you weren't my friend you wouldn't be getting this information! You're my very good friend! You know, because I feel I don't want to jinx it or something.

RG: But maybe there's the opportunity for even more. If there's information you need from somebody who you're not hearing, just go ask and see what happens. I've had things happen where suddenly I have an answer and that answer was nowhere near my way of thinking, or that I never would have thought of in a million years.

SU: That's a great idea. I do think something like that happens when you get an idea, you know, 'This is what I've got to do.' But yes, that's a great idea to ask. I'm going to try that!

RG: I want to ask you about books. Is there anything you've read recently that you particularly love from an artistic or spiritual sense? What's your most favorite book that you would take to your desert island?

SU: Wow. That's a tough one. I don't know if I could come up with one book, to be honest. I read various books that do inspire my soul. I'm usually reading a lot of different things. I'm almost finished with 'Barbarian Days: A Surfing Life.' It's about William Finnegan, he's actually won the Pulitzer Prize, it's a memoir on his young life as a surfer and when he traveled the world as a surfer. I'm fascinated by surfing, which I think is like painting – you have to sort of have instincts of the moment, and it is about following the energy and creating energy and following the energy and being part of the energy...

RG: Falling down and starting over.

SU: Yeah, falling down and starting over! And not knowing where it's coming from and having to deal with different circumstances, and so it was a fascinating book. The Hemingway book, I never thought I'd be relating to him but I am.

RG: Does it help you personally with your art?

SU: It's about how you approach anything. I want to sort of focus on one thing as opposed to trying out different things all the time. I think I'm focusing more on why a lot of times I have this vision and then I would draw it, but I wouldn't really think about what it meant. I still maybe don't know what it means. I'm reading a book on Nietzsche's animal philosophy, about getting back in touch with our animality, and those are things that are interesting but I wouldn't have necessarily put it together with my art, and try to find out

to trying out different things all the time. I think I'm focusing more on why a lot of times I have this vision and then I would draw it, but I wouldn't really think about what it meant. I still maybe don't know what it means. I'm reading a book on Nietzsche's animal philosophy, about getting back in touch with our animality, and those are things that are interesting but I wouldn't have necessarily put it together with my art, and try to find out how they're related to each other. He's helped strategically in terms of thinking about how to focus all these things together and I think it's making stronger paintings, because it's giving me an idea of maybe what these paintings are about, more so than I would have thought, would have known about before.

RG: They're very powerful, I have to say, for lots of different reasons. Subject, color, and the intensity of the strokes, lots of reasons. So - what haven't I asked you that I should be asking you?

SU: I can't imagine there's something else!

This conversation has been edited and condensed.
