

# FINANCIAL TIMES

## Trickle-down effect: the method (or madness) of Pat Steir

The American artist interviewed on the eve of her first London show in 28 years



*Pat Steir in her studio last month © Ike Edeani*

In Pat Steir's Manhattan kitchen there are drawings of dogs by her friends Wayne Thiebaud and Joan Jonas, and one of birds by Ross Bleckner. On the floor above are two works by Sol Lewitt, her one-time companion — one a maze of white lines on a dark-blue ground, the other a huge white circle scribbled directly on to a yellow wall. In the dining room next door is a suite of Frank Gehry's ingenious cardboard tables and chairs.

"They were an exchange too, I think," says Steir, as she tuts at a paint mark on the table top. She got to know the architect when she lived in California in the 1970s. "It was a couple of years, or long enough to know I didn't want to live in California," she smiles. "I ended up making black paintings — all that light!"

Steir's own work gets less of a show: it is represented only by some shards of canvas in the hallway, remnants of a painting from 1990. It had been sold at auction in New York in 2015 but became damaged in storage before the buyer had claimed it. "It was badly wrapped — it had plastic right on the paint," Steir sighs. "The buyer got their money back, and I went with an assistant to cut it up last fall — I didn't want it getting out and about in that state. But I felt bad. I only made three or four of those."

The damaged painting — dramatic columns of gushing paint and horizontal swishes of transparent white, suggesting waterfalls and mountains — had been nearly two metres tall and half a metre wide, which is typical of much of the work Steir has made since the mid-1980s, and explains why we have to go to her studio in Chelsea to see it. There, a series of momentous works, their surfaces composed of carefully calibrated pourings of oil paint, lean against the wall. They are immersive in their scale: the closer you get, the more they suggest their own alternative universe.

From November 9, 14 of these works, made between 1990 and 2011, will be on show at Dominique Lévy's London gallery. It will be Steir's first exhibition in the city, she says, for 28 years (the last was a drawing show at Tate). "It doesn't look like a survey show, though," she says. "They cover three decades but they speak to one another, whether black-and-white or colour."

Steir is now 78, and comes to the studio every day at midday and stays until 7pm or 8pm. She has one assistant to stretch the canvasses and mix the paints, and another who does the correspondence. But it's Steir who ascends in a cherrypicker to the top of the canvas that has been prepared with an underpainting of soft spring green.



Pat Steir's 'Dragon Tooth Waterfall' (1990) © Dominique Lévy, New York/London

The colour, she says, “is not too dark. It pushes out light, and you gotta start with something. Sometimes I put blue on top of it.” With a brush loaded with oil paint, she draws a horizontal line across its very top. The paint then does its own work, running down the canvas, though its weight has been controlled already by the amount of turpentine it contains. The colours merge when wet, and the paint splits when dry, allowing recessed colours to emerge. Steir’s part is like a performance and the result is circumscribed by the capability and reach of her own arm: many canvases are diptychs, divided in two by the extent of her reach.

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“To me, it’s a meditation,” Steir says of her process. “In my earlier work, there’s more self-consciousness, though I always poured paint. I did a painting called ‘Looking for the Mountain’ in 1971, after I’d met Agnes Martin for the first time, and there was a big pour of blue on the right to represent water. I knew

then you could use pure paint without manipulating it, but it didn’t occur to me it could be the whole painting until about 15 years later.” She continued visiting Martin, known for her canvasses of crayoned grids and bands of soft colour, in Taos, New Mexico, for 35 years. “The connection was emotional,” says Steir. “We often didn’t talk about anything much. But then, for Agnes, especially in her work, not thinking was something important.”

Pat Steir was born Iris Patricia Sukoneck in Newark, New Jersey, in 1938. Her Russian émigré father would have liked to be an artist, but instead worked in window display and the silkscreen business. His eldest daughter, however, was determined. “I just knew, from the age of five,” she says.

Steir studied graphics and illustration at Brooklyn's Pratt Institute for two years, then married a high-school friend, Merle Steir, in 1958. He was a student at Harvard, so she followed him there and found a place to study art and literature at Boston University. When he was drafted to Atlanta, she ended up in New York, along with friends she'd made at Boston, including painter Brice Marden, and their marriage reached its conclusion. By 1964, she was exhibiting work, but dates her career as an artist to the early 1970s, when she stopped working full-time as an art director at publisher Harper Row.

Around this time, she also began a relationship with Lewitt, the artist who believed in the idea first, and the execution simply a means to its elaboration. Lewitt, she says, was "busy becoming famous" at the time and the pair travelled extensively in Europe. "He taught me not to judge a work while you're making it. That whole abstract expressionist struggle — fighting with the paint, having a hard time, thinking, 'This painting is killing me!' He didn't believe in all that."

He also taught her not to throw anything away. "There's a piece I made in the early '90s — a waterfall, white on dark. I hadn't looked at it for 30 years, and it's beautiful. It's going in the London show." If that is thanks to Lewitt, her lines have never emulated his specificity and logic. "Mine," she says, "were always mad marks by comparison."



*'New Graphic Waterfall on Dark Blue Background' (2007) © Dominique Lévy, New York/London*

With Lewitt, she went on to start Printed Matter in 1976, a not-for-profit imprint that is still going today. “We were crossing a street in Genoa, and I said to Sol, ‘I need a contingency plan in case the painting doesn’t take off,’” she says. Together they created 10 artists’ books before passing its management into other hands.

Another friend, composer John Cage, whom she met in 1980, “influenced my art by simply conveying how important it is to do it,” she says. “Even when it comes to feminism, my strongest statement of that belief is to do what I am doing, to take part, to feel I’m allowed to have expectations and ambitions.

“Art is the product of the world we live in, it is the culture,” she continues. “When armies invade, they destroy the museums. And it’s important in other ways, for the sake of beauty. Brice says a beautiful painting can cure a headache, though I’m not so sure.”

Two years ago, Steir had a fall while leaving the Metropolitan Museum after dark: she visits every Friday with the artist Richard Tuttle and his wife, the poet Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, and they roam through the Asian and African galleries, which are quiet in the later evening. She broke her leg in a couple of places. “I used to say my paintings worked so well because when I was on the ladder, I couldn’t worry about what I was doing. I just had to think about my balance and the paint just did its thing.” Now, with twice-weekly physiotherapy, she is working to get her balance back. “I used to think I’d retire to Bombay,” she says. “But artists don’t retire.”

*Pat Steir’s London show runs from November 9 to January 28, [dominique-levy.com](http://dominique-levy.com)*

*Photographs: Ike Edeani; Dominique Lévy, New York/London*