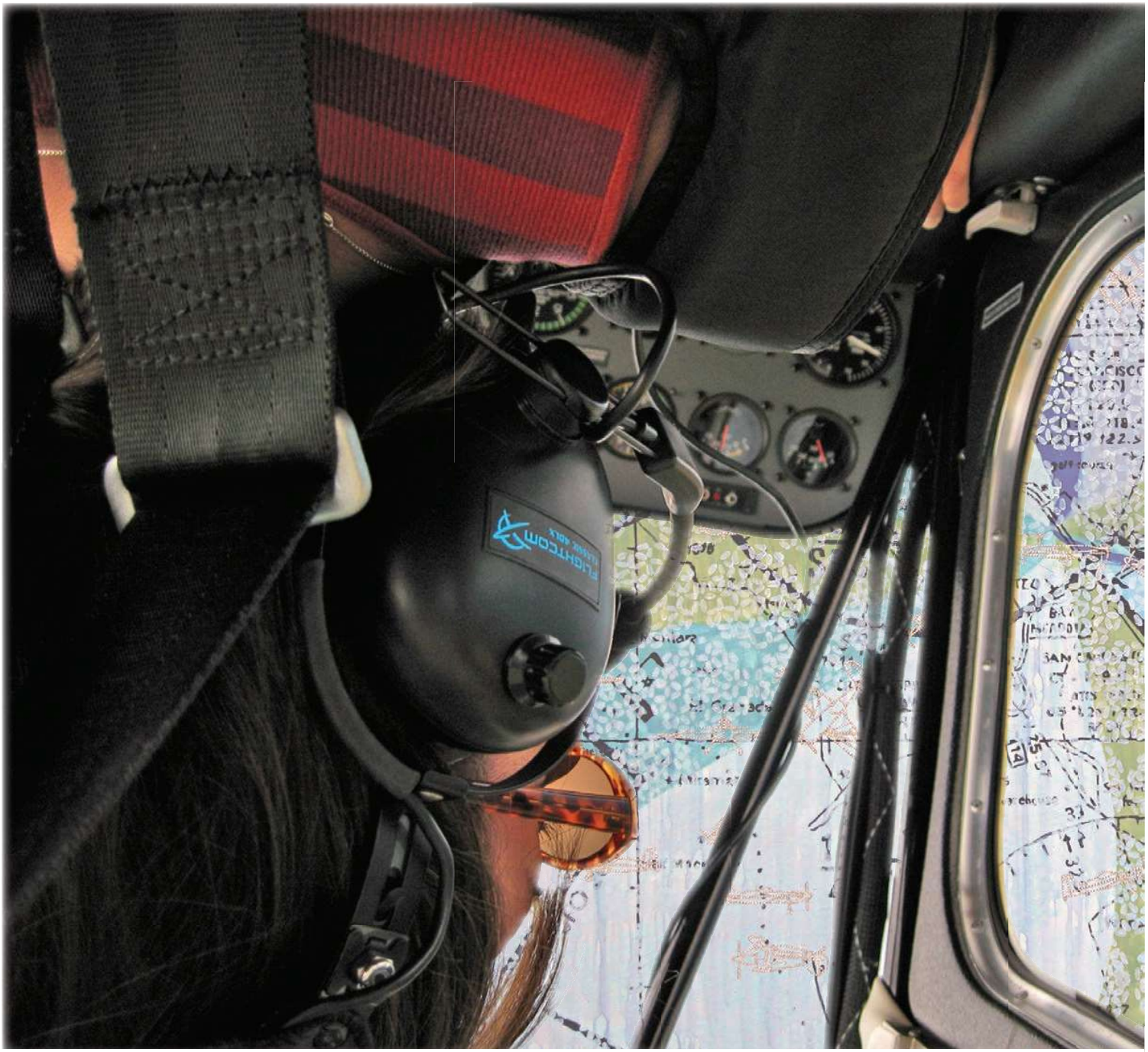

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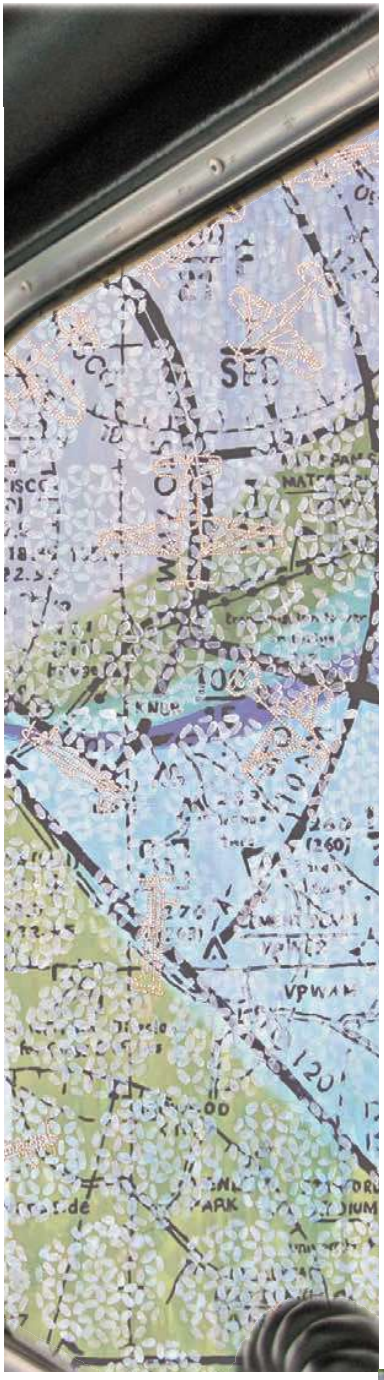
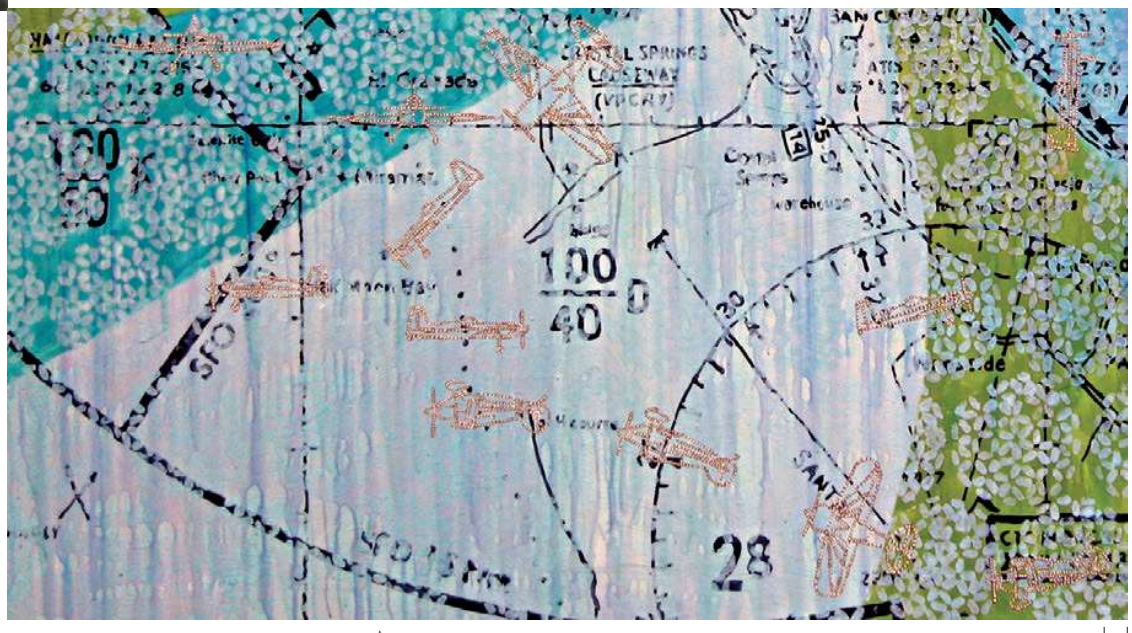


Lise Lemeland

I am an artist, an academian, an aviatrix and an aerobat, in that chronological order. I have been painting for more than 20 years, and I have been flying for less than two years. Like most artists, my artwork has changed in style and theme since I started painting. Every so often the changes are drastic, like the rebellious teens I teach who transform their appearances from one day to the next. More often my transitions are subtle. But never has my artwork undergone a major thematic overhaul as it did soon after I found myself at the controls of a single-engine airplane.



The artist's studio.

I never planned to be a pilot, let alone an aerobatic pilot. But then, I never planned to be an artist either. In fact, I have always had this impression that somewhere there exists a map of my life, that I've never been privileged to see. And yet when a path appears that I am meant to follow, in the midst of my uncertainty, an invisible hand seems to grip my spirit. The pull is powerful. In that moment, insight compels me to follow my heart.

What's Your Calling?

When I was a little girl, my parents covertly stocked my bedside table with little art books about Picasso, Monet, and van Gogh. I looked at the pictures when I couldn't sleep. When I was 7, while vacationing on Martha's Vineyard, my mother accidentally hit a tennis ball into my open eye, which incited a panicked trip to the ER. The physician put yellow dye drops into my eye to see if there were any scratches and asked me what I saw.

To his surprise, I told him quite seriously that I could see like van Gogh. His eyes widened, and he asked me why. I said (with a giggle) that everything had a yellow tint, including him. As strange as this response may have been, something even stranger was happening in my head. In my mind, I had somehow connected my injury with the strange dead painter, the one who painted everything yellow and who had voluntarily cut off his own ear! Wow! That was my first hint that an unusual force was at work.

The aviation equivalent to that story was my first flight in a small aircraft, 33 years later, also on Martha's Vineyard. One beautiful afternoon, I took a ride in a Waco UPF-7 out of Katama airstrip. It was a pretty spur-of-the-moment decision; I was not a flier and had never aspired to be one.

My pilot must have sensed a fellow adventurer in the front seat, because the next thing I knew he was looping and rolling me through the skies off South Beach. I was both terrified and ecstatic, just like I was at age 7 on my first roller coaster ride. When I left Katama, I couldn't talk of anything but the biplane ride for months afterward. Just ask my kids. My spirit was in the clutches of the invisible hand again, and I knew I had to try flying.

The Role of Insight

For me, insight has become a powerful mental tool. When the mind is under its guidance, we rely on both the analytical language center known as the left brain as well as the synthesizing center of the right brain, known for its ability to make distant and unprecedented connections. Flying involves both hemispheres at the same time: You must be able to see the forest *and* the trees. Not surprisingly, painting also involves both.

Do you remember the famous story of aviator Neil Williams, who had the misfortune of watching his left wing fold upward in the middle of an air show flight? He had only a moment to figure out how to fix the problem and stay alive. At high speed his left brain rifled through reams of data while his right brain processed it. In a split second, the precise connection was made and a solution was formulated. It was insight that caused him to roll inverted to unbuckle the wing. He was able to fly that way until he rolled hard upright, just above the runway, and landed.

Our minds have access to masses of information. They can link, surmise, and intuit so well that we are able to handle situations we couldn't ever predict, sometimes even with finesse.

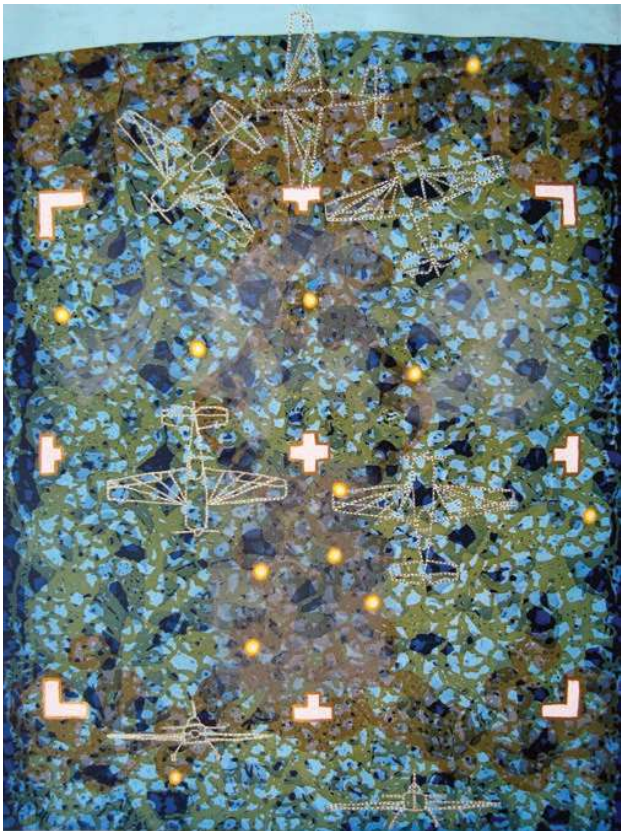
The inverted flight, spins, loops, and rolls literally turned my world upside down.

In art, insight leads an artist to make many decisions. People always ask me if I plan out my paintings, which can be very detailed and visually complex. They are surprised when I tell them that I rarely have a plan for a painting, and that I've never made one from start to finish without a lot of modifications. Ever had the feeling that something is not quite right, but you can't put your finger on it? My job in the studio is to recognize that feeling, identify the offending color/pattern/shape/subject, and then fix it. Sometimes the process is instantaneous. Other times it takes days, weeks, months…and often the offender is actually the part of the painting that once seemed the best.

An Uncomfortable Transition

Soon after my ride in the Waco two summers ago, I ventured to my local airport for an intro flight. As I suspected, I fell head over heels in love with flying. I flew as much as my schedule would permit, usually two or three times a week. Two months after I soloed, I took an unusual attitudes course at Executive Flyers Aviation in Bedford, Massachusetts.

***Practice Day: SFO* (detail).**



Seeing Stars.

Lise Lemeland: artist, teacher, and pilot.

The experience really changed my life. The inverted flight, spins, loops, and rolls literally turned my world upside down. The artist in me could see nothing more beautiful than the horizon spinning around the wingtip or the nose of my Super Decathlon. The visual experience of aerobatics was a logic-defying, pseudo-psychedelic drug, and I wanted more. More aerobatics!

In the months that followed, flying became all consuming, and my studio time suffered. I would work on my paintings, but only while listening to LiveATC over the computer. I played Rod Machado's Aviation Humor seminar from AOPA's website while I painted, and laughed out loud. I watched old *Sporty's Learn To Fly* VHS tapes while I stenciled my canvases with patterns.

As time wore on, I felt something was not right in the paintings, and it made me uncomfortable. Then it hit me. Clearly, my subject matter wasn't in sync with my life anymore. I realized that aerobatics is my art, and therefore my art needed to be about aerobatics. Was it insight? I believe so.

Aerobatic Aesthetics: Form and Content

In my experience, art, aviation, and aerobatics share much more than what meets the eye. They are all examples of the beautiful and harmonious marriage of right- and left-brain tasks, wonderful and challenging. Both skills rely heavily on muscle memory, visualization, and a lot of practice.

There is an art *of* aerobatics when we are flying. Competition aerobatics prizes an aesthetic that has much to do with symmetry, lines, and a continual search for elegance. There is repetition and variation, all happening within the structure of an invisible 3,300-foot cube of airspace called the aerobatic box. The box is the canvas, the airplane is the paintbrush, and the judges follow the invisible lines of the flight path. Judges look at the composition—how you use the space in the box—and call it "presentation."

"The box is the canvas, the airplane is the paintbrush . . ."

Executing a slow roll, for example, has many similarities to painting. You roll around a point or landmark (and if visibility is sketchy, you imagine it). As you are rolling, you make a series of mental assessments about the relationship of the nose to the point. Is it equidistant? That's the beginning of a well-executed roll. In painting, this is called proportion: the ability to assess relationships of forms, one to another. Your roll rate is another important criteria, and you want to keep it constant. This is like line quality in art: a steady pressure/even speed creates a uniform line.

Even a novice knows that a loop is supposed to be round, not elliptical. But the act of performing the loop also has a corresponding skill in painting, namely muscle memory. I recall my aerobatic instructor talking me

through the loop in ground school one day, and watching him cock his head to look at the imaginary wingtip and crane his neck to catch the imaginary horizon coming down through the top window.

As we practice these maneuvers over and over, we train our muscles to make a series of movements. Automatically, our eyes are in the correct position to gather the information we need about our placement. It's an amazing and probably odd-looking dance, but it works. When an artist studies the human figure, for example, we also practice over and over so that the hand learns the form.

These are all formal issues that have to do with the way things look. And yet there are important issues of content: the way things feel, or the range of emotions that are conjured up in the viewer.

To the uninitiated, aerobatics can be disorienting. You might feel fear, a sense of thrill, dizziness, rapture, or all of the above. (Any of you aerobats remember your first aerobatic flight?)

What I remember most was the feeling that I had just been graced with a sensation that I had no words to describe—it went beyond my realm of experience. My pilot did a loop and then a barrel roll, and *I had no idea what he had done*! I recollect the sensation of my body weight doubling as the Waco clawed its way up the loop; the short float over the top when I felt as light as an astronaut in space; the blood rushing out of my brain as we dove toward the ocean; the horizon coiling around the nose of the airplane and looking up to see—to my astonishment—the ocean!

In aerobatic aesthetics, form is defined by symmetry, presentation, alignment—the things the judges look for. And what defines content is all of the sensations and emotions that transpire in the cockpit—the pilot's perspective. It's only through practice and experience that we gain mastery over the disorientation and bring our art and aerobatics into sharper focus.

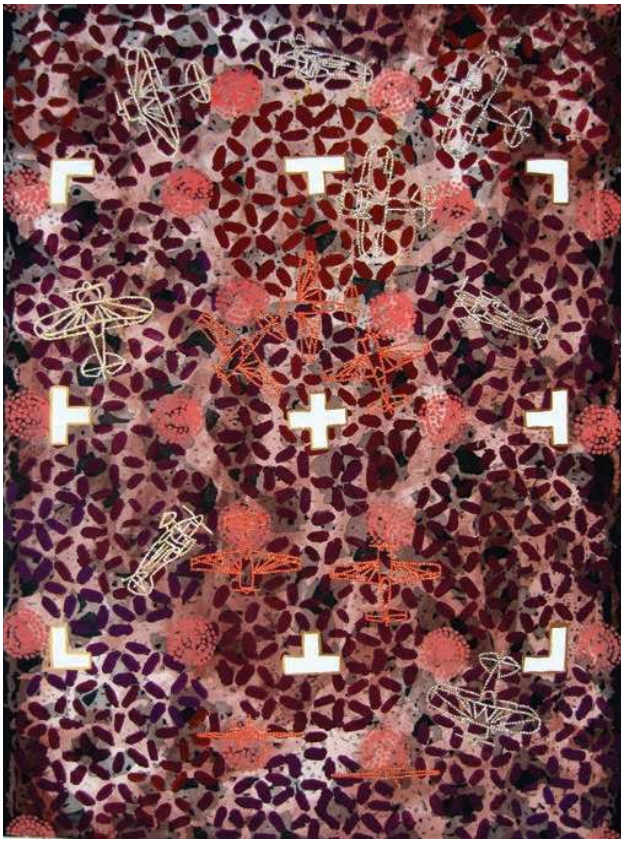
I returned to my studio with this goal: to find ways to show my viewer, through visual language, what aerobatics feels *and* looks like.

The Art of Aerobatics

Some of my paintings deal with other aspects of flying, including but not limited to aerobatics. *Behind the Airplane* is about the confusion and stress of getting behind. It's happened to all of us pilots, and it's not a good feeling: You're in the cockpit, inverted and headed for Runway 18. There are 20-plus precision approach path indicator lights, because every time you check them, they multiply. You see runways and taxiways from other airports layered on top of each other. Bits and pieces from sectionals are mixed up, but the map is incorrect. Your attitude indicator (impossibly) shows that you're upside-down. You are confused and on the verge of a disaster.

In *Aileron Roll*, I place my viewer in the cockpit, also inverted. Runway 18/36 extends before you with its vertebrae of taxiways, arcing through a landscape of lacy patterns. The image of the runway repeats and rotates 360 degrees around the nose, implying the roll. In delicate line drawings, two Pitts execute aileron rolls across the blue sky, which lies beneath you.

A series of large canvases entitled "Practice Days" deals with a different perspective. *Practice Day: SFO* depicts an aqua-blue version of San Francisco's airspace from a terminal area chart, including all symbols, numbers, and text. A patterned cloud layer is stenciled in translucent white, and on top of that are dozens of gold, beaded aerobatic airplanes (Pitts and Extras) doing loops, hammerheads, and spins. The planes are all close to each other, their flight paths overlapping. Even though the painting depicts the congestion of the airspace, at a distance the airplanes disappear and the sky seems deceptively clear.

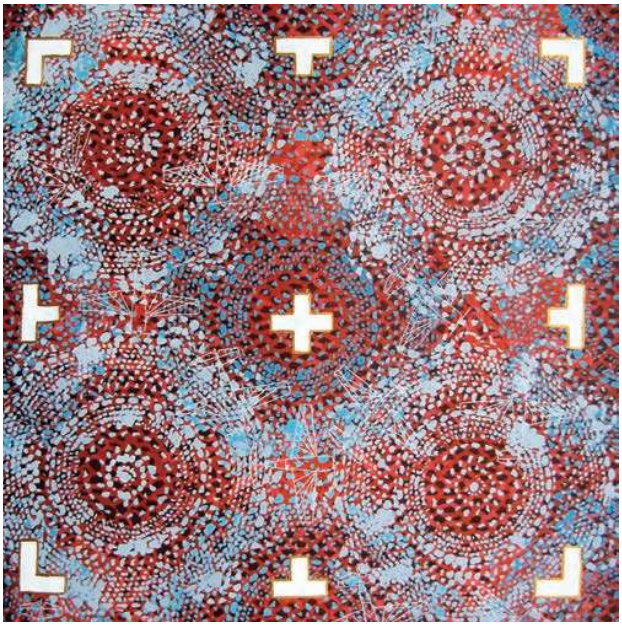


Hammerheads in the Box.

Field In Sight.

It was love at first flight.

Grey Out.



***Ghosts of the Box* (detail).**

My latest foray into competition aerobatics has sparked a reoccurring image from studying the IAC rulebook text. In a series of works on paper, with titles such as *Hammerheads in the Aerobatic Box*, *Gray Out Over Runway 23*, *Seeing Stars in the Aerobatic Box*, and *Ghosts of the Aerobatic Box,* the white boundary markers of the box appear. Airplanes are doing their figures with order, symmetry, and precision, just as in competition.

". . . flying is an endless discovery and a constant learning process, just like painting."

Aesthetic Aerobatics

I've written a lot about how aerobatics has influenced my art, but what about art influencing my flying? There are certainly times that my visual skills come in handy while flying. Maneuvers that use the horizon, from the early steep turns, to rolls, loops, and half-Cubans, all rely heavily on the ability to discern angles between the sight or wingtip and the horizon.

Veteran aerobatic pilots advise me that alignment is very important, and my grades on my figures were proof. Points are easily lost due to entering and exiting figures off heading. Luckily, I'm the picture-straightener, and wrong angles in a painting drive me nuts. Though I strive for heading accuracy in competition, I'm still pretty green at it.

As I mentioned, presentation, or using the length, width, and vertical altitude of the box, is also important. This makes perfect sense artistically, because all compositions in paintings need to make use of the whole canvas. Getting the airplane to do that—well, that's another story!

Aerobatics Artist

I'm sure you have been told that no two landings are the same. To me, no two paintings are the same either. Likewise, flying is an endless discovery and a constant learning process, just like painting. My work continues to evolve, and sometimes it seems defiant and even intractable. I believe that's where intuition and insight come into play. The mind is making connections whether or not you're conscious of it, and it will let you know in time. In my case, the invisible hand gives a good tug when it needs my attention.

As an artist and a pilot who loves aerobatics, I've sometimes said that I've painted myself into a corner. The aerobatics and the artwork are now inextricable from each other, the former feeding the latter. When the weather is bad, the finances tight, the responsibilities of my teaching job or family keep me from the airport, I'm doubly deprived. My inspiration is all wrapped up in aerobatics. But is that *really* a handicap?

How can one explain the feeling of flying an airplane upside-down? Of the straps being the only apparatus keeping you from dropping out of an open cockpit and into the ocean? Of the looming ground spinning so quietly around your nose in a spin because you have cut your engine?

Why use words at all? I use my brushes to let the world in on an experience that few people, and only a small percentage of all pilots, share. And maybe, through my paintings, I will inspire another 7-year-old girl to think about flying.

Maybe she'll even take an intro aerobatic flight. If she does...I bet she'll be hooked.

Lise Lemeland is a pilot, a professional artist and a professor at Alfred University in southwestern NY. She has exhibited nationally and internationally, and was awarded a Joan Mitchell Foundation Fellowship for Painting in 2006. She began aerobatic training in 2008, and earned her Private Pilot's Certificate in 2009. This year, she was awarded the Doug Yost Memorial Scholarship for Aerobatics, and also received a NYFA grant to videotape unusual attitudes in flight for artistic research. See her work at **www.liselemeland.com**