

Playtime

by Larry Monczka



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Commentary

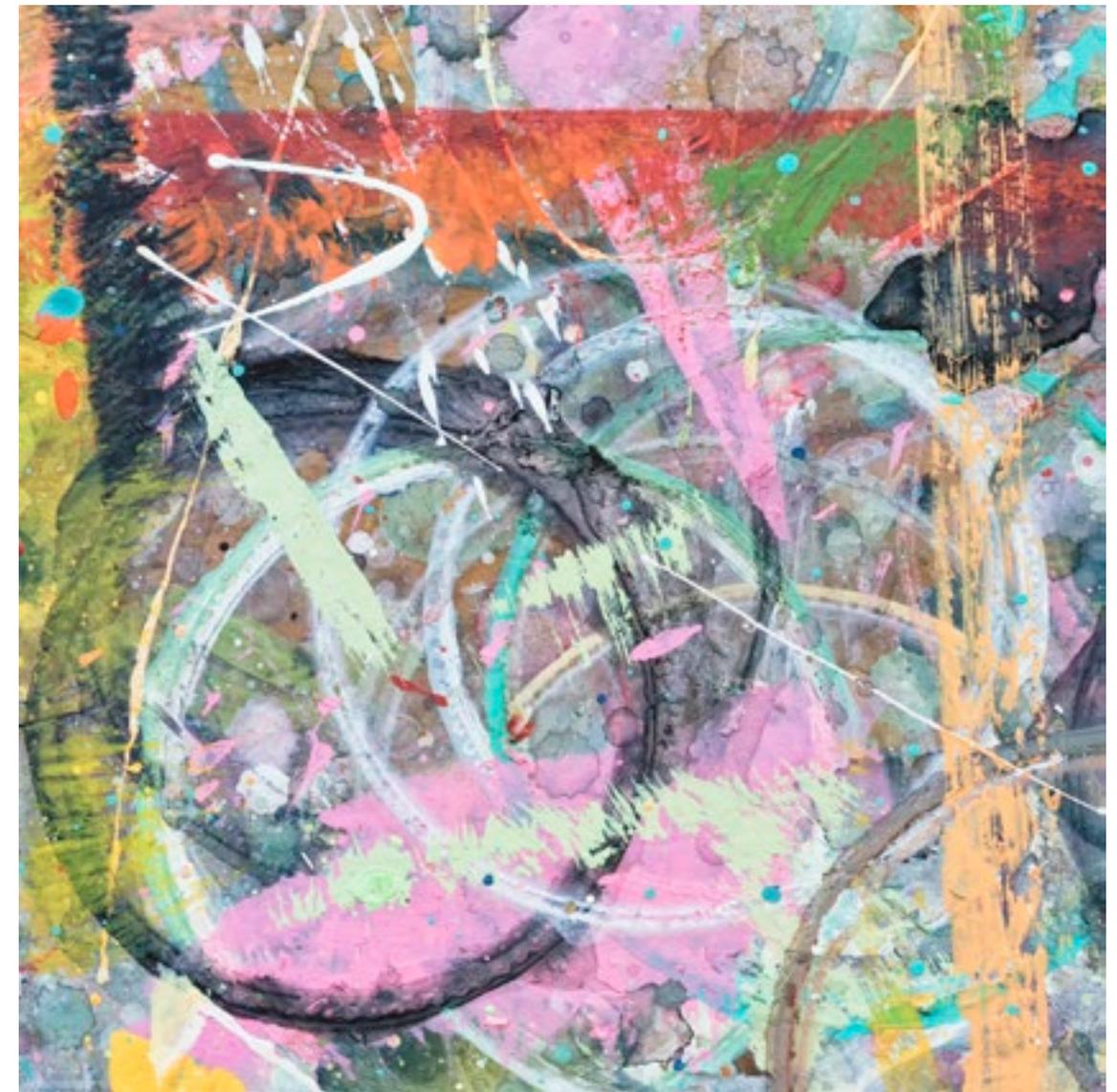
Abstract painting is fundamentally different than abstract photography in that painters are *creating* the abstract whereas photographers are usually *finding* it. In this project, Larry Monczka discovered a field of possible compositions in the form of the desktop where a painter friend of his mixed her paints in her art studio. There he found the remnants of decades of spilled paint, drips, smears, rings left from the bottom of paint cans, and comprising of a random set of colors she had used in her paintings. Larry recognize this as a space to explore for “found abstracts” — and the resulting portfolio is quite interesting.

It’s important to note that this “field of potential compositions” consisted of a small space no larger than about 15 square feet. He could have simply searched that two-dimensional space for a single composition that would represent his artistic vision. Instead, Larry did what I’ve observed most photographers do — he worked the space for multiple compositions. He didn’t just give up after the first one with the assumption that he’d “got it.” Instead, he kept looking, kept composing, kept refining, kept exploring, and ended up with a portfolio of some 20 images he submitted to *LensWork*.

How do you find 20 images in 15 square feet? Perhaps this question is best answered with the fundamental strategy about how to make found abstract compositions in the midst of such chaos. The key is to understand that the space is chaos — in fact,

probably *uninteresting* chaos, simply because it’s overwhelming both visually and sensually. The photographic challenge is to try to bring a certain sense of order to that chaos. Look for limited areas that simplify and bring structure that our eye can grasp and understand. With sufficient macro photography, compositions could easily become too simplistic — for example, a simple dot of paint in a reasonably solid background. Backup so that the field of view is the entire space and there’s probably too much confusion and too little structure for it to make an interesting photograph. As in so many things in life, it is the middle way — in this case the middle distances — that provide a solution.

In the old days, I used to use cropping L’s to help with this kind of project, but I find today’s digital camera’s live view screens provide an even easier solution. We can see with clarity and precision precisely what we are including in the composition — and then simply click. This is a physical activity where fractions of an inch can make all the difference and patience is your most valuable tool. Edge management is of tantamount importance, and finding shapes that encourage a visual flow and exploration are the deciding factors. It’s analogous to watching an out of focus image pop into focus in the camera — but in this case were waiting for



the composition, not the focus. Move, move a little more, move just a bit more and the composition just pop into place. I wish I could explain more precisely how this happens, but that’s been my experience in doing this kind of work over the last 30 years.

All of Monczka’s compositions are square. I think that was an excellent choice on his part. For some reason (I’m not enough of a theoretician to be able to explain it), it’s easier to compose circular abstracts

in a square boundary. Because there were so many circles created by the paint cans, he used this to his advantage. The result is a portfolio of moons, or planets, or bubbles, or waves on the water, or rings — often repeating and overlaid upon one another. It’s an imaginative world he creates with these abstracts. And, fundamentally, I think that’s the key to their success — they are *worlds*, not simply splashes of paint.