



SUSAN SWARTZ

BREAKING AWAY
2006-2018

AT THE MANETTI SHREM MUSEUM

UC Davis, California, June-September 2018

54

NOW ON VIEW

Susan Swartz:
Breaking Away,
2006-2018

Andrea Chung:
You broke the ocean
in half to be here

jan sh... m an
ma... etti



d maria
shrem museum of art





Nature Revisited 44, 2018. 42"x84"

SUSAN SWARTZ | Breaking Away

A foreward by Rachel Teagle

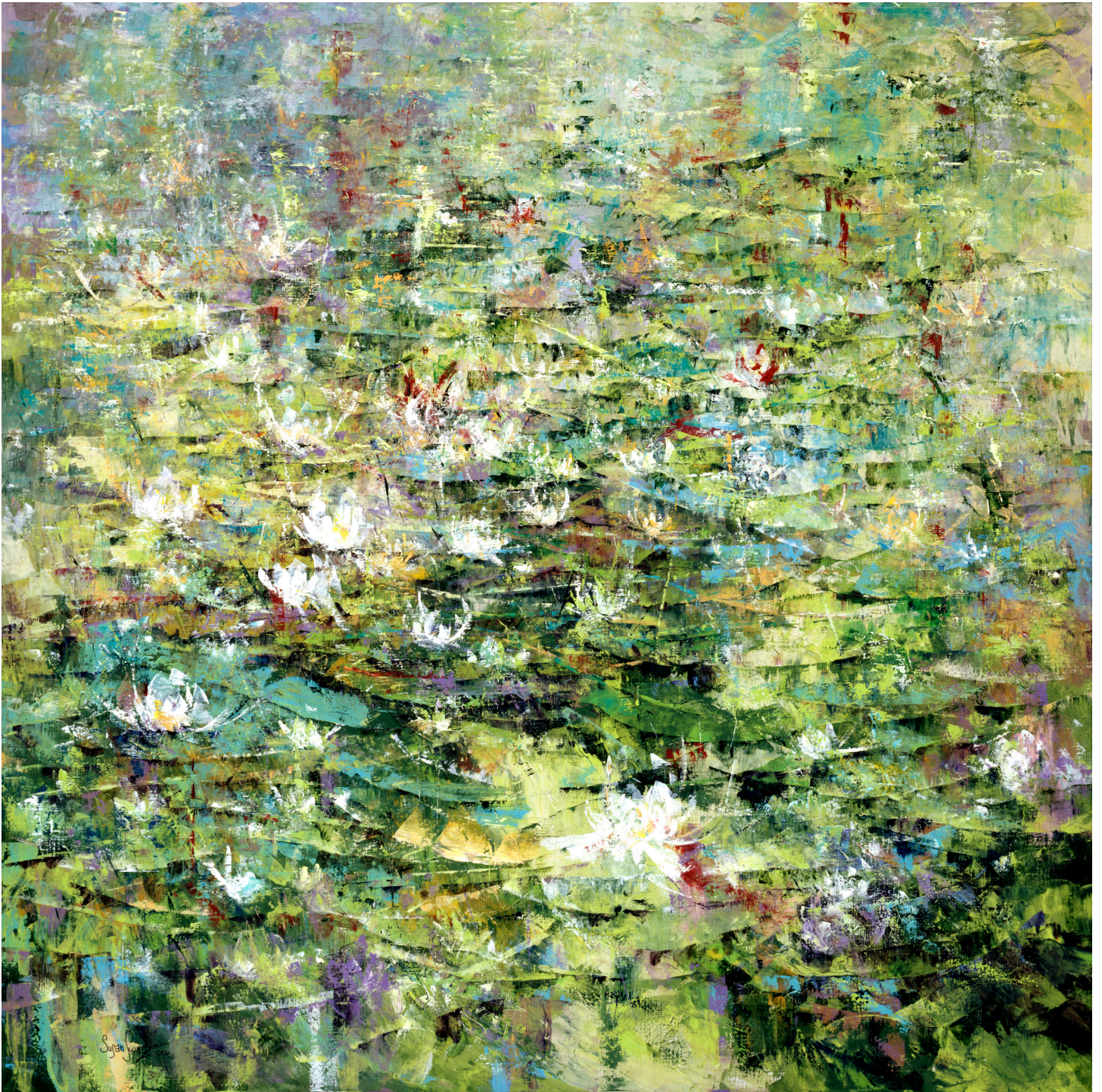
Brightly colored ridges of paint, orchid and avocado colored lightning, crackle across the surface of Susan Swartz's remarkable painting, *Nature Revisited 44*, 2018. From a distance the painting looks quite subtle, an accumulation of the palest of greens mixed into a field of creamy whites laid over multiple layers of paint. 'Everything changes, however, with a closer view that allows the veins of color to come into focus. These slight inflections spark the painting's palpable energy. Alive, seemingly evolving in front of your eyes, *Nature Revisited 44* introduces a new chapter in the artist's work. In her own words she is "breaking away" with a confidence that has only recently relocated from her heart into her agile hands.

Swartz dreamed of a life as a professional artist ever since a high school teacher recognized her talent. Her parents listened and she was the first in her family to attend university near her childhood home in Pittsburgh, PA. Trained in the academic tradition, Swartz started her career by making realistic landscape paintings. Close study of nature has always been her starting point; it was in college when she began to develop a personal approach to recording the appearance of things in the world.

Like countless painters before her, Swartz is motivated by the grandeur of nature. Her art partakes in a long legacy of American landscape painting that dates back to the nineteenth-century Hudson River School. Dr. Dieter Ronte highlighted Swartz's affiliation with this American approach to landscape in the catalogue that accompanied Swartz's exhibition that toured Europe from 2015-17. "[Swartz's] paintings," he explained, "are full of romanticisms, full of longing, love and always in search of the familiar turned unfamiliar, of the psyche of the person in nature."

One of the earliest paintings in this exhibition, *Serenade of Lilies*, 2007, exemplifies Swartz's first steps towards a more "unfamiliar" relationship to nature. Its dynamics reverse the energy of *Nature Revisited 44*. Color is the first and most forceful experience of the painting. She mixed verdant greens of every hue from chartreuse to viridian. From a distance the greens coalesce into a leafy pond that is punctuated by white flowers that the artist laid down with fast, rough gestures. Multiple layers of paint accumulate into ridges that echo the form of leaves resting on water. Seen up close, however, any reference to nature dissolves and the painting becomes a riotous celebration of the materiality of paint.

Serenade of Lilies opens this exhibition because Swartz recognizes the painting as a pivotal moment in her journey away from representation as an act of fidelity. This painting simultaneously depicts a recognizable subject as it also dissolves into an abstract play of color and material. She referenced the natural world, but her new goal was to evoke a feeling more than to depict a subject. This aspect of Swartz's personal path parallels the progress of American painting in the twentieth century as it moved towards automatic painting of the New York School; in other words, an expression of the artists' inner-vision. Artists on the west coast did not ascribe to such a rigorous approach. Teachers at the San Francisco Art Institute, such as Clyfford Still, championed abstraction but taught their students to begin by observing the natural world around them. Light, color, and simple forms found in nature were ready fodder for Still who painted in a radically abstract style with no obvious subject.



Serenade of Lilies, 2007. 72"x72"



Purple Majesty, 2007. 72"x72"

Swartz maintains this Californian tradition. John Buchanan, former Director of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, summarized: “Yes, her work may well be seen as the contemporary continuum of that tradition that emerged in many countries, cultures and from early times forward. Yet, Susan’s paintings may be more aptly likened to “landscapes of the mind,” influenced as much by the imagination as by an actual site.” Swartz has spent the last ten years—the period this exhibition surveys—moving away from a direct connection to landscape towards a realm of feeling. *Purple Majesty*, a painting made one year after *Serenade of Lilies*, is another early example of the artist finding her way out of realism. She is clearly painting aspen trees at sunset, the state tree of Utah which is home to her current studio. And, she is searching for more. Her path towards an emotional connection, more than direct experience, is explored in the video the artist made in collaboration with cinematographer Louie Schwartzberg, on view in the adjacent gallery.

“Early” work, such as *Purple Majesty* and *Serenade of Lilies* came relatively later in life, as the artist explains, “after years of painting in my head.” When she graduated from college Swartz immersed herself in the regional art scene. She exhibited her work frequently in local galleries and she launched her professional career with a job teaching art in high school. A passionate teacher, she integrated her students into the life of her young family and supported them with odd jobs. She taught while exhibiting her art. As time passed, however, Swartz realized that the men in her cohort were moving on to more prestigious venues, while women languished at the local level. Like many women artists before her, without advancement, Swartz made the decision to set aside her career to focus on the more immediate needs of her family.

Swartz began to paint again long after her children left home, and it took time to develop her voice. *Serenade of Lilies*, for example, came more than a decade after she developed a daily studio practice. The work has evolved yet again over the course of the last ten years.

Recently, Swartz has delved into a world of complete abstraction, but natural phenomena remain her touchstone. She was inspired to make *Cloud Burst*, 2016, for example, after watching a downpour. Variations in color, some minute, convey the emotion of rain, but unlike her earlier work, there is no representation of rain, only its feeling. In other works, such as her *Breaking Away* series, all from 2018, she is yet more distant from her source. These canvases express the artist's freedom with paint, and a new sophistication that allows paint alone to carry all expressive intent in her work.

The most remarkable aspect of Swartz's painting is how thoroughly her life story is present in the work. The artist survived a protracted and debilitating battle with Lyme disease. Her physical struggle registered in the art. For several years, painting at scale was difficult and specific gestures were too painful for her weakened muscles. Fatigue affected her ability to stand at the easel. Her recuperation was slow, but the incremental gain of stamina and agility is visible throughout the paintings in this exhibition. Her *Breaking Away* series, a recent culmination of previous much smaller experimental canvases, was painted with speed and facility.

It is, however, her *Nature Revisited* paintings, that bring a new synthesis to the artist's work. *Nature Revisited #44* celebrates health restored. The painting is thick with paint—the record of her application of multiple layers—a visible expression of her commitment to process. Darker, more intense colors remain visible in the painting's murky depths. It is clear that she painted over something else. The painting is a palimpsest that weaves together the artist's past as it announces the promise of a productive future. And, here, even at her most abstract, a relationship to nature surfaces in Swartz' work. The outline of floral forms scatter across the painting's surface. They are just shapes, an outline of the most basic form of a flower that coalesce in the ridges of paint as it lifts from the canvas. Life springs to the surface of the painting, and once again for Susan Swartz.

— **Rachel Teagle**

Founding Director, Manetti Shrem Museum



Cloudburst, 2016. 72"x48"

PUBLIC CELEBRATION AT THE JAN AND MARIA
MANETTI SHREM MUSEUM

• • •

July 15, 2018



Museum founding donors Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem with Susan and Jim Swartz





Denise Hale with Susan



The Shrems with Ralph Hexter, Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor of UC Davis



Panel discussion with Founding Director Rachel Teagle; Susan; Jessica Wimbley, Director of Museum Education; and artist Andrea Chung



Ralph Hexter with Susan









Janine Thill viewing Susan's work



Susan with Mary Pilara



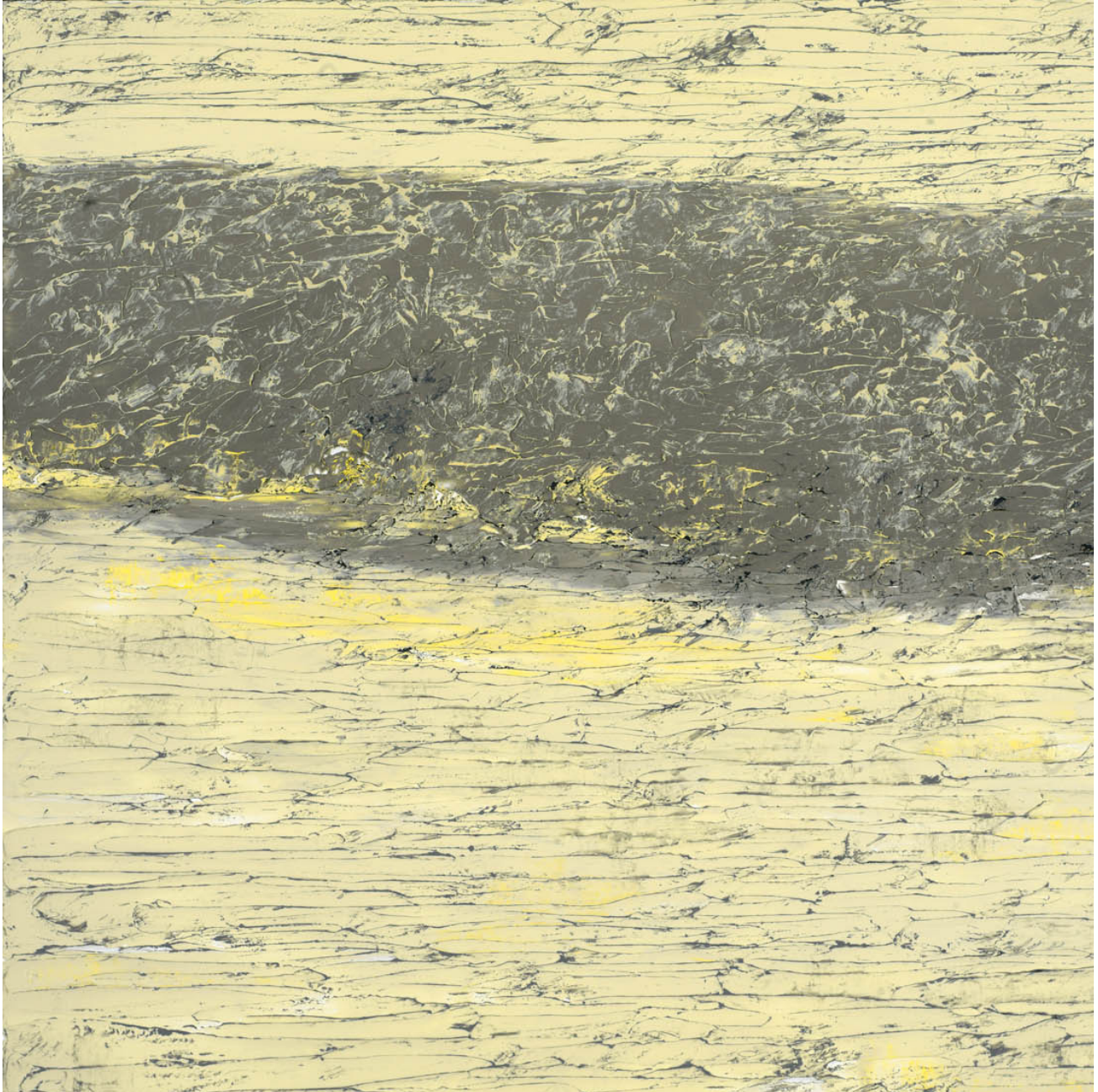
Jessie Ann Owens, Distinguished Professor Emeritus at UC Davis; Rachel Teagle; with Susan



Susan with Jessica Wimbley



Susan standing in front of Gratitude for Sunlight



Breaking Away 7, 2018. 72"x72"

PACE
PALO ALTO

• • •

July 16, 2018

jan shrem and maria **manetti shrem** museum of art

Founding Director Rachel Teagle invites you to celebrate

Susan Swartz: Breaking Away, 2006-2018

on view June 30 – September 2, 2018



Monday, July 16th, 2018

5 p.m. - 6:30pm

PACE

299 Hamilton Ave.

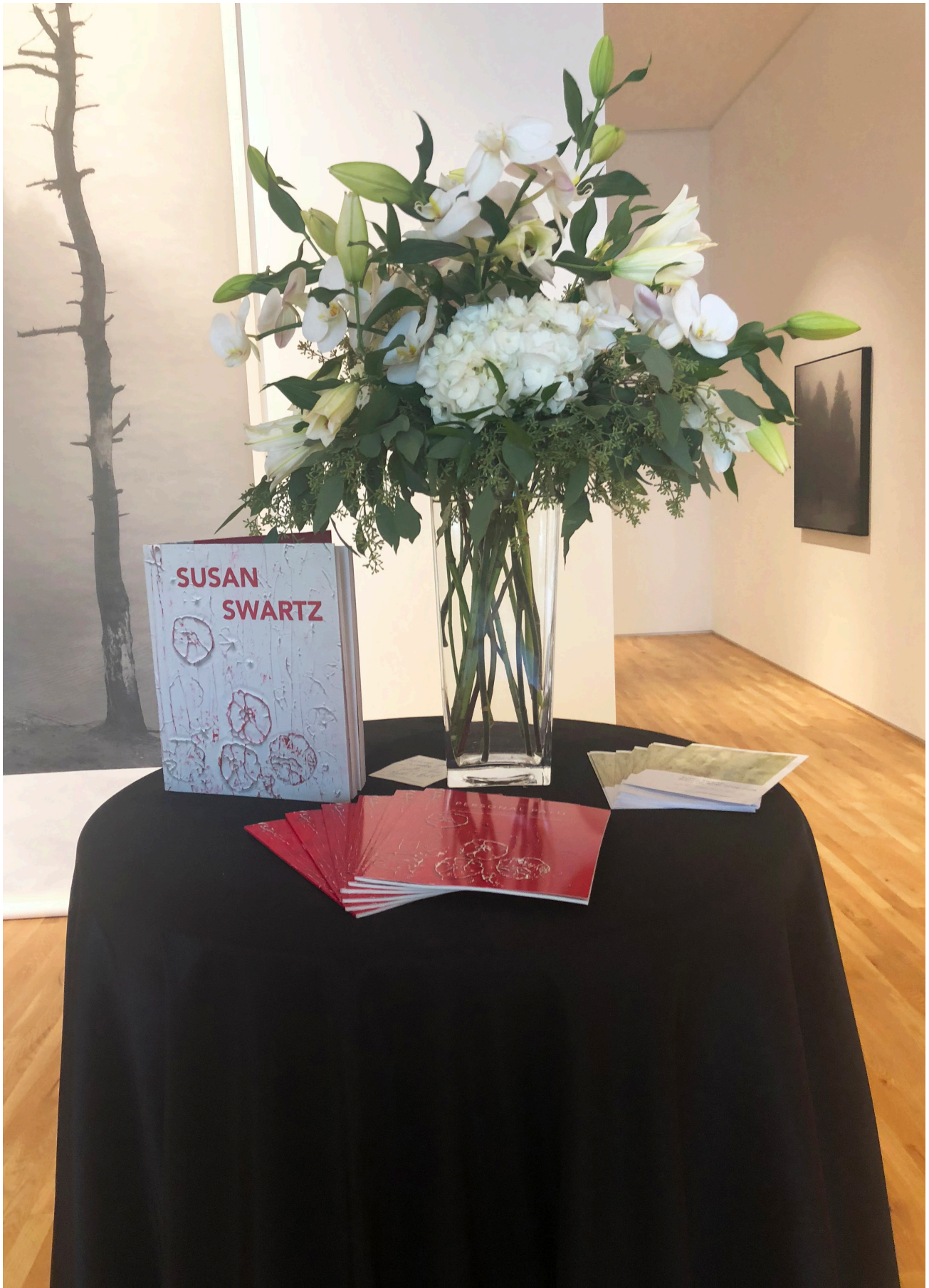
Palo alto, CA 94301

Join us for an opportunity to meet a featured artist of the Manetti Shrem Museum's Summer Season. Susan Swartz will exhibit a survey of recent work that demonstrates a newfound synthesis and complexity in her approach to abstracting the natural landscape.

Please RSVP by July 13th to Angela Richards

alsrichards@ucdavis.edu

530 - 752 - 5043



Susan Swartz's reception at Pace Palo Alto



Jim Swartz with Marva and John Warnock



DeeDee McMurtry with Susan



Rachel Teagle gives her opening remarks



Susan with Mauro Aprile Zanetti



Courtney Kass, Director, Pace Palo Alto; Susan; and Elizabeth Sullivan, President, Pace Palo Alto

NAPA LUNCHEON AT THE KRAMLICH
RESIDENCE

• • •

July 18, 2018









Diane Dorrans Saeks with Susan



Pam Kramlich introducing Rachel Teagle



Randy Roberts, Pam Kramlich, and Andy Pilara



Mary Pilara, Susan, and Claire Abby

CRITICAL REVIEWS

...

Susan Swartz: Breaking Away

by Melik Kaylan

Trace an arc between the polarities of Romantic nature painting and Abstract Expressionism — consider the work of Caspar David Freidrich, the 19th century German landscapist, and the paintings of Gerhard Richter—and along that path you will find the work of American artist Susan Swartz. Not exclusively but crucially, Swartz acknowledges the two great masters of German painting, some 150 years apart, as a formative presence in her work. If this pedigree seems a bit presumptuous, consider that Germany’s top curators today have acknowledged her stature, mounting a 2015 - 2017 European wide museum tour of her paintings. Swartz is, if anything, receiving the recognition that is her due.

This latest museum show of some 40 paintings, at the Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at UC Davis, *Breaking Away*, chronicles the evolution of Swartz’s work from 2006 to the present.

There are three distinct narratives to the work: the aesthetic, the spiritual and the biographical. Her exploration of form evolves from representational to abstract. Swartz deconstructs the portrayal of nature; she goes behind nature, behind the act of painting and into the spiritual realm. That is where the lineage of Caspar David Friedrich’s work comes in. His ghostly mystical landscapes were often deemed “metaphysical” for positing a figure as witness to nature’s revelation. Such figures are often steeped in a kind of divine immanence, poised on the edge something momentous, beholding the unearthly. This prevailing urge to transcend the spiritual realm is palpable also in Swartz’s earlier, more self-explanatory works in this show.

Her *Afternoon Shadows* from 2006 depicts a clearly discernible landscape, replete with luminescing pale yellow sky, gilding bosky bursts of trees and bushes. Yet she had already begun her mutation of genres to explore “landscapes of the mind” in an Expressionist tradition. To be sure, Expressionism does not automatically lead to

Abstraction. In Chinese literati painting, for example, centuries pass from a period when faithful imitation of nature was the ideal, to when misty evocations of the artist's inner state via floating islands and scarified forests would prevail. In Swartz's work, the process is likewise gradual and palpable.

By the time of her *Water Study 1* from 2012 she finds herself in Turner territory, so to speak; with particular reference to his nautical storm studies where the elements of nature have seemingly dissolved all forms into chaos and light. In this 2012 work Swartz gives little clue to subject matter, save a half emergent orb, sun or moon, lost in a wash of dark purple and gold, possibly sunlight extinguishing tempests. What is happening before our eyes can be described as the freeing of color from form—what the Fauvists, notably Andre Derain, first did in smaller steps without the complete dissolution of perceptible shapes—a process that culminated in Rothko's total abstractions.



Water Study 1, 2012. 36"x36"

Swartz's pivotal transformation can be seen in the series of paintings *Contemplation Sextet* in 2014 and the 2016 the pairing of *Fractured Mist* and *Cloud Burst*. Here, nature is suggested not depicted—its majestic power conveyed in fluid flame-dance effulgencies so reduced to their essential elements that observer and observed, the inner mind and outer world, all meld together. In this regard, it is worth bearing in mind the show's eponymous title, *Breaking Away*, which refers to her latest series of near total abstract paintings from 2018.

Perhaps the most illustrative example of this act of “breaking away”

is evinced in her 2007 *Serenade of Lilies*, the opening tour de force that announces the exhibition's overarching theme of continuous evolution. A wondrous study, this painting shows the moment when identifiable objects, such as the lilies, begin to disincarnate and transform into abstract integers of a mood composition. Recalling Monet's studies of his lily pond at Giverny, this work is at once a homage to past inspiration and a farewell that forges ahead, well beyond the artist's comfort zone.

This leitmotif of "breaking away" is embedded in all of the paintings in the show, at multiple levels. The works incrementally tell the story of Swartz's experience and output as a series of pivotal moments: The artist breaking away from attachment to decorative notions of "beauty" in art, breaking away from depicting outward nature to reflecting her inner nature, breaking away from the limits of representation and successive formalist stages, from the pause imposed by the duties of motherhood, family, career, from the debility of personal health issues and the imperatives of the market.



Breaking Away 9, 2018. 72"x72"

On an aesthetic level, Swartz's work probes visual forms and genres in her development from landscapist onward. Having gradually broken away from the mimetic and pictorial she is breaking towards "materiality" — an interest in the materials and process of painting itself. The subject of her work becomes painting itself. The viewer looks at the adobe-like textured surface of this work spanning time and embarks on a journey inward, with the artist, culminating in the self-referential post-modernist style: The luxuriant impasto of creams and browns, the bas-relief tactility of paint almost sculpted on the surface, the suggestion that the artist is most interested in what art does and

how it does it, and herself doing it.

That being said, Swartz seems more driven in this work to seek transcendence than involution. One can discern the still enduring presence of nature's forces, however incorporeal, in the hurrying kinetic motions and in the earthy colors. Breaking Away 9, with its horizontal alignment, suggests wheat and mud serrying in the wind. Breaking Away 7 evokes riverine elements. But also in these paintings and others after 2012 we can see where Swartz has absorbed lessons from Gerhard Richter, whose polychrome compositions — with their jagged washes of rainbow colors — invite us to interpret, to look through rather than merely at the surface. If Abstract Expressionism can be beautiful or decorative, while still displaying profundity, Richter shows us how.

Which brings us to Swartz's defining series, Nature Revisited. The trick here, as in Richter, involves presenting the eye with seemingly familiar elements that act as lure and then fade into the whole, drawing us closer to the enigma. Nature Revisited greets the viewer with pastels of avocado and pale cream on a surface that feels like enamel, almost metallic, yet is thickly layered and flowing. Inscribed into this solid consistency, wisps of lines rise vertically, sometimes attended by little green flecks. They could be leaves. We could be viewing a misty snapshot of stems in a swamp; or a foggy window with thin trickles. Or a vision of nature's fecund stirrings, disordered aspirations: The raw materials of creation that become nature or, indeed, become a painting.



Nature Revisited 8, 2016. 12"x12"

Susan Swartz: The Persistence of Lyric Abstraction

by 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 matter: 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



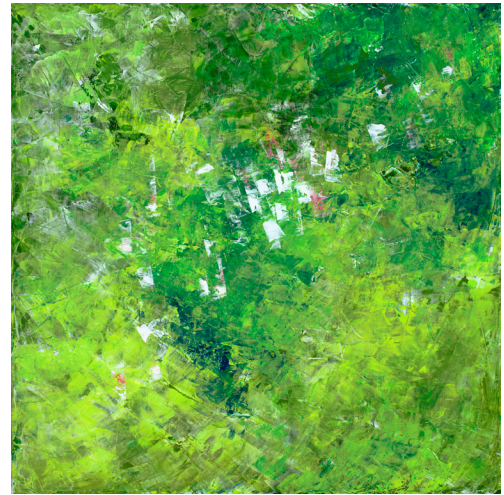
Nature’s Mirage 10, 2014. 20”x20”

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.



Bhutan - Prayers Over Rice Fields,
2014. 20"x20"

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 all-over 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?



Evolving Visions 3, 2015. 72”x72”

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



Contemplation 24E, 2015. 20"x20"

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.

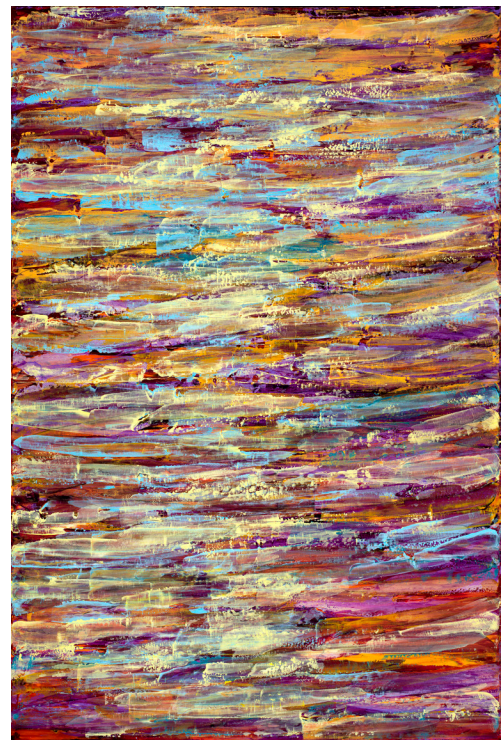
Thus, when seen in her circumstances, Swartz can be likened to an admirable explorer—someone for whom painting remains unknown territory. This is evident in her art. If it is difficult to impossible for her, or anyone else, to alter the field in a major way, that is because we are mostly treading on 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.

And The Fullness Thereof

by Lilly Wei

The paintings teeter between the abstract and the representational and span a decade, from 2007 to the present. At times, they appear more abstract, at other times more representational. Some sing with a full-throated chorus of colors. Others are monochromatic or muted—solos, duets or trios, say—sometimes white, grey, pale yellow, sometimes a bold, startlingly bright green, deep rose, aquamarine blue and there are usually more hues tucked underneath the surface, to add richness, surprise. The artist of these painterly extravaganzas is the American painter Susan Swartz who recently showed them at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) Museum in Beijing and a little earlier at the Manetti Shrem Museum of Art, University of California, Davis in Davis, California.

Swartz revels in paint the way a child might, digging into its gloppy, earthy materiality as the wheels of her imagination spin. She has studied a range of mediums but it was paint that enthralled her, that became her truest love. It is the medium that most directly captures and conveys her vision as it shifted over the years, from the mimetic to the more abstract and exhilaratingly expressive in her recent paintings. It is a vision that has much in common with the romanticism of Casper David Friedrich, the drifts of atmospheric color that are the hallmarks of Turner and Whistler and the luminous dissolutions of world of the Impressionists, only more materially substantive. In paintings such as those from the series “Landscape of Resonances,” there is also a nod to contemporary artists such as Gerhard Richter, whose abstractions look at times as if a landscape is lurking beneath its blurs of dragged, squeegeed paint. All we need to do is readjust our eyes to look a little more deeply, acutely, our minds recalibrating, our senses sharpening.

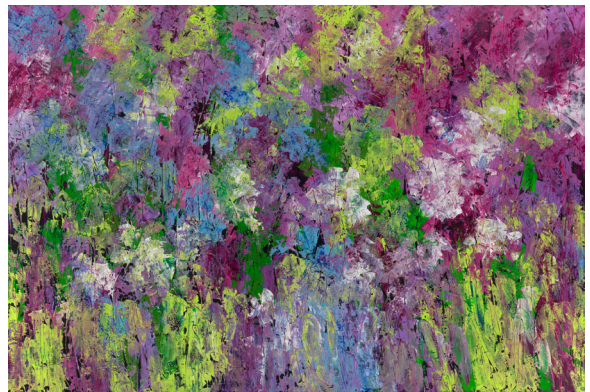


Landscape of Resonances 8, 2013.
72”x48”

Swartz’s paintings are often paeans to the domesticated, the more personally

scaled, acknowledging and paying tribute to the immensities of nature and the wilderness, but grounded in what has been cultivated, shaped by human intervention, imagination and emotions. She happily confesses to a mad love for her gardens, intoxicated by their colors and constant transformations as the seasons move from the first blooms of spring to the abundance of summer to wintry bareness, their guises endless: radiant in sunlight, battered by rain, gemmed by ice, cloaked by fog, by weather and temporality. And although scent is not present, the paintings are so vivid that you might think you smell their bouquet.

Metaphorically, her images evoke a prelapsarian paradise as well as a postlapsarian consciousness of mortality. Implicit also in these paintings is the complex relationship we have with a nature that is both beneficent and destructive, that gives and takes. Her gardens, however, are about beauty, about bounty. She says simply, “they inspire me.” Spring Muse 7 and 8, 2015, are two paintings that praise gardens.



Spring Muse 7, 2015. 48"x72"

Each is four feet high and extend six feet, and even more immersive when installed together. Looking at them is like being drenched in a shower of color from which you emerge refreshed. What might be abstract revolves into landscape, a garden taking form from the brushwork; you might see masses of white hydrangeas among the greens.



Spring Muse 8, 2015. 48"x72"

Swartz often works in series but what constitutes these series is not predetermined. She depends upon where the painting takes her. Two such from 2017 and 2018, “Synthesis” and “Spectrum,” are both one foot square, and more or less monochrome, although glimpses of other colors appear, their great impact coming from the punchy thickness of paint strokes verging on relief that is touchable, almost lickable. Others are tall verticals and installed sequentially to form

another kind of immersive environment that is more austere or seen from a greater distance, in earth and stone colors. Other paintings are sometimes splashed with a band of vivid yellow, a striking blue, referring to the larger natural environment of great trees, high mountains, fields, skies, and water, seas which she is fortunate to be surrounded by. Her most epic series to date, however, is “Nature Revisited,” begun in 2016 and ongoing. The paintings in the sequence vary greatly, many brilliantly colored but the standouts for me are predominantly milk white, creamy, with the embedded ghost of a single leaf, stem or branch, say, like fossilized flora, breaking through to the surface.

Having survived a debilitating, nearly fatal illness, Swartz is “giddy” with joy and gratitude, she says, and sees the world from an entirely different perspective, where it is all the more miraculous. These paintings might be thought of as an offering to life and to nature, one in which art becomes part of nature and embraces the spiritual; after all, it was from dreams of paradisiacal gardens that cultures arose. They also forcefully remind us that such gardens—and landscapes—are renewable, if vulnerable resources and we must be attentive guardians of what we have been entrusted with.



Synthesis 7, 10, and 12, 2018. 12”x12”

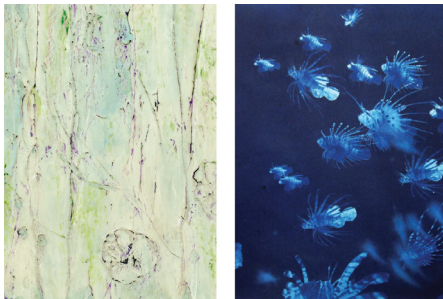
PRESS

• • •

The Manetti Shrem Museum's Summer Season Features Artists Susan Swartz and Andrea Chung

The museum celebrates new voices with Swartz's west coast debut and Chung's first traveling exhibition.

Manetti Shrem Museum July 11, 2018



Left: Susan Swartz, detail of *Nature Revisited 44*, 2018, acrylic on linen, 42 x 84 in. Courtesy of Susan Swartz Studios. Right: Andrea Chung, detail of *Filthy water cannot be washed*, 2016-2017, Cyanotypes and watercolor, 88 x 240 in. (223.5 x 609.6 cm). Collection Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. Museum purchase with funds provided by The Robert L. and Dorothy M. Shapiro Acquisition Endowment and proceeds from Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego Art Auction 2016, 2018.7. Courtesy of the artist.

Two exhibitions currently on view at the Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at the University of California, Davis highlight the university's distinctive legacy of nurturing and exhibiting innovative contemporary art.

Susan Swartz: Breaking Away, 2006–2018, curated by Manetti Shrem Museum

Founding Director, Rachel Teagle, offers new work showcasing the development of a painterly style that results in lush surfaces sculpted from the subtle accretion of color. The exhibition is comprised of a survey of recent work that demonstrates a breakthrough for

the *artist centered* around a newfound synthesis and complexity in her approach to abstracting the natural landscape. "Like countless painters before her, Swartz is motivated by the grandeur of nature," notes Teagle. "Her recent works simultaneously depict recognizable subjects and also dissolve into an abstract play of color and material."

Manetti Shrem Museum's Summer Season features artists Susan Swartz and Andrea Chung

By StoryStudio on July 9, 2018 9:56 AM



The **Manetti Shrem Museum's** inaugural summer season welcomes two exciting American artists to highlight the university's distinctive legacy of nurturing and exhibiting innovative contemporary art.

ABOVE

Left: Susan Swartz, detail of *Nature Revisited 44*, 2018, acrylic on linen, 42 x 84 in. Courtesy of Susan Swartz Studios. Right: Andrea Chung, detail of *Filthy water cannot be washed*, 2016-2017, Cyanotypes and watercolor, 88 x 240 in. (223.5 x 609.6 cm). Collection Museum

of Contemporary Art San Diego. Museum purchase with funds provided by The Robert L. and Dorothy M. Shapiro Acquisition Endowment and proceeds from Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego Art Auction 2016, 2018.7. Courtesy of the artist.

In Susan Swartz: *Breaking Away, 2006–2018*, the artist is motivated by the grandeur of nature combined with an exuberant celebration of the materiality of paint.

Swartz grew up in Pittsburgh and began her art career in the traditional style of realistic landscape painting. She was the Official Olympic Environmental Artist for the 2002 Olympic Winter Games in Salt Lake City. But in the last 10 years, from her Utah studio, Swartz's work has veered more toward the Californian tradition of artists, filtering imagination into abstraction on the canvas.



IMAGE 1 OF 4

Susan Swartz, detail of *Nature Revisited 44*, 2018, acrylic on linen, 42 x 84 in. Courtesy of Susan Swartz Studios.
