

art

Susan Swartz: The Persistence of Lyric Abstraction

Jonathan Goodman

The now-mature painter Susan Swartz is currently receiving recognition in a career notable for its tenacity of purpose. A show in California, at the University of California, Davis' Manetti Shrem Museum of Art, and in Beijing, at the Central Academy of Fine Arts Museum, attest to the burgeoning interest with which her fine-honed lyric abstraction is being viewed. There is, by now, a long established history for the kind of painting Swartz makes; it is a particularly American tradition, specifically named the New York School. This characterization is in some ways more geographical than stylistic, as the artists falling under such a rubric manifest an extraordinary difference of formal practices--surely, the style of Barnett Newman differs from that of Mark Rothko, which cannot be compared to the art of Franz Kline. What first must be said is that this way of working has been with us for decades; and that the best artists belonging to abstract expressionism, the movement with which Swartz is most closely aligned, were active in the middle of the last century. This means that their legacy can easily be seen as historical, and a bit of a distance from the current painter seeking new avenues of expressiveness. The styles of the New York School and abstract expressionism are not practiced today by large groups of artists, but that doesn't hardly matters: inspired individuals can still pick up what came before them, and make strong art, perhaps on a slightly isolated basis--Louise Fishman and Amy Sillman both enjoy high creativity even as their work follows quite closely the history of lyric abstraction. Also, Swartz makes it clear that her art derives from a persistent regard for nature, which seems to elevate and refine the existence of abstraction in her paintings. Her interest in nature separates to some extent her work from a purely abstract categorization

Because she is effecting a merger between the natural world and the tradition of abstract painting, Swartz successfully brings about a new manner of painting. Her work reflects the ongoing development of abstract art. She is also making work of deliberate beauty, which in a body of work whose first impression is one of abstraction, joins her to an art tradition that is neither figurative nor abstractly neutral. Yet it is true that her audience will tend to read her one way or another--for example, in New York, it would seem that her art would be categorized as abstraction, given the fact such art remains more than highly prominent here, although for questionable reasons--like the dominance of the market. Indeed, the connection between lyric abstraction (aided by a subtle reading of nature) and its ability to sell for absurdly high prices demonstrates a problematic feature in our current art scene: the complete takeover of money as a determining factor in an artist's critical estimation. Also, technology blunts our experience of her work; Swartz's achievement as a painter relies on a complicated, highly tactile surface that cannot be properly experienced on line or on an iPad. But now, after at least a couple of

generations of looking at computer imagery, we accept the process as valid. This is not necessarily true at all, and Swartz's marvelously tactile abstractions demand viewing of the actual painting instead of a pixel-ridden facsimile. Nature especially resists viewing from a technological distance, whether in real life or in art. But Swartz's style is complex; the series "Nature's Mirage" consists of paintings that, at first look, seem resolutely abstract; yet as the name of the sequence indicates, they derive from natural phenomena. These works are beautifully made and dense with implied meaning; it looks like their association with the external world gives the abstraction an imaginative particularity that nicely enhances the style (the same thing occurs in an artist like Gorky's paintings and drawings, which draw closely from nature).

Swartz's surfaces are sensuous in the extreme; they are not composed of a heavy impasto, but they do reflect a surface deeper than what we would call skin-deep. Indeed, one of the most prominent, and formally successful, aspects of Swartz's art is its exterior surface, which suggests an inspired preoccupation with how an exterior might look when close attention is paid to its texture. Perhaps the texture comes from the artist's wish to identify with a real surface, one that would more than simply echo the world she imagines and sees. Can a surface be ambitious enough, and accomplished enough, to be accepted as an important component supporting an outstanding work of art? It seems so in abstraction; certainly, it is so in Swartz's highly developed style. Moreover, it becomes clear, over time, that the abstraction is not pure; instead, it reflects the artist's interest in landscape. There is a series Swartz worked on called "Bhutan," the South Asian country located in the eastern Himalayas. These paintings, several of which are bright-green abstractions, don't reflect in detail the reality of what the artist encountered; instead, they approximate the natural world that clearly dazzled her. But again, our first response is that the work is abstract.

The real question is whether the estimate of abstraction, which is a triumph of form rather than an assertion of content, can do justice to a content that also is taken with rendering the experience of nature. There is no story-telling in her work. Nothing happens that we can comment about in Swartz's paintings, not because she deliberately rejects narrative in her work but because narrative is simply not there to be had. Even if her kind of lyric abstraction is close to the natural world, it will tend to be linked to recent American art history, which emphasizes abstract imagery. This history, in its detailing of the most ambitious artists working at the time, must reflect the remarkable achievement of abstract painting. But we must acknowledge that Swartz's art is quite a bit more than that. Its newness comes from the subtlety with which melds her impressions of nature with a mostly abstract style. Her audience may not fully appreciate the merger, since mostly we demand innovation for its own sake. Swartz's art is more complex than that, taking on an appreciation of the past by paying attention to the landscape. She is not the first person to work in this manner, but she is currently one of the best.

Also, in her website, Swartz indicates that critics have placed her within a tradition that follows nature, in particular the legacy of the German romantics. The nonobjective basis of her work is only part of the picture. It is hard to detect direct references in her painting to the German tradition, but writers have found such allusions in her work, and one immediately respects her feeling for nature in her art. Even so, that feeling tends not to be particularized in form, so that we are unable to recognize trees or mountains or rivers with any degree of confidence. Instead, the abstraction takes over, and perhaps by necessity, Swartz becomes a contemporary artist again, rather than one openly inspired by a romantic realist tradition. To be sure, she moves in the direction of essences, in which the import of a visual experience is suggested rather than decisively outlined. As a result, one has to read these paintings intuitively rather than analytically; they take up a way of looking that is suggestive in its presentation of nature and culture. As we have noted, contemporary art's history of abstraction forces us into a corner, where we see only nonobjective painting when the reality is more intricate than that. To Swartz's credit, it becomes incumbent upon us to open our eyes and our sensibilities and our historical training to a body of work that exists in a flux of various influences, abstract and realist, outward-oriented and inwardly imagined. Indeed, a major component of Swartz's achievement lies in her ability to coexist among different possibilities in painting, placing them though in a cohesive picture, one notable for its stylistic unity.

The question can be asked, Where does such unity come from? Collage has been a major force in modernism, with the juxtaposition of imagery generating meaning that would not come about otherwise. But Swartz does not work this way. Instead, she makes use of the allover painting concept we find historically in American abstract art. Her paintings register a unity that is part of her stylistic attractiveness. It is more than hard to separate her individual works into discrete parts. Perhaps, given the example of Gerhard Richter, whose skill in abstraction and figuration exists at an equally high level, we can understand Swartz as a painter for whom both ways of working are equally important--even if she has decided to mix them more than separate them from each other. There are examples when the artist does work purely abstractly, as in the "Contemplation" and "Evolving Visions" series, just as there is a sequence called "Nature Revisited," which pretty clearly suggests mountains and foliage. And sometimes her audience comes across a hybrid vision, in which these kinds of styles are mixed. No longer are we set in our ways--we fully accept the concomitant presence of nonobjective and figurative art by the same person. Maybe this dual competency is a way of advancing the way we think about art; why shouldn't it be possible for a painter to address two ways of looking in works that demonstrate her skill in both?

As time goes on, it will become possible to see whether Swartz's commitment to nature is expressed well in abstract terms. Nature contains a considerable amount of abstraction in its forms, which can be addressed in figuration in art--if you look at details of classical Chinese painting, you can see areas that, if isolated, look a great deal like contemporary Western

nonobjective art. So the relations between abstraction and figuration are much closer than we might think at first, even if we acknowledge that, on different ends of the spectrum, pure abstraction and utter realism do exist. But Swartz moves in a hybrid direction, which makes her efforts intricate and notionally complex, although her art can in no way be called conceptual. She herself occupies a spectrum ranging across a broad range of imageries. Her “Contemplation” series, mostly gray in color with flecks of other hues, looks to pure mind as a referent and an inspiration. How does one represent thought? It is impossible to do, but Swartz attempts an indirect description in her use of a mostly neutral gray color and her presentation of a pure ambience that seems to have generated out of itself. These paintings are full of presence that do not link to physical reality. As such, they command extended viewing and contemplation, as the title of the sequence indicates. So the paintings try to communicate the experience of meditation, an entirely intuitive thinking that closely relates to religious feeling without being completely in its keeping. It can be argued that abstract paintings such as exist in this series are themselves exercises in meditation; they certainly demonstrate an inner discipline that cannot be described as painting alone. It is fair to comment that contemplation is, in its own way, an action of the mind, and this is what the paintings communicate, both in their facture and in their final form.

Every nine months or so, someone proclaims the death of painting, but the practice persists despite the jaded charge. Indeed, Arthur C. Danto’s claim that art was dead, across the board, had a pleasing end-of-the-millennium finality to it, but things have turned out differently. Art in general, and painting in particular, continue to be turned out--at an alarming rate. As a writer, as a contemporary art historian (a contradiction in terms!), my job is to contextualize, explain, and, finally, judge the work I see. This is relatively easy to do in response to Swartz’s art, which openly belongs to a heritage that Americans know extremely well. In fact, it is important to place her paintings within a continuum that can shed light on what she does: its technical proximity to earlier American artists, its very contemporary mixture of the abstract and the figurative, and its willingness to forge ahead. Excellent painting always presupposes a past and a future while existing in an improvised and inspired present. But it is not an activity in which someone consciously sets out to move forward; one makes one’s work and sees whether it is successful. Being prescient, intimating what comes next on a regular basis, is beyond the skills of anyone in any art. Instead, things happen that may, or may not, define a movement. We are no longer living in a time of strong formal advance; no major movement dominates the current scene. Instead, the changes rendered in fine art tend to be small. But that needn’t support the idea that the work itself is small.

Thus, when seen in her circumstances, Swartz can be likened to an admirable explorer--someone for whom painting remains unknown territory. This is evident in her art. If it is difficult to impossible for her, or anyone else, to alter the field in a major way, that is because we are mostly treading on known ground. Even so, as I have said, painting can continue ahead by incorporating the artist’s individuality into the work in a way that reflects her character alone. Swartz looks to

the future in her own manner; she imagines a time when abstraction might perfectly merge with the outside world--however impossible that might seem! Her works describing natural phenomena are as accomplished as her abstract meditations, which outline thought in way that is successfully visual, as hard as that may be. We are living in a time now when contemporary culture sorely needs both craft and inspiration, qualities associated with the hand and the mind, respectively. Just as Swartz continues to present a double creative portrait by painting in two styles, so does she demonstrate her belief in skill and in creativity. Her audience needs to recognize that this is not easily done; and that it is not a mere blend of aptitudes. Instead, it is a call for a unified field, in which perception, technical ability, and imaginative vision merge in ways that do not repeat what happened before. This is found on a regular basis in Swartz's art, which reiterates the hope that paintings are made not only to be enjoyed, but also to enlighten and renew.

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