An abstract painting with a rich, textured surface. The color palette is diverse, featuring deep blues, vibrant reds, warm oranges, and earthy yellows. The brushwork is expressive and layered, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall composition is non-representational, focusing on color and form.

How to Bring Your Abstract Art to *Life*

Julie Bernstein Engelmann

How to bring your Abstract Art to Life

A Manifesto of freedom and confidence for the creative soul

by Julie Bernstein Engelmann

An abstract painting with a warm, fiery color palette of oranges, yellows, and reds. In the lower-left corner, there is a dark, shadowy figure that appears to be a person or a creature, possibly a woman, looking towards the center. The overall texture is rich and layered, with visible brushstrokes and a sense of depth.

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INTRODUCTION

What exactly makes a good abstract painting?

Are the abstract artworks in a gallery so different from 5-year-old Sally's paintings?

If I paint a bunch of colors and textures all over my canvas, is that all there is to it?

These perplexing questions, sincere or otherwise, plague beginning abstract painters. Not many art teachers can answer them. Not many artists can articulate the answers either, a weakness I discovered in myself when I began teaching abstract painting more than a decade ago.

In my art training, if courses and books talked about abstraction at all, they went into a dry list of polysyllabic composition principles* that, as far as I could tell, had little relation to whatever muse inspired the great masterpieces of the Abstract Expressionists.

Worse, that list had little relation to whatever muse might inspire my students.

*Composition principles generally include terms like: balance, contrast/contradiction, emphasis/dominance/focal point, gradation, harmony/unity, placement/positioning/arrangement, rhythm/repetition/pattern, variation/variety.



Truthfully, the list had little relation to bringing my own abstract art to life. It seemed to dampen my creative freedom and left me second-guessing my every move.

At the other end of the spectrum, outside of school, many books and workshops offered wildly creative approaches to abstract painting. New acrylic mediums allowed artists to texturize, collage, pour, peel, and mix dry and wet materials. Artists invented out-of-the-box techniques to inspire their enthusiastic followers to create exciting abstract art.

Yet they provided no truly meaningful and compelling way to help students understand their paintings and how to improve them.

I set aside my previous training. Instead, year after year I refined and streamlined my teaching methods in the crucible of the artist workshop. I developed what I felt was the quickest way to help artists get on their feet as abstract painters.

Composition principles and wild techniques are tools that do have their place. But first, an artist needs the most basic tool for understanding what is happening on an abstract canvas: *seeing*.



This book will help you use these tools effectively, starting with putting them in the right order: 1) How to *see* an abstract painting as a space with depth; 2) how to make it a *great* painting (the territory of those who teach wildly creative approaches); and 3) how to make it a *good* painting (the territory of those who teach composition principles).

More significantly, I'll help you understand: 4) the *trip* through an abstract painting; 5) the *story* in an abstract painting; and 6) the *harmonics* of an abstract painting. I offer these metaphors to help you grasp the dimensional, meaningful world of abstraction.

After all, an abstract painting is not just a bunch of colors and textures. It is a bunch of colors and textures that the viewer can “step into,” as varied and rich as realism.

This discussion means little to artists who prefer concepts over what their eyes can see. But for artists who value the immediacy of the painting experience as much as the subject, artists who are more invigorated by interacting with the paint than by portraying concepts and images, it is the most exciting pursuit of all.

If you resonate with the possibilities of luscious paint, if you want freedom and confidence as an abstract artist, this book offers you the keys to the beautiful experience of understanding how to bring your abstract art to life.





THE SEEING

Bringing a painting to life is one of the surprising thrills of being an artist.

Not all artists have this experience, or aspire to it, or think of it in this way. But if you are attracted to this book, no doubt you can already feel that you want to get your hands on this excitement.

The gratifying journey of bringing your abstract art to life begins, humbly enough, by learning to *see* an abstract painting.

It took me many years to be able to *see* abstract art.

My painting teacher at Barnard College, Abstract Expressionist Milton Resnick, used to come over to my canvas-in-progress, wipe out a few areas, gesture in large circles, and exclaim, “There! **Now you can see it! Now you have a painting!**”

I did not know what he was talking about.

That was 35 years ago. Nowadays when I teach, I catch myself saying the same thing. ...No, I don't wipe out anyone's canvas.



THE SPACIAL DEPTH

To *see* abstract art, look at the painting as a space that has depth. Look at the layers of dimension: some areas go way back, some parts come forward. The canvas is like a stage set. The forms and colors make a scene with some visual depth, shallow or deep. Can you see it? Practice seeing this depth-space in different abstract paintings.

Now notice what the spacial depth feels like. In one painting it might feel breezy, in another squished. In one part you might bump around. In another place you might go from twist to swoosh. Ask yourself, “What is the trip through the painting-space like?”



THE TRIP

If you zoom around with no place to stop; if you float with no place to go; if you bing-bang like a pinball between a couple of spots and entirely miss other areas; if you fall out of the picture—these are signs of a poor composition. In My Humble Opinion. Which is why I call this a manifesto.

In a good composition, your eye is fascinated to explore the painting again and again. It has places to stop and play, paths to go everywhere, and doesn't fall off the edge unless it has a way back in.

Like a kid at the fair, in a good composition your eye wants to go everywhere and try out all the rides, and could do it all day.

“I love this gorgeous color-squish! Wiggling along these drips, I land on a twisty curve. Ah, that leads me to a warm spot... Dots! Hop across. Now a dry place slows me to a crawl. I come into an open space! Sliding over the smear... Hey, I'm back in the great color squish, only this time it's different!”



THE FEELING

We've talked about how the trip through the painting feels. But how does the artwork make *you* feel as you take the trip through it with your eyes: curious, serious, joyous, expansive, important, free, childlike, indulgent, secretive?

Each painting is different. You may pass some paintings by, but others will draw you in powerfully, urging you to keep looking.

A painting can speak to you so directly that you long to have it in your home.
Thus, a collector is born.



Next, look at the paint itself: the markings (lines or smears, wet or dry, rough or smooth, long or short); the motions (speedy or slow, sharp or loose); the way the paint does things (blend, squish, run, scratch, spray, cake, crack).

Just considering the painting **as paint**, how yummy, fabulous, and fascinating is it?

Dynamic color explosions. The joy & energy is flying off the canvas!

Exhibition Guestbook

THE PAINT

“The most important quality of an abstract painting is the way it is painted.” I learned this truism long ago from my teaching mentor at UCLA, artist Tom Leeson. “Because, the way it is painted is all an abstract painting is.”

“In a realistic painting, the subject matter carries much of the meaning— whereas in an abstract painting, the way the materials are used IS the meaning.” Which is why the paint must be fabulous!

Experienced abstract artists are easy about their approach. While they may have a plan, they are just as interested in seeing how the paint responds to their touch.

Enjoying letting the paint be paint is key to allowing your painting to come to life.

How beautiful is it, just the way the paint is handled? Does the artist honor the materials, bring out their spirit, take joy in their possibilities?

In return, do the materials seem to bring the spirit out of the artist?





THE POSSIBILITIES

As a creative soul, there is no doubt that you can smell the scent of exciting possibilities when you look at an abstract painting that you love. I'll bet when you see one, you can't wait to get into the studio and play with the materials yourself.

I just can't begin to tell you what seeing your work does to me. I am mesmerized, amazed, in awe at your use of the paint, your wondrous, luminous colors. Your work is phenomenal and inspiring.

Exhibition Guestbook

I have often wondered: why does one painting seem to come alive, serving up fascination and excitement and possibilities, and another fall flat to the soul?

Everything involved in a painting has a vibration. The artist's intentions—but also the paint, canvas and brushes—vibrate with possibilities.

Exciting possibilities. Most artists are like a hound on the trail of this scent. We can smell it, and are compelled to know where it might take us.

Possibilities.



THE GREAT UNKNOWN

Some artists pretty much know what they are going to make before they make it.

I'm going to guess: that's not what interests you. If you are here, it's probably because you want something more *unknown*. Freshness. Freedom. Excitement. Surprise.



A great abstract painting, in my opinion, begins in the place where you abandon the known.

You start somewhere and then let it go, to ride the wild ride.

Like jazz improvisation. Like taking a walk. Like life.

From the unknown comes the magic that brings us back to a painting again and again.

It gives us something new each time, like an old friend who still surprises us.

THE FASCINATION

To abandon the known, where do you start?

Possibilities. Follow your intrigue, your fascination, your mystery.

Some artists start from a color combination or proportion. Or from an idea that calls forth a shape or form or symbol. Or from the sensuality of the materials; from an action, like scraping paint; from music, texture, or an image that gives you an idea. Perhaps from intuitive or random mark-making. Or, in my case, planned accident, the beautiful mess.

It is pursuing your fascination that makes your painting great.

Fabulous and full of wonder. This room is on fire!!!

Exhibition Guestbook

The artist's agony and ecstasy is that we can just reach the tail of this wild beast of *possibilities* before it slips from our grasp.

Follow it—your fascination, your inspiration, your intuition, your muse, your angst, your meaning! This is not the time to second-guess.



THE TRANSITION TO GOOD

So, you're in the studio making amazing marks and brushstrokes. You're in hot pursuit – you're on a roll.

Finally, you see it: **the awesomeness that you want your painting to be about.** Yes! This feels like a million bucks. It rocks! The greatness is here, you know it.

And just then, most of my students come to a big, blank moment:

“Hmm. How do I complete this painting without ruining it?”

Let's pause and take a look at this moment, because it is the transition between making the painting great and making it good.

In a way, the great part is done. The impulse, the power, the lifeblood is there.

If you've ever done figure drawing, you know that the power is in the initial gesture. Everything that comes afterward is an attempt to enhance that gesture without compromising its power.



Same with abstract painting. You don't arrive at great by improving on good. Instead, you go for great first, and then enhance it, so it is also good.

Great in an abstract painting usually takes longer than a gesture!

Unless a painting is also good, it isn't really a great painting. It is just great paint.



Once a painting is both **great** and **good**, it can spring to life for the viewer.

What is a good painting?

A good painting is one where the viewer can really see what you were seeing in all those possibilities.

A good painting is one where you “tell the story well,” the story of what's so fabulous in this painting.

So, how do you do that?

THE STORY AND THE COMPOSITION

Follow the trail. **Your excitement tells you that you've found a story: a way you love what you see in the paint.** Now you just need to keep what you love sacred, and support it by composing and tuning the story so that we can see it.

What is *composition* in an abstract painting? It is a story, well told through visual language. That is my personal definition, anyway!

For example, the central shape in my painting at right had a proud, rooster-like quality. To enhance this story, I added the red “legs,” which brought directional thrust, color warmth, and shape contrast.

To counterbalance the powerful angle, I added heavy weight to the lower left of the painting through value and texture contrast. I'll go into composition in a future course.

By composing, I purposely moved your eye through the painting to make more of the story, helping you to see it too.

But it's not just my story; far from it. The painting has its own vibrational integrity.



THE HARMONICS

Just like tuning a stringed instrument, a painting vibrates with harmonics that you can tune into, to help you bring your painting into a state of clear resonance.

If you pay attention, you can feel or see within a painting whether the vibrations are aligned. No. More precisely, you can see within a painting where the vibrations are *not* aligned. It hurts just a bit to look at that part, like the irritating sound of a high-tension electrical wire. Something about it bugs you.

The misaligned place (if you recall the kid at the fair, trying out all the rides) is where the visual depth in the painting jams up, where your eye has no path to roam or too strong a path, the colors clash, or an area seems to shift to a different painting.

Now, notice the good stuff. Reserving your favorite part as sacred, what other areas are well-aligned to it, where your eye is roaming through properly? Keep all that! Add, remove, and adjust elsewhere until all parts of the painting weave into harmony.

Aligning the vibrations, along with a light (or sometimes heavy) touch of composition, is what completes a painting so that its greatness is supported by its goodness.



THE COMING TO LIFE

The moment the vibrations all come into a harmonious whole, the painting springs to life in 3D, like a hologram.

“Whoa!” My heart soars. This is the moment I live for!

It means I'm almost done. Maybe there's some fine tuning, but “hands off the futzing.” I sign it and set the painting where I can see it for at least several days.

Over the next week or two, the painting either gets better (yes! I'm calling it done) or worse (and worse). But worse just means that soon I'll know where to make a change. The change can range from minor (oh, that was all it needed!) to a full-scale overhaul (sigh), in which case the process starts again.

My classes and workshops take you through the process of beginning from the vast unknown, to finding the great story in the painting, to discerning the delicate nudges of composition that are all you need to make it good, too.



THE MEANING

So, your painting is finished. With satisfaction, you're admiring how great and good it is. But what does it mean? And is it worth money to someone?

No one but you can tell you what great means. You will feel your great painting powerfully, in a way that reaches right inside of you and takes your breath away.

I usually do not like abstract paintings, but I walked in the room and was struck still by the depth of emotion in your work, very unexpected!

Exhibition Guestbook

However, I can tell you what *good* means. It means, as Milton Resnick would say, “There! Now you can see it! Now you have a painting!” It means that when you move your feeling-self around inside your painting's depth-space, it feels really good.

It means the painting gets better the longer you live with it. It means you see something a little different and very satisfying each time you look at your painting.

And usually that means someone else will, too.





YOUR EXPRESSION

So many artists who pursue abstract painting fluctuate between guessing what they are doing and catching a wave of brilliance. I'd like to shift your odds toward your natural brilliance. My mission, and the reason I teach and mentor artists, is to help creative souls like you to experience freedom, confidence and fulfillment in abstract art.

I know only too well the zealous desire to paint expressively, followed shortly after liftoff by the disheartening realization that you don't really know how to complete your painting without ruining the initial inspired luck that came like a gift.

I hope to spare you the decades I went through of frustrated highs and lows, with the emphasis on turning those agonizing lows into a lifetime of exploring confidently and expressing freely through color and form.

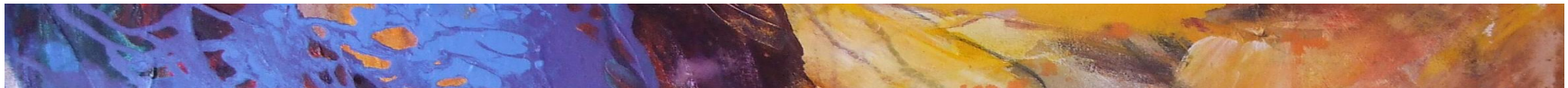
If you are a creative soul who resonates with my work and my words in a way that feels like possibilities are opening up, I invite you to experience one-on-one artist mentoring with me.



- Do you have a feeling that you need more guidance in your abstract art—yet you've gone as far as your teachers, peers, and your current level of insight can take you?
- Do you wish you could move from feeling around in the dark to knowing what is happening when you paint?
- Have you begun to realize that feedback, sharing, and accountability are keys to moving forward as an artist?
- Do you want to feel confident and competent when you enter shows, price your artwork, and approach galleries?
- Do you get goosebumps thinking what it might mean to take your art seriously?

By phone and web, we meet for mentoring in a virtual space that honors you as an artist. We delve deeply into your artwork, your visions, your explorations, and your unique strengths. We uncover the visual factors that affect the impact of each of your pieces, and discuss specific ways to enhance them. We address your questions.

Over time, your focus, rhythm, sharing, and momentum build unprecedented productivity, transforming you as an artist and propelling you toward your goals.



Art to HeartSM Session

You are invited to experience Artist Mentoring with Julie Bernstein Engelmann



- ✓ One-on-one, 75 minutes with Julie focusing on your art
- ✓ Gain insight into your unique strengths
- ✓ Learn what may be holding your paintings back, and specific ways to improve them
- ✓ Honor yourself as an artist, as well as the spirit and language of your art
- ✓ Ask practical questions to help you move forward

Book your session here

~~\$120~~ \$75



ABOUT JULIE BERNSTEIN ENGELMANN

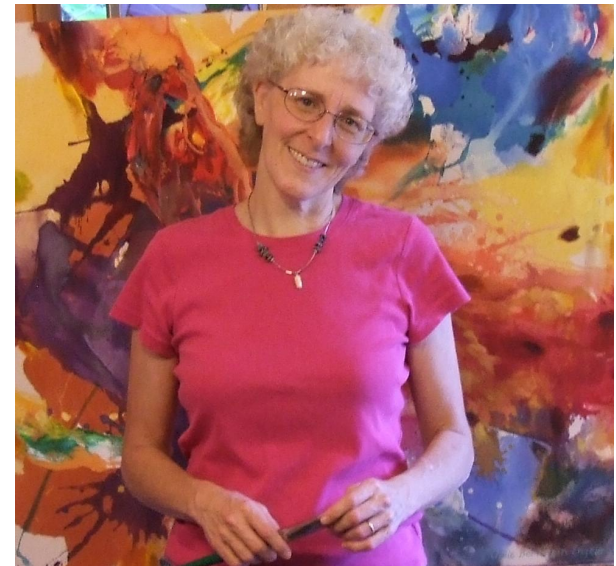
Abstract art that speaks to the heart and spirit

My mission is to further the dialog on abstract painting for creative souls, and to help you experience freedom, confidence and fulfillment in abstract painting.

I grew up in the 1960s and '70s well-versed in the language of abstraction, thanks to my art-docent, art-collecting mother. Yet my real passion to learn the mysteries of abstraction was ignited by studying with the inspiring Abstract Expressionist Milton Resnick at Barnard College in New York City. He showed me how to paint with spirit, and how to see the cohesive, spacial depth in an abstract painting.

After graduation, and several years of painting and working in art galleries and museums, I realized I did not yet know what “good painting” meant. What was the difference between the artwork of aspiring artists like me and the paintings being shown in galleries and museums?

I went back to earn my M.F.A. at the University of California, Los Angeles. The program gave me strong concepts of authenticity, meaning, and integrity, but a true understanding of abstraction was not among them.



My quest came to a head in 2003, when I began teaching abstract painting workshops for artist groups and for the Continuing Education department at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. To my dismay, the class paintings, mainly floating blobs of tube colors, revealed a troubling lack of substance behind what I thought I knew about abstract painting. I resolved to find a better way to understand and teach this.

Each year I clarified, refined, and streamlined my teaching methods to find the essential groundwork in abstraction that would enable students to successfully go in any direction with their unique style. Each year the class paintings improved. In an exhibit of county artists of all genres, my students and I won five of the nine professional and non-professional prizes awarded. Meanwhile, my own [artwork](#) work gained more success. I was showing through galleries in Pittsburgh and Sedona, winning Best of Shows, and my art was acquired by numerous collections. I was honored with a solo [museum exhibit](#).

I bring my many years of [experience](#) mentoring artists, judging shows, and conferring with curators into helping you become confident in creating, sharing, showing and selling your art.

More importantly, as a champion of depth and [drama](#) in abstract painting, I am fascinated by your unique marks and forms, and I dearly love to celebrate your beautiful expression with you.



ENTHUSIASM FROM MENTORING CLIENTS

*Julie, I am amazed by how much I learn in each of our sessions!!! I love our telephone sessions and how you are able to teach me and guide my painting, despite the fact that you are across the country. The recordings are so helpful and I refer back to them frequently. **My time in the studio is so much more fun because I have new direction and I am not just guessing at what to paint.** I have gone from not painting at all, to spending several hours a day painting and loving it!*

I can't thank you enough for helping me submit and be accepted to my first juried art show!! I love your painting and the title 'Is it Really Okay to Feel this Good?' and I ask myself that often when I am painting!

– Sandy Duckett, Phoenix, Arizona



*Julie, you are such a powerful presence in my life. As a painter, I have such a strong desire to express myself. I love to revel in the freedom of making marks with paint and ink that I am deeply drawn to make, and to powerfully feel the mystery and energy of my Being made manifest. **As my mentor, I feel like you have literally helped me look, and as a result, see what I am doing from a visual perspective. What a gift!** Something that is so personal, I can more easily share now.*

*Having a consistent connection with you over time has allowed me to mark the evolution of my enjoyment and awareness as a painter and art creator. Your specific awareness of abstract art is helpful and grounding. **With you at my side I feel like I have the support to go as far and as deep as I want to with my art.** Thank you.*

- Katie Harrington, Burlington, Vermont



Before I met Julie Engelmann my art work consisted of sporadic, realistic watercolours. Julie's classes and mentoring opened up a whole new avenue for me; I had not previously been exposed to abstract/expressionist painting. I love the freedom, creativity and new color sense that I feel when I paint in this "new" style.

*I have continued along this new path, incorporating abstract expressionism with my realistic tendencies. **Julie's mentoring has motivated me to produce more paintings than I ever thought I would do on my own.***

*Even though her own style is very abstract, Julie has a broad background of art knowledge and experience to bring to any style of painting. **Her critiques are always honest, insightful and positive which makes them all the more helpful.** I believe she has enabled me to take really big stride in my growth as an artist.*

As a result of Julie's mentoring, I have won several awards in local art shows. My latest, in November 2013, was a first place in the non-professional category. I have sold several paintings through our local art gallery.



– Julie Knox, Indiana, Pennsylvania

In her critiques, Julie has a gift for getting to the heart of the matter. She sees at once where positive changes can be introduced and how any composition can be made stronger. She pulls no punches, but even the faintest of hearts will feel well-supported, as she conveys a genuine sense of believing in the artist and his or her potential.

As an "artist's artist," Julie knows how to develop that potential and how to help anyone chart a believable course toward artistic fulfillment. I see not only rapid improvement in my work, but new possibilities for showing and marketing it. Thanks to Julie's remarkable encouragement and mentorship, I'm well on my way, and I give her my highest recommendation as I go!



– Scott Dimond, Topsham, Maine

ABOUT THE TERMS ABSTRACT AND ART

Art: A more accurate title for this book might be *How to Bring Your Abstract Paintings to Life*. But that title sounds less poetic and overly lengthy. Instead, I'll suggest that the principles discussed in this book could well be applied to abstract art in any medium, especially drawing and collage, but even fiber and sculpture.

Abstract: Technically, the term used for art with no recognizable images is *non-objective*, whereas the term *abstract* refers to art that is a take-off from recognizable form. However, I believe that humanity in the last half century has pretty much stampeded over the attempts by art critics and historians to maintain control over distinguishing these terms. Since a typical art fan is comfortable calling the “not-recognizable” stuff abstract, I use that term.

On the other hand, a more urgent explanation should be made regarding my apparent dismissal of abstract art that is **carefully planned, clean-edged, or flat** (no textural variations). I do appreciate these kinds of paintings. And while I don't teach to them, actually the only section of the book not relevant to devotees of planned art is the part about abandoning the known. Everything about seeing spacial depth and composing based on harmonics can be applied, to great advantage, in these kinds of abstract art.



PHOTO AND PAINTING CREDITS

Photo credits: **Introduction:** Julie teaching, by Minda Bernstein 2013. **Your Expression:** Julie on studio table, by Amber Engelmann 2012. **About Julie Bernstein Engelmann:** Julie in front of painting, by Amber Engelmann 2012; Julie teaching, video still by Julie 2013. **Enthusiasm from Mentoring Clients:** Client photos were submitted by each of them; except the one of Scott Dimond, by Chip Engelmann 2013. **Painting photos:** All by Julie Bernstein Engelmann.

All paintings are by Julie Bernstein Engelmann: **Cover:** Detail from *Freedom From Wondering If I Did Something Wrong*; acrylic and latex on partially primed canvas; 30"Hx34"W; 2013. **Table of Contents and Parts 1,2,3 title pages:** Detail (rotated) from *No One Else Knows Better*; acrylic, latex, conte; 48"Hx72"W; 2013. **The Spacial Depth (Left):** *Unicorn Sunday (Comfort in Uncertainty)*; acrylic and latex on unprimed canvas; 22"Hx34"W; 2011; **(Right):** *My Golden Network of Spiritual Helpers*; acrylic, latex and conte on partially primed canvas; 34"Hx44"W; 2012. **The Trip:** *Relax Into Your Answer*; acrylic, latex, conte on partially primed canvas; 24"Hx30"W; 2012. **The Feeling:** *I May Be All That Exists*; acrylic and latex on partially primed canvas; 22"Hx26"W; 2013. **The Great Unknown:** *Saved By Flaw*; oil, latex, acrylic and conte on canvas; 36"Hx40"W; 2010. **The Transition to Good:** *Is It Really Okay to Feel This Good?*; acrylic and latex on unprimed canvas; 36"Hx40"W; 2013. **The Story and the Composition:** *In Flow and Ease*; acrylic and latex on unprimed canvas; 24"Hx18"W; 2013. **The Coming to Life:** *Athena (Goddess of Inner Wisdom)*; oil, latex and acrylic on canvas; 25"Hx25"W; 2010. **Art to Heart Session:** *Heart*; oil on canvas panel; 12"Hx9"W; 1996. **Footer bars:** Details from *In Flow and Ease*; *My Golden Network of Spiritual Helpers*; *Interconnected People Doing What They Love*; and *Picking Back Up My Life Story (After a Dream)*; all 2012–2013.

Several of these paintings are owned by private collectors. Click to [Artworks currently available for purchase](#).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A huge thank you to editor Minda Bernstein and my early readers, whose feedback made this manifesto much easier to understand for people who happen to live outside my head.

Inspired to share this ebook? Great! But please have your friend get their own free copy at www.julieengelmann.com. Thanks! –Julie





Ready? [Here's that link again.](#) Book your

Art to Heart Session

One-on-one, 75 minutes with Julie focused on your art.