

# TITLE MAGAZINE

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REVIEWS

## Foreign Language: Neysa Grassi's Traveling Exhibition

By JENNA BUCKINGHAM



*Untitled (Spain)*, 2007, gouache and ink on paper  
7 1/2 x 7 inches

In the exhibition catalog, critic, poet, and professor Susan Stewart describes Neysa Grassi's show *Rose Gatherer: 2001-2011*, and the artist's process itself, as erotic: "...with touch and smell dominating the more rational senses of sight and hearing." The intimate sensuality of Grassi's work reaches outward in *Foreign Language*, her current exhibition at Locks Gallery. There is a shift, with the travel-inspired works, from the inner mind, spirit, and body, to the exterior person, the macro-space of position, location, neighborhood, town, region, and even cosmos. The exterior and knowable environment comes into play, bringing with it a startling reveal of the artist's direct touch on paper and canvas. For those familiar with the bodies of work in *Rose Gatherer*, these works are like a burst of cold air into a heated room: the

viewer becomes aware of the elements of the physical world. There are open edges revealing their layers, map-invoking chaotic grids, twisting and undulating sections of different natural patterns. Grassi's travels around the world have infiltrated her enclosed, sensual spaces, and they connect to us like a conversation. We are not required to speak another language to share a transcendent experience.

Grassi's travel works are mostly on paper and, as has been her practice, only come in a few sizes; most of them would intimately fit into a notebook or a suitcase. This easy-to-handle scale is somewhat deceiving, however, as the density of the material is intense, surprisingly somehow not obliterating the delicate support that each is on. A gouache on paper, *Untitled (Spain)* from Grassi's 2007 travels, for example, at 7 1/2 x 7 inches is layered to the point of partial fogginess and color elusiveness, paint added and taken away over and over again. Here, the artist is doing what she does best: drawing us up against and into a work. But the portal of translucent layering is only available in a section of the painting surrounded by dark, structured, forward-thrusting lines that push us out and land us right back on the other side, where we actually are. This shift of movement from studio practice to works made during travel is an

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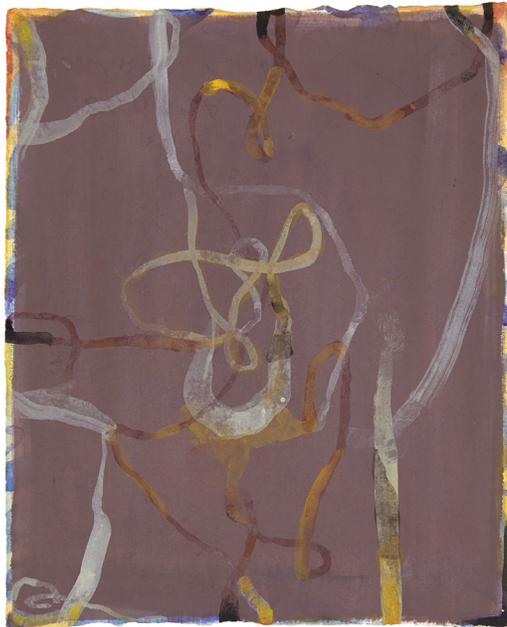
interruptive and generous allowance by the artist.

Place inevitably shakes us up, influences, and changes us. Travel alters how we understand ourselves, and we are therefore disrupted by it. Sometimes we cannot remain as tidy or in control as we mean to be because we feel obscure and exposed. Travel can reveal us in a light it was previously impossible to see. It can be like stepping outside of oneself and observing movements and expressions, being surprised by the dissonance in what we see and what we have imagined. Travel can relax us into this new strangeness if we allow for that. Grassi's works on paper in this exhibition call us to face the obscure hand, its naked honesty plain to see, the layers revealing themselves at the edges and in holes throughout the undulating surfaces.

Perhaps most emotional and revealing is the *Maine Summer* series, a group of fifteen works, four of which displayed in a grid at the Locks exhibition. These works are slightly larger, at "chest size," 11 ¼ x 10 inches, with some small variations between them. The foggy surfaces and black edges seem to render the works almost photographic, like 1970's plastic Holga camera prints from a study on out-of-focus surfaces. But at the very surface of the layering is a very intimate, human texture: fingerprints. Grassi touched the work and then allowed the evidence to remain. The fingerprints testify not only to the mark of the artist, but they place the paintings in exact human scale. Without them the viewer could see any number of perspectives, from the view of a vast landscape to the moment of fog on a hand mirror. Because of the fingerprints, the viewer sees what they are actually looking at. Paintings.



*Untitled (Maine Summer)*, 2009, gouache on paper



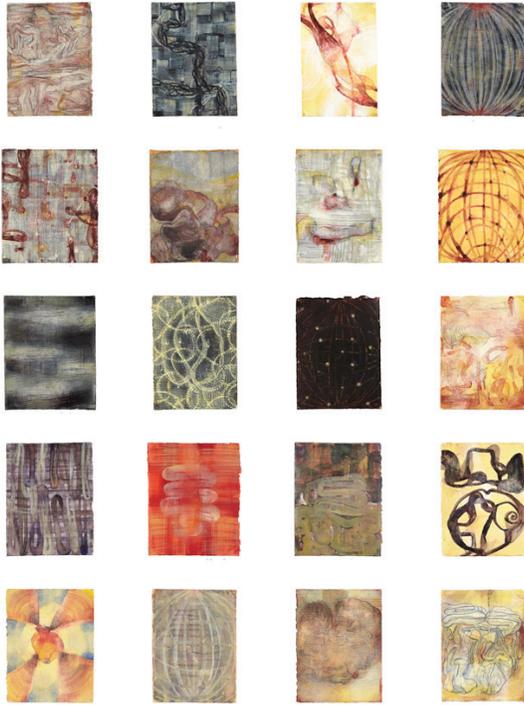
*Untitled (Florence)*, 2003, gouache on paper,  
9 x 7 1/2 inches

In the *Florence* series of works on paper, slow, artery-like loops entwine graphically, sometimes even revealing a beginning and an end. While some of the works in this series are layered slowly, allowing the paint to dry, others are layered quickly, with lines smearing and obscuring each other, flattening out the surface. The 1997 *Florence* works, not all of them displayed at the Locks Gallery exhibition, focus a great deal on the geometrical circular lines forming the atlas, with a play on cosmic activity created through the adding and omitting of color layers. There is a pervading fish-eye style grid in these works that creates a fence between the viewer and what lies beneath. In the 2003 *Florence* series, Grasse experiments more with entwining the arterial lines, repeating them over the layers, covering and uncovering them, and veiling them in translucency. These works give a sense of geography like a topographical map or a road map, and perhaps show how our perception of a geographical area changes when we see it from above, the overwhelming vision of complex systems getting smaller and smaller.

As the works in this exhibition seem to claim some exterior space, they still come back in on themselves. While the atlas and star-like forms of the 1997 *Florence* series indicate objects of cosmic proportion, they do not define the works. Instead they tend to turn back in on themselves, transporting the viewer all the way back into the micro-world reminiscent of the atlas: the inside of the iris at the center of the human eye. The *Cathedral* works inspired by Philadelphia invoke (by name and visual indicators) the repetitive arches of a cathedral building, while these repeating colors and shapes actually look more like the inside of a throat. In this way, the outside does come back inside, but in new and surprising ways. Each different selection of color, shapes, and layers invites us to draw new connections between ourselves and others, the earth, and the world.

Each of the series from Grasse's travels carries some of its own pervading themes. They identify themselves from each other through color and technique, with some works more graphic, others elusive, or a mixture of both. The layers seem to indicate that the works are shaped into themselves by the artist's filtered experience of a place, with memory and emotion adding personal reflection to each episode of travel.

The meaning of travel may be found in the title of the series, *Losing and Finding*, a body of work containing six groupings and individuals: oil paintings, gouaches, and mono prints. These works, in contrast to the pieces completed during travel, are done entirely in the studio, reflecting on travel. The zebra-striped works range from somewhat simple, small-scale notations to large multi-layered, surfaces developed over time. There is a pervading color scheme that interchanges its leading color and hue across the works. Like a customs line at the airport, the works in this series are very much like each other, and their dependability attunes one's self to the processes that unite us all, everywhere in the



world. There are some routines and activities that everyone in the world performs every day. As one travels across the globe, we engage in a process of losing the familiar and finding the phenomenal, losing the old and finding the new, losing the recognizable and finding the true self.

This body of work is only on exhibition in part at Locks gallery, as it will receive more focus in the upcoming exhibitions at Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts and the Maryland Institute College of Art. Just as Grassi may have lost and found herself in different parts of the world, so the presentations in this traveling exhibition will morph and vary as they travel to different venues and in to the hands of different curators. The Philadelphia series of the Foreign Language inventory is also underrepresented in Locks Gallery's exhibition, and it is to be expected that other showings will create new emphasis and conversations yet untold by this the first premiere.

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***Neysa Grassi: Foreign Language at Locks Gallery, through May 9  
Travelling to Delaware Center for Contemporary Art (June 27-November 8th) and Maryland Institute College of Art (Fall, 2016)***

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