

# On the Cover

*Portions of the following are based on an interview with the artist on December 11, 2004.*

"My first public art show, a few years ago," comments Ellen Langer, "was very exciting for me. At the same time, I felt self-conscious, like an interloper. I wondered, do I belong here? A woman asked how long I'd been painting. I responded, 'It depends on what you mean by painting. If you mean seeing, it's increased over the last five years, though it's been there all my life. If you mean being creative, then I've been rewarded for that all my adult life. If you mean having a paintbrush in my hand, that's only been the past two or three years.'"

A psychology professor at Harvard University, Langer grew up in Westchester, New York. She began college as a chemistry major, then switched to psychology and obtained her doctorate from Yale University in social psychology. She taught at the Graduate Center of City University of New York before joining the Department of Psychology at Harvard University. There, much of her research, teaching, and writing (both scholarly and popular) relates to mindlessness and its antidote, mindfulness. Her research interests have been directed toward the illusion of control, aging, and decision making, in addition to mindfulness theory and its applications in health, business, and education.

Langer says that while growing up, she never received any encouragement for art—in fact, it was more like discouragement from the adults around her. She came to painting almost by accident, during the endlessly rainy New England summer of 1999. While picking up materials at the local hardware store in the town where she summers, she ran into a friend who was an artist and spontaneously said that she was thinking of taking up painting. Excitedly, the friend took her to her studio and gave her two canvases. Later, Langer tentatively shared the idea with friends; they encouraged her to "just do it."

The process of mindfulness—of being in the moment—has been integral to Langer's experience of painting. The artist self becomes absorbed; the psychologist self subsequently reflects and queries. Langer describes herself as "getting found" rather than "getting lost" in the activity of painting. Once she steps back, she begins the intellectual exploration. She wonders of herself: Why did you paint that? She asks questions more broadly—for example, What do we mean when we talk about making a mistake? Can we understand "mistakes" as cues to be in the moment, to go forward and be curious about how to incorporate a "mistake"?

Langer describes herself as "untaught" rather than self-taught. She prefers to be in the place of a learner, which keeps her mindful. "Once one feels they're taught, that they know something, it brings a certain level of certainty, a mindlessness," she observes. "When we are mindless, we are trapped in rigid mindsets, oblivious to context or perspective. When we are mindful, we are actively drawing novel distinctions rather

than relying on distinctions drawn in the past" (Langer, 2005, pp. 15–16).

She is interested not just in the how of painting but also the why—and the why not. What is it about art that makes us want or have to show it to others? The very nature of producing the work makes one vulnerable to others' assessment.

The painting on the cover of this issue, *The Three Nancys*, did not start out as a portrait; Langer did not have a "master plan." In fact, this was an instance of going ahead with a mistake. Having painted the figure of a woman, she tried to paint the same form again. As soon as this "reproduction" was not exactly the same as the first, she recognized that she was at a choice point. "A mistake is the cue to being in the moment," Langer says (Busa, 2004, p. 85). With the first error, she asked herself why she was trying to make it just the same. She "chose to let it be the same, only different." From there, it seemed important to paint the figure a third time. "If you have a person twice, it implies something static, like two sides of a story. But all of us are many people. The image of three sides of a person conveys complexity, much more than two. Once you have three, it needn't stop there—a story can have as many sides as one wants."

Langer's intention in painting is less the pure representation and more a feeling or an idea. "Once I have experienced the feeling there is nothing more I want to say" (Busa, 2004, p. 84). At times, Langer sees this painting as three different people who look very similar; sometimes, it is one person looking three different ways. And how do we, as observers, attend to this painting? How do we stay mindful? We can notice the formal elements, the deep solid black of the dress with its definitive V-line neck balancing and contrasting with the wavy white, tightly parted hair. We can consider (our interpretation of) the person, Nancy, looking out directly, perhaps quizzically. Is she static? Does she always have the same expression, or are there projective elements that we bring to each viewing, as we watch her watching us? Langer paints in order to raise—and respond to—questions for herself; as viewers, we can bring a similar level of inquiry and connection to our observation.

More broadly, Langer encourages us to relish creativity as an element in our lives. "Any creative activity can have a powerful effect on our lives, if we pursue it mindfully and recognize the ways in which old familiar fears and habits can be set aside to make room for the personal renaissance we seek" (Langer, 2005, p. 7).

## REFERENCES

- Busa, C. (2004). Ellen Langer: Confidence is an encumbrance. *Provincetown Arts*, 18, 84–85.
- Langer, E. J. (2005). *On becoming an artist: Reinventing yourself through mindful creativity*. New York: Ballantine.

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