A particular houseplant—some sort of bromeliad; spiky, weeping, lush—appears often in Mary Ann Aitken’s paintings. Her focus on the plant suggests its life-affirming potential, but not in any general sense. Rather in a truly personal sense, as in how one object becomes more familiar than the rest, more known, and in turn, somehow knowing.

Along with her dedication to the studio, Mary Ann Aitken worked for over 20 years as an art therapist for patients with mental illness and addictions. This experience of art making as a healing, self-affirming act imbues her work with gravity. There is a deep, heartfelt joy in that seriousness, just as there is darkness and aloneness. Solitude gives Aitken’s paintings their disarming directness; looking at them, one feels (aches with, drifts in) their own singularity.

Her works on panel have a distinctive thickness to them, the slowness of heavy oils, layers, and grit. This texture implies intimacy as well; closeness to the thing and to the self in painting it. But there is levity too: wrought, roughhewn working offset by quick gestures—a footprint, scribbles of mixing color, the nimble swipe of a brush or palette knife. Grounded and vigorous, Aitken’s paintings are steadfastly electric. Looking at her Untitled (1989) still life, I feel as if I’ve held each item in my hands, sticky now from the slice of dark pink watermelon, softly flopping the banana peels down on the table, weighing the heaviness of canned goods, closing the gummy screw top on the ranch dressing, tracing the cool metal curves of the spoon. Her Untitled (Coffee Maker) (1984) evokes habitual movements, performed in the haze of drowsiness, the gathering of drips and stains, soft gradual browns.

Domestic life forms breathe in Aitken’s work. Her paintings on newspaper are particularly animated: exposed, dated fragments of text and advertisement toggle with colorful dabs of petals or goldfish. The fragile paper, meant to last only for a day, preserves a fleeting moment in time. These works are reminiscent of Paul Thek’s paintings on newsprint, sharing a similar sense of lightness despite (or in) transience. Yet, Aitken’s paintings are more down to earth.

I really can’t get Aitken’s Self-Portrait (1983) out of my mind. The artist floats in a rough black field, a turbulent void. She wears her red painting robe, donned in the studio to protect her clothes. In the painting, it protects her from the void. Compact and raw, her features are indistinct (two merged, bluish dots, a glob of dirty blonde) but her presence and energy are strongly felt. On the right, loose robe-hued brush strokes are casually placed, as if she were using the background itself as a palette (does painting have a fourth wall to break?). Every mark reflects and reveals the self. Aitken, an extremely private person, was hesitant to share her paintings while she was alive. Perhaps this was for the very reason that they disclosed so much of her in their intense, material sincerity.
1. Mary Ann Aitken
   *Untitled*, 2010-11
   Oil, sand, and paper on canvas
   11 1/4 x 14 inches

2. Mary Ann Aitken
   *Untitled (Coffee Maker)*, 1984
   Oil on panel
   9 1/4 x 7 inches

Courtesy of the Estate of Mary Ann Aitken
A single, blond haired figure stands in a sea of fiery red. Another figure in a pinkish robe and gray fuzzy slippers emerges from a field of darkness. Images of a fish bowl, coffee maker, banana, a dog named Soldier, leaves of a plant—animate and inanimate—are painted on various everyday materials: sections of the daily newspaper, old paneling, Masonite, linoleum, and cardboard. The material is never precious, but the emotion expressed is deep and genuine. Honesty is a word that comes to mind when thinking about my friend, Mary Ann Aitken and her paintings. She was a woman of high moral character who lived modestly and unselfishly. How many artists today could resist showing their latest paintings after finishing them? Not true of Mary Ann. She spent her life creating beautiful works but rarely exhibited them until the end of her life. During the day, she worked at an art store near the Detroit Institute of Arts. We both got around without a car, which at the time didn’t seem to be a problem. In fact it made it easier to see the city’s quirks and discover spaces unique to Detroit.

Her studio practice remained private all the years I knew her. In the five years we lived in The Cary, she never talked about her process. I think in part because she was working out ideas and trying to master her skill as a painter. She was a harsh critic of her own work. Like most artists, she doubted herself. She didn’t like the scrutiny art received when exposed to the public. For her, art was very personal and intimate, an interior exploration of self and the human psyche. I recall the smell of oil paint as I would pass by her door en route to the communal bathroom on the third floor. It wasn’t until 1988 that she finally invited me to see her paintings. Later that year we were evicted after being told our residency in The Cary was illegal. The Cass Corridor aesthetic emerged
in Detroit in the early 1960s, driven by artist including Gordon Newton, Michael Luchs, Bob Sestok, Ellen Phelan, Nancy Mitchnick, Jim Chatelain, and Brenda Goodman. A second generation wave of artists took up the mantle in the early 1980’s; Gilda Snowden, Diane Carr, Cay Bahnmiller, Kurt Novak, and Gary Mayer were some of the primary voices. The works by these and earlier artists are distinguished by the sheer physicality of materials. Raw, gutsy, tough, and bold aptly describe their works and approach to art making. Some of Mary Ann’s paintings use a dark palette, drawing comparison to the work of Bahnmiller, and yet her figurative works share a common link to Mitchnick. Robert Wilbert was Mary Ann’s painting teacher, mentor, and friend, whom she always held with high admiration and respect. When looking at Mary Ann’s paintings one can see his influence; like Mr. Wilbert’s paintings, her work is rooted in formalism. Mary Ann’s paintings seem to offer an entry that is never forced. The open spaces in her paintings allow for contemplation.

Mary Ann’s knowledge and scope of art was immense, as evident in her vast book collection. Subjects varied from The Art of the Japanese Print to monographs on Joan Mitchell, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Georgia O’Keefe, as well as books on clinical psychology. She earned two degrees from Wayne State University, a Bachelor of Fine Arts (1983) and a Masters in Art Therapy (1989). In many ways her life epitomized these two ideas: she wanted to celebrate all the beauty in the world through her art, and use her skills as a therapist to improve the lives of people around her. In 1989 she moved to New York, where she lived for 22 years until her death from breast cancer in 2012.

Mary Ann maintained a voracious drive to paint over the entire course of her short life. As her health began to fail in 2008 she kept up the pace, especially the last two years of her life. She juggled time between New York and Detroit, but it was the time spent at her family’s summer cottage in Canada that gave her the most pleasure. She was surrounded by family and nature, her art books and a cold beer. Nothing could be better. Like the early paintings, the later works are layered with thick, encaustic surfaces but are different in the use of sand, shells, and shards of broken glass, all found on the beach. Into these paintings, she literally pours in the natural world around her.

Mary Ann’s sister Maureen wrote a moving tribute titled In Memory of Mary Ann in 2012. In it she writes, “When Mary Ann found out she had cancer, the news was devastating. But Mary Ann did an amazing thing: spiritually, she became stronger. She felt you couldn’t always influence what happened to you, but you could make meaning of what happened to you. She took great inspiration from the New York artist Cordula Volkening, who had terminal brain cancer, and gave Mary Ann this advice: the only way out of fear is to live in the moment and paint. That is what Mary Ann did. She lived every moment with even greater intensity. She said the people she loved and painting were all that mattered, and she focused her last years on these endeavors. She made meaning out of the experience. She painted more.”

At its core, Mary Ann’s art speaks a language of self all people can relate to and understand. It is a simple language in which isolation, nature, the domestic, darkness, and lightness occupy one picture plane.
1. Mary Ann Aitken  
*Untitled (fish bowl)*, 1983  
Oil on paper  
12 x 14 inches  
Collection of Susan Goethel Campbell

2. Mary Ann Aitken  
*Untitled (red flowers)*, 1989  
Oil on Masonite  
24 x 24 inches  
Courtesy of the Estate of Mary Ann Aitken
3. Mary Ann Aitken
*Self-Portrait*, 1983
Oil on panel
19 x 15 inches
Collection of Ed Fraga