Invisible Forces

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Invisible Forces

by

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Historically the genre of landscape painting has provided artists the opportunity to explore pictorial issues of scale, light, texture and movement. Landscape painting becomes a way of meditating on the mystifying power and complexity of nature. As I did with my earlier representational landscapes, I search to uncover abstract forms evocative of the underlying structures in nature; while striving towards a very specific sense of vibrating light, deep space, and vast scale in depiction. I hope to capture ephemeral moments of clarity where those sensations of nature are deeply felt. In my work, natural phenomena are nudged into unfamiliar pictorial territory with the goal of renewing the viewer’s sense of wonder.

My interests lie in our lack of human relationship to terrestrial time, microbial worlds, and quantum fluctuations of the cosmos. These forms outside of human sensory perception become concrete images in my mind. Fueled by a passion for popular science, I have spent graduate school trying to capture what it feels like to be a small part of this seemingly infinite ecosystem. Early depictions — planets, black holes, particles — drew upon my training as a representational painter. It gradually became apparent that the genre of landscape painting could be used to evoke a sensation of deep space, frozen time, shifting scale, and unity. I began to invent landscapes, literally building them through the inherent mark making as a means of generating landscape imagery. E.H. Gombrich articulates the appeal of this kind of process while summarizing Vasari’s revelations regarding unfinished images, in his chapter “Image in the Clouds” from Art and Illusion:
“...it shows his awareness of the link between the imagination of the artist and that of his public. Only works that are created in a state of heightened imagination...will appeal to the imagination.”

Although the landscape manifested itself differently in each painting, I craved the kind of complex and restrained image that could only come from a more developed idea rather than the immediacy of the process. I wanted to imply deeper structures entangled with the landscape, and my impressionistic images made up of layered marks did not achieve a sensation of the permanent or eternal. I began exploring how working with abstract shapes could bring me closer to evoking an essential underlying structure of nature. I had no experience in creating abstract shapes and my early attempts fluctuated between too generic and overly specific. I returned to observational drawing: isolating a negative space between two people, cropping the tip of a leaf, copying the shape of a piece of trampled garbage in the subway. I was surprised by their complexity when isolated from their original contexts.

Strange and unidentifiable shapes, yet evocative of natural phenomena, began to appear in my work. In a review of an Ellsworth Kelly show, Isabelle Graw describes a similar practice of Kelly’s: “…he might use an extant shadow to determine the contour of a form, for instance, or trace the pattern of a tiled floor.” Similarly, Myron Stout described how provocative abstract shapes can come from something as seemingly traditional as figure drawing:

“I drew from the model very regularly, something he (Hans Hofmann) insisted on. The value -- not to lose a direct visual experience. You can do

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anything with the figure. You can paint it very naturalistically, or you can do it more expressionistically, or you can go on to complete abstraction, but that business of having the true visual experience of nature is essential. It is what feeds you. It's what you see.”

It’s almost as if the shapes are “found” rather than "discovered" or subjectively created. The shapes I took from reality always felt more “true” than my completely imagined forms, maybe because physical forces had actually acted on them. In my research, I discovered that many abstract artists develop their shapes through observation. Patricia Treib, in an interview with Joe Fyfe, states,

“Even though I’m aware that any decision, any move, is an interpretation, a selection, an act of editing, I became drawn to trying to carefully notice and observe what was in front of me—to attempt to pull something out that I would have overlooked. I wanted to be receptive to what was in front of me and to be startled by it.”

I realized I could combine chance with my subjective choices to create meaningful shapes. E.H. Gombrich, also in Image in the Clouds, has an analogous statement, “…it really matters less whether the initial form into which the artist projects the image is man-made or found. What matters is rather what he can make of it.” Working with a precise shape creates scaffolding in which I can explore one of my favorite ideas: how complexity often exists in a simple form.

For the thesis paintings, I wanted to create large-scale, refined compositions that draw specific associations with nature but leave the viewer room for interpretation. Precise images are embedded in “open” areas where experimentation can happen. This

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approach, in which an underlying structure delineates the composition but leaves room for discovery, was a major departure from my previous work and allows for intuition, the pleasure of painting, as well as a restrained image.

The first of the thesis paintings, *Pearly Gates*, consists of three areas: the background, the two-dimensional ribbon-like shapes, and the spheres that sit on the ribbons. The shapes, in combination with a sense of deep focus and disorienting scale, evoke cellular structures, planetary bodies, and childlike perceptions of nature.

I imagined *Pearly Gates* while I was reading *The Gene* by Siddhartha Mukherjee. The book described the difficulty visualizing the structure of DNA before microscopic imaging, as well as current difficulties imagining alternative structures that could carry genetic information in alien life forms. I imagined a ribbon-like spiral with a fragile droplet of chemical information sliding down its surface. I also considered these to be worlds or “bubble universes” sliding down a curving, spiraling dimension of time. This cosmological interpretation of the shape prompted the decision to create two of the ribbons, implying identical events separated by space or time that would never interact. The shapes also appear to be a close-up view of dew on a natural material. To keep the different readings of the shape from collapsing into a limited interpretation, I chose colors that could be evocative of the body, outer space, or the landscape. The background recedes in space, as a patchwork of soft edged, slowly scumbled shapes with little contrast. The two-dimensionality of the ribbons is mirrored by the directional brushwork; the voluminous droplets assert themselves into the third dimension with contoured lines, bright highlights, and textured gestures. This interaction between 2-D and 3-D forms

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encourages associations with fundamental structures. The continual refinement of the shapes yielded an image that could exist in multiple scales - inside an atom, the body, the landscape, or a universal expanse.

Objects under the microscope and cosmic phenomena share a similar monumentality that requires a mere shift in perception. To maintain focus on extremes of scale is difficult; human beings can only easily comprehend things in relation to our own bodies. Recent travels through New Mexico, Arizona and Colorado provoked a close examination of the bodily feeling of scale, especially in the Grand Canyon where experience of scale aroused a religious feeling of awe and wonder. While in New Mexico, I spent a lot of time looking Georgia O’Keefe’s paintings, admiring her manipulation of scale. She forces the viewer to look closely at the interior of a flower as if it were a monumental landscape. She addresses this in a letter to the director of the Cleveland Art Museum,

“…this flower is painted large to convey to you my experience of the flower and what is my experience of the flower if it is not color. I know I cannot paint a flower. I cannot paint the sun on the desert on a bright summer morning but maybe in terms of paint color I can convey to you my experience of the flower or the experience that makes the flower of significance to me at that particular time.”

In *Gravitational Lens*, the focus is on the oscillation between the immense and the minuscule. The exposed gessoed area around the central form becomes a place in which to visualize gravitational lensing — the bending of light to follow the curvature of space time around a massive object. This “emptiness” is a space to play with chaos and structure where nebulous and/or hard-edged shapes float in dissolving pools of pig-

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ment. The central shape was refined while thinking of the abstractions of Paul Feeley and Myron Stout. In particular, I was interested in the way their shapes push outward into space and are simultaneously constricted by the forces surrounding them. The double elongated mound form in *Gravitational Lens* feels both expansive and condensed, otherworldly and familiar, specific to natural forms but ambiguous enough to create an opportunity for the viewer to “complete” the painting through their interpretation. The material qualities of paint, altered through application or with differing ratios of medium/thinner, also leads to the discovery of new forms. Pigments separate into hazy color fields while the weave of the canvas causes the paint to move in tiny rivulets. The size of the marks in relation to the overall size of the canvas encourages the dual interpretations of looking up at the sky or down at the ground.

*The Expanse* pushes scale toward the truly monumental. In the center of the painting, a tiered temple/waterfall form is compressed between the edges of the canvas. This form is depicted with one point perspective while surrounding landscape is painted atmospherically, causing spatial fluctuations between the two. They slide and scrape against each other like tectonic plates as the central form pops forward and the surrounding cliffs push it back again. Forcing landscape into a rigid symmetry feels like a psychedelic visualization of death, with the cold palette mirroring the sensation of crystallized energy. The red Flashe paint visible underneath translucent washes and on the edges of the canvas gives a persistent glow under the crust of frozen geometric order. That red is a remnant of the first iteration of the painting, a controlled, mathematical rendering of a ziggurat that left nothing for me to respond to. To restore an openness and lightness to the image, transparent sheets of pigment were poured over the regi-
mented central form and then wiped away. The surrounding landscape was rendered gesturally while preserving the geometric constraints of the central shape, locking the composition together like a puzzle and emphasizing the balance between energetic expression and rigid order.

As a foil to the inflexible structure of *The Expanse*, the final painting began with playful experimentation using the techniques drawn from the other three thesis paintings. *Jupiter Disco*'s central form evokes many different allusions to the natural world (spider, splash, eye and flower to name but a few). This biomorphic form hovers as a kind of reflection/distortion of its surroundings in that enclosed space. It is created and sustained by its environment, like a thought in the mind, a pool in a cave, or life in the womb. I created the impression of an interior through color and a smaller canvas size. I employed deep browns to evoke a cave or the inside of a body, and iridescence pigments to create membranes, minerals, or thin sheets of water. The surface treatment and mark making is highly varied: gestural large marks make up the deep background, fat drips hang from the top, sharply outlined by the pigment they pushed along, sliding liquid gestures encircle the center, and thick scribbles describe a chunky shape attached to the edge of the canvas. Through these different treatments, a variety of forms and textures developed, evocative of life forms, sounds, proteins, or membranes inhabiting a cave, head or cell.

I paint because I have bodily sensations that I can’t describe verbally. These feelings float up from a subconscious place, often when I’m falling asleep, and evoke a mystical wholeness with nature. I turn the ideas around in my mind until I discover how to pursue them in a concrete form. I’m filled with euphoria as specific sensations of vi-
brating light, deep space, and vast scale develop within the imagined image. It becomes important to hold fast to those ephemeral sensations throughout the development of the painting. These paintings, through combining an inner abstract dimension with landscape imagery, are meant to communicate to the viewer that we are a part of what we behold in nature.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


PIECES IN THE EXHIBITION

Pearly Gates, oil on canvas, 84" x 84", 2017
Gravitational Lens, oil and acrylic on canvas, 84” x 84”, 2017
*The Expanse*, acrylic, Flashe, and oil on canvas, 84” x 84”, 2017
*Jupiter Disco*, oil, acrylic, and absorbent ground on canvas, 72” x 72”, 2017