

Art | In Conversation

## EJ Hauser with Phong H. Bui

“I believe in art that is capable of generating energy, and what a magical healing power art is, as it lessens the burdens of life’s gravity.”



Portrait of EJ Hauser, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

In my last poem review of EJ Hauser’s exhibition at Regina Rex (February 26–April 2, 2017), *Me + You*, these following few lines still speak volumes of my response to her work:

“Centralized, massive countenances that won’t stand still./ Firmly etched epitaph, pictograph, image-signs on/ These fields of vision. Yo-he-yo, ta-ta Coptic/ Ashkenazi cuneiforms. ... Hemlock trees, magic mountains; they are long-ago/ Megaliths, terrestrial lung/gill-breathing creatures ... Bell Jar computations, Pac-Man doodles,/ Asteroid arcades, she can’t wait to gather her myrrh,/ Colocynth, nutmeg, mastic, etc. to offer ... Ancient ideograms, rapping Gustonian gestations ... A testament of endurance.” Since my last conversation with EJ, which was our New Social Environment Lunchtime Conversation #2 (March 18, 2020) on the occasion of her last exhibit *Forest Dwellers* at Haverkamp Galerie (August 8–September 5, 2020), I’ve learned to see and contemplate the paintings with greater appreciation of how EJ has, in the last year during the pandemic, been able to channel the spirit and energy of the environment, while fostering the intricate yet infinitely resourceful world of ecosystems that make up our natural surroundings as part of her pictorial content. This communion in turn feeds the perpetual formation of her forms, shapes, images, and sense of touch, all of which corresponds succinctly to her deployment of material and matter as one potential synthesis. On the occasion of EJ’s new exhibit, *Voyagers*, at Derek Eller Gallery (April 29–May 29, 2021), I paid a visit to her Sunset Park studio for an in-depth conversation with the painter about her practice leading to this body of new paintings, and more.

Phong H. Bui (Rail): We first met through Chris Martin, our beloved mutual friend, in the summer of 2010. And then in 2013, I was able to include five of your paintings in the exhibit *Come Together: Surviving Sandy, Year 1*, which were all painted with a structuralist relationship between text and image. I remember one painting, entitled *forgetmenot two* (2012), in which the text “Forget Me Not” was painted so boldly and monumentally, convening the whole surface of the canvas, it was as though they were sculpted forms, then soon back to the birth of the amphibian imagery, the symbol of fertility and harmony, and everything that follows your deep interest in the hidden world of nature’s alchemy and mysticism, which is very strangely quite apt for this time. But first, I would like to ask how you would describe the genesis of the text-based paintings, then how they evolved into the iconic images of the amphibian, which for quite some time most of us viewers have associated with your work?

EJ Hauser: For me, letters form a sculptural-like scaffolding, a compositional structure, one that sometimes resolves in text-only paintings, and sometimes leads to the text in combination with images, or sometimes the text gets buried under subsequent layers of paint. I've always been captivated by how letters look, and I constantly write down notes and words when I paint. I've usually got at least one table in the studio dedicated solely to drawing. And whenever there's an idea that comes to me while painting, I just write it down. Inside the text-only paintings, it's important to me that they can be read both legibly as words, as well as an abstraction. In 2015–16, I was working with a lot of text in the paintings and I began craving something alive inside the work—an aliveness in addition to that of language. I had this initial thought that things that are alive have eyes, they can see, they can look. So, I searched for something in the studio that had eyes with the intention of making observational drawings. I found a little green toy frog on a desk, maybe an inch tall, and started making drawings, and not only did these amphibians have eyes, but some had smiles too.



EJ Hauser, *Big Voyager*, 2020–21 oil on canvas, 70 x 55 inches, Courtesy the artist and Derek Eller Gallery, New York.

Rail: One of the most curious yet mesmeric aspects of your work, especially for those who have followed your evolution as a painter as long as I have, is how you are able to bring in ancient alchemy and symbols; for example, in the case of the amphibian image, which is a very ancient creature, and your equal interest in digital technology. And these two interests in the old and new seem to materialize in and through all kinds of strategies, from printing, scanning, cutting, rubbing, collaging, and so on. Can you share with us how the two can co-exist simultaneously?

Hauser: I feel moving into the digital was a natural response to the increasingly digital environment we are immersed in. It has been a process, melding that digital energy into my analog drawings and paintings. In about 2013–14, I got an iPad and an iPad drawing program. And during that same year, I was giving lectures, and looking at small paintings and drawings projected large, and it made me curious to try new means of translating scale and idea. I wish there was some kind of a premeditated strategy that would explain the simultaneous ancient and digital look of my work, but I think mainly it has been a process of elimination, how my images appear the way they do. And I love cheap, soft nylon brushes that are square and flat, they are good for making edges. And I like the paint on my palette to be a certain consistency—I love oil paint for this reason. I also suppose the way I touch the canvas has a certain kind of percussive rhythm that makes my paintings look the way they do. I believe all of these things came together, quite organically, and of course the eye and hand develop confidence with practice, over time. What helped me see these marks as coming from both an ancient and digital place was the observations of artist friends. At first when I heard “pixel,” I was a bit surprised; I had just been trying to break an image down into its component parts like in a mosaic or a weaving. Now, I am really aware of the back and forth from past to present and I'm excited by this way of building an image.



EJ Hauser, *Primary Voyagers*, 2020-21. Oil on canvas, 80 x 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and Derek Eller Gallery, New York. Courtesy the artist and Derek Eller Gallery, New York.

Rail: Yep, it's like deploying the use of repetition, without being a completely minimal artist. Anyway, as far as speed and efficiency are concerned, given your preference of using a square brush, EJ, to make a square in each stroke, do you think it's your own way to mediate between speed and slowness as two required conditions in making a painting?

Hauser: Absolutely. Speed I first associate with my drawing practice, which as you know is quick, and often made on newsprint; it's a material that allows me a freedom of making. The thing I've always desired in my drawings is to capture the kind of urgency of feeling I felt at the time of making it. A big question for me is how to translate this urgency from drawing into the totally different speed that is making a painting, and those square brushes are like drumsticks keeping time on the canvas.

Rail: Can you describe how your trip to Devon, England, and having read Peter Wohlleben's book *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2015), had a significant impact on your work since?

Hauser: I feel whenever you get the opportunity to have a show, it's like putting out an album, there's a side A and a side B. And each album organizes the songs to represent a wide variety of feelings, as well as an overall concept for the musician(s). And so, with each show, I have specific feelings and interests that punctuate the body of work. There has been a kind of path from the idea of transformation, that was suggested by the image of a frog-like creature in my 2015 show at Regina Rex called *Amphibian*. Just imagine an amphibian crawling out of the mud and water onto the land, then into a tree, and so on, don't you think it is similar to the human progression? And after having spent time painting in a barn in Bovina, in upstate New York, I made the work for what would become the *Barn Spirits* show at Derek Eller Gallery in 2019. Painting in this barn made it super clear that I hadn't been in nature enough, hadn't been listening to nature enough, and it made me desire to be more in tune with that intelligence. And the following summer I traveled to Devon, and because the UK is a limited piece of land, I think the way they deal with nature is a bit different than we do here in the comparative vastness of the US. In Devon, there are no power lines, no billboards, there's almost no signage, and little sign of technology and commerce in its rural areas. That trip made a real impression on me, and resulted in the body of work called "*Forest Dwellers*" that was shown at Haverkampf Galerie last year. While in Devon, we visited a very old oak forest, and explored the cairns in Dartmoor, it felt quite ancient, it was like the energies of the Bronze and Iron Ages were still present. And we also worked and relaxed in my dear friend's garden. So, after returning to Brooklyn, I revisited a series of paintings called the "*Garden Dwellers*," it makes sense that there's continuity from the *Garden Dwellers* to the *Forest Dwellers*, and especially now as we humans can no longer ignore the tending of the garden that is our planet.

Rail: Amen. The last time I was in your studio, EJ, we spoke about the compression, the intensity, the energy that had been generated in illuminated manuscripts, we were talking about how the Book of Durrow, made between 650 and 700 CE, has a different kind of density and energy than the Book of Kells, which was made in the late 6th through early 9th centuries; we were also talking about how the artist monks were super conscious of how the energy of the painted images were kept in certain spaces from all the edges. I have the feeling you're conscious of the same relationship. Is that a fair observation?

Hauser: Absolutely! I am inspired by the intertwining of text, image, and pattern in illuminated manuscripts, especially like those you mention in the Book of Durrow and the Book of Kells. On their pages, braided plants, roots, and animals are formed into borders, and flow in and around the text. They are dense geometric passages that suggest the intensity those Irish monks must have felt in their environment alongside their spiritual practice. These borders organize and contain the energy of their subject matter and that definitely feels similar to my compositional instincts in drawing and painting.



EJ Hauser, *Divining Log Landscape (silver)*, 2020-21. Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches. Courtesy the artist and Derek Eller Gallery, New York.

Rail: And again, *The Hidden Life of Trees*, published in 2015, by Peter Wohlleben, a real forester who takes the perspective of the trees the way that Jacques Cousteau relates to the inhabitants of the ocean. Can you share with us how you transferred the concept of the Wood Wide Web into your work?

Hauser: The term “Wood Wide Web” references the way that all the trees in a forest communicate and participate in helping one another be alert to dangers, including all kinds of insects, beetles, etc., or even animals like giraffes. Trees are also able to broadcast threats like disease and drought. It’s quite amazing, they send out scents as a means for communicating with one other, they also send out food to tend stumps that one might assume have no life left in them. Another overlay to this remarkable forest communication is how the entire forest uses a network of microscopic fungi called mycelium, that is located under the floor of the forest, which assists in this communication by distributing minerals, food, and water to the forest. This is not unlike the way we’re connected today, through our cell phones, social media, and the internet.

Rail: That's super-duper true. I notice one small painting entitled little der zauberberg (blue-pink) (2019), is that a reference directly to Thomas Mann's novel The Magic Mountain (1924)?

Hauser: It is. I've read it on a couple of occasions, and was really astounded by Mann's painterly language, the way that he uses symbols as an ongoing, repetitive, serial structure throughout a book about sickness, healing, and transformation. I made a couple versions of these Little Magic Mountain paintings in homage to this book.

Rail: Definitely, one can see it clearly, the color is painted in chromatic pallets of say red, blue, ochre, even silver, and other unnamable colors!

Hauser: I love the idea of unnamable colors, Phong, and trying to "find" or "hunt down" color is something I am always doing. I love playing with color and scale changes, and when I make a drawing that I want to take into painting, I want to see all the possibilities. I relate this to variation in music, like listening to different musicians covering the same song. And if I love a song, like a jazz standard for instance, I am interested in all the versions. It's wonderful to have Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and Etta Jones all interpret the same song with their unique voices. Rail: That makes total sense. What about the divining log, which I know means something very specific to you?

Hauser: As an undergraduate, I studied sculpture, it was my perceived inability to use color in sculpture that drove me into painting. And many of my paintings contain what I think of as power objects, much like talismans; these are human-made archaeological and artistic objects imbued with meaning and energy through the intention of their makers, and their cultural/symbolic significance. The "divining log" originated with a small ceramic vase I found in a junk store in Devon, it looks like a Y-shaped log. The moment I spotted it, it just screamed at me, "please take me home, make drawings of me." I imagine my invented "divining log" as a kind of power object used for finding things that are buried very deep, and obviously related to the divining rod which is used for finding water, a kind of Gaian association.

Rail: Which believes in the idea of honoring the Earth, hence committing to lessen the human impact on the Earth.

Hauser: Exactly! Gaianism, like magic and alchemy, has been ignored mostly because of its association with the new age movement.

Rail: I know! Chris Martin and I used to talk about this issue, for any kind of political, social, or religious doctrine can indoctrinate any conformist tendencies among followers, since all they have to do is to conform but not be aware of their own application, or whatever, to their own growth.

Hauser: Chris and Tamara Gonzales have shared very powerful ideas through books they admired, for example, Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind from 1970 by Shunryū Suzuki, from which I learned the longer you're making, creating things, the more difficult it is to be courageous and brave. This realization is so important for me in that every time I make a new painting, the only way I can get it working is when I submit to entropy in the studio. It's important, as always, to have a lot of avenues of visual interest to pursue. For instance, the amphibian that first showed up in 2015, returned in 2019, I do this so they can be in conversation with what is "current" in my life and studio. This has just happened with my latest show, creatures from drawings and paintings I made in 2017, have returned to broadcast a 2021 message.



EJ Hauser, *Little Voyager*, 2020-21. Oil on canvas, 14 x 11 inches. Courtesy the artist and Derek Eller Gallery, New York. Courtesy the artist and Derek Eller Gallery, New York.

Rail: Whatever your previous invested interests, be they in alchemy, magic, totemic sculpture, rhythm, that can be calibrated to “slowness” or “speed” to express the aura of the images, and so on, or all living “beings” at your fingertips ready to strike that EJ Hauser chord.

Hauser: I certainly don’t ever want to paint myself into a corner, I am a committed lifelong painter, and slow growth doesn’t worry me.

Rail: I always love what Willem de Kooning once said “to desire to create a style beforehand is an apology for one’s anxiety.” I admire some of our artist friends who have achieved recognition and visibility rather late, be it Chris, Tam, Stanley Whitney, Marina Adams, which only means providing latitudes of freedom and mobility. When Katherine Bradford came to our NSE #283 in conversation with Nancy Princenthal, it became so apparent how much Kathy, now in her late 70s, appreciates her community of artist comrades, and above all, how alert she was to life and the deep importance of the decision she made to live her life with such an endless sense of wonderment and curiosity. Her humility is synonymous to her enthusiasm, and her enthusiasm is deeply connected to her sense of humor.

Hauser: And comradely, and love, affection for her fellow artists. I couldn’t agree more.

Rail: Can you follow up what you had said earlier about how you gave up sculpture in pursuit of painting partly because of your love of color?

Hauser: Sure! As an undergraduate sculptor, at a traditional art school, I became frustrated with and couldn’t believe in this notion of “truth to materials,” an idea that dictates that a sculpture’s colors are directly related to the material it is made of. At some point in 1990–91 I read an article with color reproductions of Jessica Stockholder’s work in *Artforum*, “The Obligatory Bed Piece: Jessica Stockholder” by Jack Bankowsky, which blew open my mind because she painted bright colors over all sorts of things, chairs, plastic bottles, cloths, sheet rock, and so on. Her work opened me, and I remember saying to myself, “I’ll stop making sculpture for six months to a year, make paintings and explore my love for color, and then after I learn all there is to learn about color, I will take that back to sculpture,” said like a 20 year-old person. [Laughter] I was thinking then, as I still do now, how children have the natural capacity to draw with their intuition totally uncensored. And my preferred colors have always been bright and hot, the more they vibrate the better, and these are the super-saturated colors inside the books I loved as a child. To this day, I am still exploring combinations of super-saturated colors, especially primaries.



E.J. Hauser, Medium Silver Voyagers, 2020-21. Oil on canvas, 62 x 39 inches. Courtesy the artist and Derek Eller Gallery, New York.

Rail: This may sound super silly, but does your sense of color lie somewhere between the Newtonian theory of color being more scientific like the seven colors of the rainbow or seven-note musical scale, and Goethe's reading of colors being identified with human emotion? Or leaning in favor of one over the other?

Hauser: I'd say I'm a bit both. A dear painter friend of mine, Mira Dancy, turned me on to this book "No One Else Has These Colors": Kirchner's Painting [Christoph Krekel, Karin Schick, Heide Skowranek, et al., Hatje Cantz, 2012], which explains that Kirchner knew that in order for him to express his emotions, he had to be systematic and scientific about his own theory of color. For example, not only did he have his own ideas about how to explore the relationship between primary and complementary color, he also modified the latest industrially manufactured tube paints in a particular way to achieve a matte but simultaneously intensive brilliance in his painting.

Rail: He was aware of the 19th century French chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul, who was famous for his research on fats and oils that started the field of organic chemistry. Among his amazing inventions, which was written into an influential book *On the Law of Simultaneous Contrast of Colors* (1839), which all of his contemporary painters, as well as among the Impressionist, Neo-Impressionists, and those of later times, had either read or were aware of. My haiku version is he had discovered when two colors were juxtaposed, or slightly overlapping or very close together, they would have the effect of another color when seen afar.

Hauser: It's so fascinating that at first glance, Kirchner's painting gives off an amazing sense of spontaneity, but each painting proves to be precisely planned and carefully developed. Not to mention his brilliance in transferring the speed and openness of his drawings and sketches into oil paintings.



E.J. Hauser, Original Moonseeds, 2020-21. Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches. Courtesy the artist and Derek Eller Gallery, New York.

Rail: It's the perception of effortless that counts, yet we all know it's a result of thousands of hours of practice, of rehearsing, and so on. In the on-the-spot update that you made for our Weekend Journal #67 (posted on Instagram on December 5, 2020), you shared with us how you went to your Sunset Park studio on Sunday, March 15, 2020 to take drawing materials, books, notebooks, along with some favorite rocks, etc. to take them home in one backpack. It was in the next two months at a makeshift studio, which you carved out of a small space in your closet, enough for a small table, built by your two excellent artist friends Dan Bainbridge and Erin Lee Jones, that however tiny and compressed this room, it called forth a thinking in how the energy of the microscopic can be generated from your last show *Forest Dwellers* into a macroscopic space.

Hauser: Yes, as much as I can resist a linear narrative in how things get born, it was during these two months making drawings in my closet that I revisited a recording from the *Voyager 2* spacecraft. *Voyager* was launched in 1977, and NASA placed what was described as a car antenna hooked up to a tape recorder onboard. It has a Brian Eno-esque sound and was titled "Music of the Spheres." The recording induces a meditative and cosmic mindset. During this time, I was also thinking back to the drawings that I'd made for a show *peaks + beasts* at Romer Young Gallery in LA (October 26–December 16, 2017), which was inspired by Edward Hicks's "Peaceable Kingdom" series of paintings that he made in the 1820–30s when he was a Quaker minister. At that time, the Quakers were experiencing a kind of ideological split between the Quakers living in a rural environment, and the Quakers living in a more urban environment. Things like making money and having worldly possessions, something the urban Quakers were doing, created a division within the religion that Hicks held dear to his heart. He was incredibly driven and made 62 "Peaceable Kingdom" paintings. What's going on in the United States today, in terms of the division between a Right and Left perspective, has prompted me to revisit these peaceable creatures. I was also thinking about the microscopic consideration of our own life here on planet Earth as it relates to the macroscopic concept of time and space. And I've always been very attracted to the anthropomorphizing of creatures such as the amphibian, birds, animals, and so on. And how, for example, we contextualize abstraction by making a lion a symbol of strength and courage sitting alongside St. Jerome in his study, or we disrupt that symbolism with a character like the Cowardly Lion in *The Wizard of Oz*.



EJ Hauser, *Big Purple Voyagers*, 2020-21. Oil on canvas, 80 x 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and Derek Eller Gallery, New York.



Rail: The same can be said of your seven frontal heads of queer lions that appear in the three paintings Big Voyagers, Medium Blue Voyagers, and Little Pink Voyagers who seem very happy to be queer.

Hauser: It takes a queer lion to know a queer lion, Phong. [Laughs]

Rail: I also appreciate how you relate your favorite letter Y, which is also the shape of your posy vase/divining log, to the alchemical symbol of androgyny, a man and women coming together as one.

Hauser: The binary is very cruel to creativity and imagination. I feel having openness and expansiveness in oneself is a very queer attribute. We contain multitudes. I adore Grace Jones and her song “Walking in the Rain,” one of the lines is “feeling like a woman, looking like a man,” I know what she is singing about.

Rail: It’s a pity how early American settlers with their colonialist mindset couldn’t recognize that Native Americans’ concepts of cosmic interrelatedness, of selfhood, androgyny, or wholeness are all related to the circle, be it ancient medicine wheels, the stone circles, the circles of ancient pots, etc. Their concept of nature, God and universe, in relation to self, is similar to Carl Jung’s “archetype of wholeness,” and Thoreau’s transcendentalist view, which he had partly learned from Eastern philosophy.

Hauser: Yes, the circle often appears in their ritual of the sand painting, they understand art as an element of life, not as a separate aesthetic ideal from living. I believe in art that is capable of generating energy, and what a magical healing power art is, as it lessens the burdens of life’s gravity. Have you ever noticed that if you’re in a bad mood, and you go to see art that you love, it is impossible to hold onto that negativity?

Rail: Absolutely! And it’s a reason why I often go to museums alone so I can heal myself from life’s gravity as you just said. This worldview is definitely visible in all of your paintings, but especially in the “Axis Mundi” and “Moonseeds” paintings, including Silver Red Axis Mundi, Little Axis Mundi, and Moonseeds, Highlighter, and a Snake (all 2020–21), for example.

Hauser: For me they’re very much about a wish for groundedness—as a kind of antidote to what we’ve been going through during these recent ungrounded years. The “Axis Mundi” and “Moonseeds” paintings express my wonder in a microcosm and a macrocosm and the scientific reality of infinite time and space, and the idea that Earth resides within a solar system that is inside a galaxy located in space, which is estimated to contain two trillion galaxies. I find these ideas to be beyond beautiful.



EJ Hauser, *Jupiter, Saturn, Moonseeds, and a Snake*, 2020-21. Oil on canvas, 52 x 39 inches. Courtesy the artist and Derek Eller Gallery, New York.

Rail: Amen again. At any rate, in regards to the same technical template of the tree focus, which is one good example that relates to your interest in printmaking and being a sculptor who makes paintings, I saw that the snake bent itself into a U-shape in the lower edges of both the Moonseeds, Highlighter, and a Snake and Jupiter, Saturn, Moonseeds, and a Snake” paintings (2020–21), all the while the leaf-like or constellations scattering in between to the top; together it looks like an old typewriter, an instrument that was invented for writing. And writing is an indispensable part of your painting; words like “juniper,” “Saturn,” or phrases like “through the sun door” and “my old flame,” which may come from books you’re reading or songs you’re listening to, and even at times they get buried underneath, or painted over so they’re less legible.

Hauser: Yes, I see this space both as a keyboard and a container, where the snake eggs mix with cosmic moonseeds. In addition to its associations with the snake in my “Garden Dwellers” paintings there is also the famous snake from the Garden of Eden and the snake of Kundalini. You can also see several letter S’s, which makes the “sssss” sound of the snake, flowing repeatedly in that space. The use of onomatopoeia is a kind of musical component, which for me, ties the whole painting together rhythmically.

Rail: How cool! One last question EJ: as our friend Katherine Bradford spoke at our NSE # 283 (Friday, April 23) about her recent paintings having a need for affection, for compassion, from which both paternal and maternal care along with the desire of touching or being touched by someone can be embraced readily, I feel there’s a similar desire of such cosmic unity in your recent work.

Hauser: I’m so glad that you’re the person who asked me this question, for I appreciate your sign off at the end of all editorials, and at the end of every NSE episode: “love and courage.” I often found myself short on courage during this dark past year, but by moving one foot in front of the other, and connecting through whatever means possible to the love and courage from our community of artists and other creative friends, assisted in the return of my courage. Walt Whitman, who I want as my spiritual grandfather, or my queer uncle, whose preface to *Leaves of Grass* I read for the Rail’s one-year NSE celebration, creates democratic vistas that have also reinforced this combination of love and courageousness. I feel very old and very young at the same time, it’s wild that I have been making paintings for almost 30 years, so these ideas of the infinite, the soulful, the magical, the celebration of weirdness, wouldn’t materialize and couldn’t transpire without love and courage. And in this new work, I think the jewel-toned colors and pervasive sense of queer cosmic aliveness join together to express my “I survived 2020” optimism.



EJ Hauser. *The Listeners* (pink), 2020–21. oil on canvas, 52 x 99 inches. Courtesy the artist and Derek Eller Gallery, New York.