

Old in Art School: A Memoir of Starting Over by Nell Painter
Berkeley, California: Counterpoint Press, 2018, 331 pages

A review by Carla Blank

At the age of sixty-four, with a distinguished academic and publishing career as a historian, Nell Painter decided to fulfill her long-time dream to become a professional visual artist.

Before launching her career as an artist she was a professor at Princeton University. Recognizing that her “history writing tugged me toward art over the years,” she follows through this change of field by going back to school, earning a BFA at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University and an MFA in painting at the Rhode Island School of Design. She chooses this difficult and expensive route, which she calls a “pursuit of pleasure,” because she wants to experience evaluations of her work by other artists. Another aim is networking, in order to realize a professional career. She did not want to end up as “a *mere* Sunday painter,” (italics author’s).

Nell Painter chronicles her day by day experiences as an art student. She is well aware of most pitfalls that could be ahead, having been a long-time participant in the ways of the academe. She enjoys learning with and from the young art students who surround her. However, she is still subject to painful self-doubts. Some come because of reactions to the fact that she is still a rarity in art school—a person much older than the other students, who is also a black woman. Others are occasioned by criticisms from fellow students and some teachers who adhere to inflexible training traditions, which include belittling students. Such taunts as, “You’ll never be an artist” – which she sees as “a way to take me down a peg—knock me off my high horse...” These admonishments which are more suitable for training Marines are transferred to the classroom, based on the belief they prepare students to survive in the competitive art world.

Making it is, however, an essential part of her goal, and so she soldiers on with plain old persistence, using lifelong skills honed through disciplined research and writing. Her basic solution to bumps in the road: do lots of work, because, for her, progress comes from her “old standbys: education and hard work.” Her accumulating knowledge of current techniques and technologies of the art trade are useful to anyone wanting to become an artist in the twenty-first century. They reveal not only her own processes -- how she applies paint to paper or canvas, such as learning to mix multiple colors to depict black skin and its reflectiveness—but also classic and contemporary techniques of the trade. She writes: “Process was becoming more important to me, how work looked as well as what it meant politically. Now I could concentrate more fully on how artists worked.”

Over these years as a student, Painter asks the questions: “What counts as art? Who is an artist? Who decides?” She has her favorite artists, and through her classes and travels, learns more, realizing: “It took me years in art school to recognize my twentieth-century eyes as my major handicap as an artist, the real way I was old in art school. My eyes hindered me perhaps more than my sex and race. I say perhaps, because I can’t disentangle old eyes from woman

and black, and because I don't want to dwell on my disadvantages. I did come to know that art is fundamentally about taste, and tastes vary; tastes change. My lying twentieth-century eyes favored craft, clarity, skill, narrative, and meaning. My twenty-first-century classmates and teachers preferred normal subject matter, the do-it-yourself (DIY) aesthetic, appropriation, and the visible marks of facture: drips, smudges, and what in the twentieth century would have been considered mistakes needing to be cleaned up."

Painter knows that artists who are not white males have long been given short shrift by the establishment art world, so she is careful to highlight many artists whose names may not be familiar to many readers, too many to list here but particularly she cites her "idol" Robert Colescott, who is a fellow Bay area friend; Faith Ringgold, who employs history and text in her works; Mary Lovelace O'Neal, an abstract artist she wrote about, also from the Bay Area, and Barkley L. Hendricks, working unrecognized in the 1960s and 70s for his life-sized portraits. Among the women who inspire her are Howardena Pindell; Alison Saar, whose sculpture of Harriet Tubman she mentions more than once; Maira Kalman, another artist incorporating text with image; and Kara Walker, who, she recounts, being called upon to champion after the Newark public questions the appropriateness of one of Walker's donated silhouette works being hung in a public library—Painter is elated when they decide to keep it. She also finds inspiration from the subject matter or processes found in African antiquities and miscellaneous "art world notables" as Romare Bearden; Richard Diebenkorn; Alice Neel; Max Beckmann, Gerhard Richter, Andy Warhol, and long gone historical figures such as the spectacular technique of Lucas Cranach, the Elder.

Coinciding with the torrent of questions and works she produces, she also includes how she finds time to finish and promote what becomes a *New York Times* listed bestseller, *The History of White People*. Plus, ever self-aware, she even reveals how she pays attention to every day "costuming" choices of the artists and teachers around her, changing her own style by straightening her hair and letting it go gray. She finds time to be with her husband (who is clearly supportive of her choices, except to ask to be mostly left out of this book), her increasingly frail parents and later her widowed father, sharing what starts with her daily long distance phone calls to him in her childhood hometown of Oakland, California, to support and comfort him through the last years of his life. Additionally, although not stated, it is likely she at least kept a running journal during these years, in order to write this book.

She admits to still dealing with moments of self-doubt—a very common energy drag experienced by most artists—but now as an independent artist, feels free to work her own ways. In some sense, Painter's years of art school brought her back full circle, incorporating her love of history, but moving "beyond straight history." She concludes: "Now what history means to me in images is freedom from coherence, clarity, and collective representation. My images carry their own visual meaning, which may or may not explicate history usefully or unequivocally. For me now, image works as particularity, not as generalization. That is how art school changed my thinking about history and how visual art set me free."

Actually, the preceding quote is one of the most stylistically “academic” moments in the book, because Painter rolls out her deepest thoughts and feelings with great clarity and energy as she travels through these years. And in doing so, she offers a primer that could be useful to anyone of any age who is considering becoming an artist, especially if going the art school route, but also it could give others courage to begin the process of reinventing themselves.

Another bonus of this book, thanks to her publisher—it is a pleasure to hold a book printed on quality paper. And because they have included many color prints of Nell Painter’s art works, readers can more fully understand the evolving processes she describes in her text.