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Ellen Siebers: painting between the world and her land

by MARIA VITTORIA PINOTTI • 2 OCTOBER 2025 • STUDIO VISIT

In the 1910s painter Pierre Bonnard moved to Vernonnet, about five kilometers from Giverny, in France, to open himself to a total relationship with nature, both through direct contact with the land and through the spaces of memory. From this, we can consider a further reflection: whether Bonnard's method – painting from memory a set of lived, forgotten, and then recombined experiences through unpredictable relationships – is also a common working method among contemporary painters. Although today there are many artists who work from life or take inspiration from photographs and images, others, like Bonnard, rely on memory – abstracting and transforming the subject into a metamorphosis with its own unique aesthetic dimension. The rules of this kind of painting, by prolonging the instant of memory, stray far from the real. Even when dealing with highly realistic subjects, such as landscape painting, they diverge from realistic representation. So, unlike the history of landscape painting – especially artists like Claude Lorrain, Jakob Philipp Hackert, the Barbizon School and the Hudson River School in America – where natural landscapes were perfect imitations of the surrounding world, some artists have managed to paint these subjects from memory and emotion. That is, through the emotional sensation evoked at first glance.



Ellen Siebers, "Two Trees", 15 x 30 cm, oil on birch panel, 2025, courtesy of the artist

In the state of New York, in Hudson – where the aforementioned Hudson River School was born – there is the studio of painter **Ellen Siebers** (1986, Wisconsin, USA). Her workspace is about 15 square meters, evenly lit by large windows. When I asked her to describe the space where she paints, she sent me photos of the studio interior, along with a wide selection of panoramic outdoor shots. Images of moths, shrubs and flowers followed, as if naturally documenting what she encountered on walks around her studio. This made it clear to me that, for Siebers, the studio is not merely the room she paints in, but the entire surrounding landscape. Only by looking at this broader context we can understand the motivations behind her work: small fragments of landscapes and figures, stripped of all environmental detail, shaped by her personal experience of nature – developed through a mental and mnemonic approach. Siebers's vision resembles that of someone who does not look at things directly but has internalized them. In this dreamlike state, we begin to discover the defining elements of her painting. Her work is rooted in the amorphous – lacking clear contours – where brushstrokes remain visibly rough across the entire canvas. The barely sketched figures encourage the viewer's imagination, as if suspended within a cloud, where the swirling spaces evoke a sensation of damp and faded imagery. The open form, absence of illusionistic means, and lack of contextual backgrounds make her works appear as pure visions – arising from the dialogue between natural observation and private interpretation. These characteristics bring her working method close to that of Pierre Bonnard, who, in the presence of Vernonnet's nature, declared: «With the drawings in hand. I look at them, take notes, then I return to myself and, before painting, I reflect, I dream». However, while Bonnard's palette is rich in color, Siebers reduces hers to earthy tones inspired by her surroundings – taupe, sage green and softly glowing blues. This sensitivity to the colors of earth and sky stems from her deep relationship with nature, resulting in works where nothing is loud, but rather calm and quietly balanced.



Ellen Siebers, "The charm", 20 x 25 cm, oil on birch panel, 2025; "Relight", 20 x 20 cm, oil on birch panel, 2025, courtesy of the artist and Ingleby Gallery © Ellen Siebers, photo John McKenzie

Siebers seems fully aware that one cannot dwell in the realm of memory while embracing figuration – because, in her recollection, even the human body and the smallest natural details fade. These subjects are conceived as negligible, to the point of being swallowed into the shadowy background of a space that lies between *the physical world and its deeper land*. By merging the extremes of these places, Siebers collapses focal distances, dramatically flattens the picture plane and introduces strange pairings and extended spatial pauses. Her paintings question whether this highly meditative form of painting – born from thought rather than direct observation – can surpass the superficiality of a literal view. Indeed, no matter what subject she depicts, Siebers always adheres first to her own private reflections – fixing that fleeting, elusive quality typical of passing thoughts. Her scenes are built with delicate balances, where square elements float in the emptiness of the canvas, like the compositions of Byzantine icons. The most important aspect of her pictorial choices is that they embody acute sensitivity. For the average person, the world may be a collection of images – but for Siebers, it's a labyrinth of signs and memories taking form in the anticipation of a vision yet to be defined. By retreating into the natural world around her studio, she instinctively ties herself to memory, opening to the indeterminacy of nature and giving color the role of the compositional key. Her works, devoid of narrative identity, appear as small contact points between possible worlds and other entities. What emerges is a kind of painting that guides the viewer into a space that is strikingly undefined and exquisitely imprecise – where the artist's hand is clearly felt, always stopping just short of clarity or closure. In other words, this is a kind of painting that portrays episodes lost in uncertainty, poised between visual reality and visionary imagination – captured just a moment before disappearing.



Ellen Siebers, "Breakfast", 30 x 30 cm, oil on birch panel, 2025, courtesy of the artist

Maria Vittoria Pinotti: How would you describe the working rhythm in your painting?
Ellen Siebers: The looser I am able to be, the better, so the working rhythm revolves around getting myself to a state where I am able to be my most responsive. When I start painting in the morning, I am often a bit tight and a little too precious, so I frequently obliterate the initial layers of painting. Music is important to me, and I often listen to things on repeat to help me access a less intentional part of my brain. When I am working my best, I am no longer worried about the idea of destroying a work, and am totally present. At that time I am most open to serendipity. It is a mix between being present with the seed of an idea at the beginning of a work, while staying open for it to change completely. This means if I am working with a reference, I have it available for a short period before I will put it away. I try to block out as much uninterrupted time as I can. All of these things are easier said than done, of course.

How much time do you spend in your Hudson studio, do you ever work *en plein air*?
I try to spend as much time as possible in the studio. Even if I am a bit tired and not ready to paint, so much can come forward in terms of ideas if I sit around in the presence of work (mine of the work of others). I paint in the daylight, so those are the hours I mostly keep in the studio. At night I might prepare some canvases, but most of the time I watch a movie. I do not work in plein air. At times I will bring objects back to the studio and work directly from them, especially if I am feeling stuck. Working outside provides too much stimulation for me, and I find it harder to access a flow state. My work is more about responding to an impetus and seeing how it can form with the paint itself, not about recording anything directly from the outdoors. For me it is more about the feeling of the thing than the thing itself.

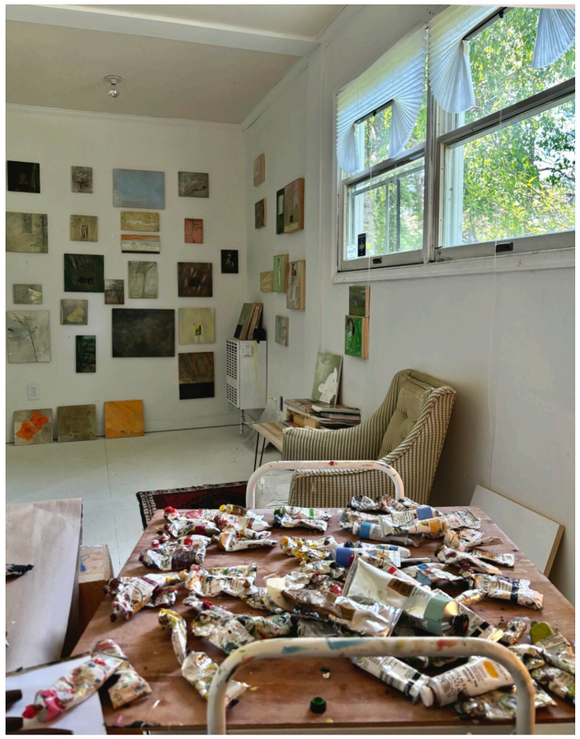


The natural landscape near Ellen Siebers' studio, September 2025, Hudson, NY

In relation to your most recent works, how do you conceive the relationship between composition and form?
This is a great question. I like to find ways that a single body or object can fill the picture plane in ways that give rise to an interesting composition – the edges of every form have great importance. I do often like things to be contained in a way that feels singular. Trying to find these moments is an interesting challenge. The degree of hard/diffused also feels important to the relationships between the chosen form and their relationship to the composition. I am very picky about the surface and how it relates to these issues, since a moment of impasto vs. a moment that is in deep space can create so much tension. The texture of a brush stroke for me needs to relate to the building of a specific form in a meaningful way – I cannot have an errant brush stroke that doesn't relate to the forms (say, from an earlier attempt on the same panel) since I think of every mark as part of the whole entity. Every moment counts.

What role do chance and intention play in your creative process?
IChance has a larger role in my work than intention. If I try to impose my intention too much, I usually make something that feels dead on arrival. Even how I mix paint leaves room for chance – I don't mix batches of color in advance, and mix with the brush itself intuitively. I might pick up a bit too much red with my brush that I didn't see on my palette, and when it makes its way onto the surface it is a surprise that either works or doesn't. It feels good to embrace being on the edge of success or failure (whatever that means) as much as possible. I often obliterate what I've worked on with a soft brush, and then forms totally change to something I couldn't have predicted. For me, this is the beauty of working, and also means I make a lot of work I never show.

In what ways does your relationship with nature, especially the landscape around your studio, shape your artistic practice?
I could argue my relationship with the landscape around my studio has the largest impact on my practice. I love to go for long walks, and I consider it of equal importance to the time I spend in the studio. The colors and forms I soak in on the walks integrate themselves into the paintings constantly. It all reverberates for a while. Since I primarily go on the same two loops for walks, there are forms and colors that I begin marinating on (like the shape of a branch of a white pine tree), and they begin abstracting or reducing slightly by the nature of what my brain is able to retain. I do have an astute memory, so for me I am able to retain quite a lot, but again – it begins to shift form. I find this all a very interesting place to pull from when I begin to work.



Ellen Siebers' Studio in Hudson, NY, September 2025, courtesy of the artist