

Critics' Forum

Visual Arts

Art and Identity: A Conversation with Joanne Julian

By Adriana and Hovig Tchalian

Joanne Julian is a Los Angeles-based artist whose work was recently showcased in a retrospective at California State University, Northridge. Entitled *Joanne Julian: Counterpoints* (January 22 - February 23, 2008), the exhibit received great acclaim by critics and attendees alike.



Joanne Julian

Julian has had a distinguished career as an educator as well as an artist. She has taught at numerous colleges and universities, mounted many exhibitions, and worked on several corporate commissions to create site-specific art. Her work has been featured in publications such as the *Los Angeles Times*, *ARTS Magazine*, *Artweek*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Images and Issues*, among others. Yet despite her accomplishments, she is relatively unknown in the Armenian community.

Julian, a second-generation Armenian, describes herself as an artist who “happens to be Armenian.” And at first glance, there is nothing ostensibly Armenian about Julian’s drawings, which are often done in ink, graphite, Prismacolor (a brand of materials that includes color markers and pencils), or acrylic on handmade paper.

In fact, Julian’s art seems often to defy categorization. Her drawings are somewhat reminiscent of the simple lines employed by Barnett Newman, a mid twentieth-century

Modernist whose aesthetic, like Julian's, exhibits minimalist qualities. Many of Julian's compositions, such as *Red Circle with Narrow Veil* (2003, acrylic, graphite, ink on Arches paper), thus have an affinity with Newman's. Critic Robert McDonald cites Julian's regard for Agnes Martin, another minimalist painter whose elegant, albeit stark, compositions couple perfectly with Julian's unfussy drawings. Compare, for instance, Julian's *Orange Ginkgos* (2006, acrylic, ink on Arches paper) or *Two Anthurium* (1989, monoprint on Arches paper) with Martin's elemental compositions (Joanne Julian, Louise Lewis, and Robert McDonald. "Joanne Julian: Counterpoints II," *Joanne Julian: Counterpoints*, 2007: 35).

These spontaneous bursts of expression can also be likened to another school that valued simplicity in form and stroke, twentieth-century Abstract Expressionism. Robert McDonald compares Julian's work explicitly to that of Franz Kline, an important figure in the Expressionist school. In *Black Water Collage* (2005, acrylic, collage, ink on Arches paper), for instance, Julian places a perfect Zen circle against a white backdrop, much like Kline's bold strokes of black against a pristine white surface. Others, such as Louise Lewis (Director, California State University Northridge Art Galleries), remind us that these dark brush strokes represent the Buddhist symbol for enlightenment, *Ensō* (meaning "circle" in Japanese), a word traditionally used in Japanese calligraphy (*Counterpoints*, 2007: 8).



Zen Circle with Dot (2007, ink on Arches paper, 41.5 x 29.5)

Many of Julian's motifs, in fact, are directly inspired by Asian art. Julian's love of Eastern art and culture began at an early age. She started collecting Japanese prints as a teenager, being attracted to their serene, minimalist palates. Since then Julian has traveled and studied in Asia. The acrylic paintings in the series called "Zen Circles," for instance, clearly display the Asian aesthetic suggested by their collective title.

The drawings themselves serve to reinforce, one might say re-enact, this multiplicity of source and purpose. Some of the forms playfully disrupt the viewer's expectations, appearing as two-dimensional depictions on one surface – all heavy brush strokes and bold lines – only to be transformed on another surface into seemingly three-dimensional objects, rings or links in a chain, connected by those same bold lines, twisted into braids or knots, grown more tactile by virtue of their new context.



Untitled with Ribbon (2002, acrylic, graphite on Arches paper, 132 x 43)

The drawings themselves, often large and free-flowing, many replete with natural elements, seem to overwhelm the strict and “unnatural” confines of their context. A number of the paintings in the series Julian’s website (joannejulian.com) calls “botanicals” feature a “close-up” of flowers, leaves or vines, the cropping effect almost extending them forcefully beyond the square of the paper, merging seamlessly with an imagined setting beyond its borders.

But as Julian explains, although the “products” of her artistic efforts may not be Armenian, the “process” she uses to create them, which she describes as a “craft,” certainly is. She remembers her Armenian grandparents on both sides of the family as craftsmen (and women) – primarily tailors and lace makers. She also remembers the painstaking detail of their labor, whether directed at creating art or everyday objects. She never took her shoes to anyone but her father-in-law, she says, a master shoemaker who could make anything look new, often tearing a shoe apart and rebuilding it to look better than it ever did.

That same level of craftsmanship can be found in Julian’s own drawings. Her meticulous attention to detail has been well-documented. Robert McDonald explains that Julian is “thoroughly acquainted with the qualities of the materials she uses and the characteristics of her tools. With respect to paper, usually Arches or Stonehenge, she determines their weights, textures/finishes and absorbencies with inks and pigments. With inks, colors are only the beginning; there are infinitudes of transparencies and opacities. She determines the appropriateness of her instruments, such as the widths, varieties of resilience and softness of their bristles” (*Counterpoints*, 2007: 31).

That approach to the detailed, delicate demands of craft has stayed with Julian, both as influence and occasional obstacle. The Asian influence in her art, for example, she attributes both to her fascination with the delicate craft of Armenian lace making, much akin to the intricacy of Asian art forms, but also to its opposite – a desire to find solace in the simpler, more minimalist aesthetic that grounds so much traditional Asian, particularly Japanese, art.

Julian considers her own identity as artist likewise fluid, more a matter of artistic style and personal lifestyle than one of subject matter, theme or artistic preoccupation. (Like her drawings, her last name is also “cropped,” an abridged version of “Julukian,” a change made by her grandparents in 1918 after escaping the Genocide and arriving in the US.) But digging a bit deeper, the assiduous viewer discovers other parallels. The braids glimpsed in one or two of the Zen Circles drawings suddenly seem familiar, faintly reminiscent of the traditional braids worn under Armenian woman dancers’ headdresses, or perhaps the braided dough of Armenian and Middle Eastern cakes.

Julian avers that she has intentionally tried to defy categorization when it comes to herself and her art. Although proud of her heritage as well as her sex, she still signs her works “J. Julian,” a way of eliding both her ethnic as well as her gender identity. As such, she prefers to be known as an artist in the mainstream, rather than, say, an “Armenian artist” or a “woman artist.” She associates herself most closely, she insists,

with her identity as “outsider.” That may be the most potent suggestion yet of Julian’s identity, paradoxically, as an Armenian woman artist in the truest sense, both because of and despite herself.

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