

Elizabeth Osborne

VANTAGE

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Essay by Donna Gustafson



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TRANSITIONS: RECENT PAINTINGS

DONNA GUSTAFSON

What I dream of is an art of balance of purity and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which might be for every mental worker, be he businessman or writer, like an appeasing influence, like a mental soother, something like a good armchair in which to rest from physical fatigue.

Henri Matisse, from "Notes of a Painter."

The elegance of Elizabeth Osborne's work, its well-crafted character and the quality of sifted, aestheticized reality, are attributes she shares with "la belle peinture"—the French tradition of beautiful painting. Osborne is an accomplished and intelligent painter with a gift for color and composition. Born in Philadelphia in 1936, she has courted inspiration year after year, and through that sustained inquiry, established a relationship with the Apollonian.

Graduating with a BFA from the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, in 1959, she began to teach at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1963 (she holds the distinction of being the first female academician since Cecelia Beaux); in that year she also won a Fulbright to study in Paris. The importance of her encounter with French painting was paramount, and it is still visible in her work. She studied Matisse and Gauguin in depth and experimented with abstraction, no doubt under the inspiration of the French modernist painters she admired.

This group of paintings falls neatly into two genres: interior/studio scenes and seascapes. While the studio scenes all circle back to the artist in an extended, but oblique self-portrait, the seascapes provide a view of the outside world. Exterior and interior views are constructed along similar lines indicating a unity of purpose. All offer evidence of the artist's hand, and also of her mind, her focus and her peripheral vision. Surface and depth are juxtaposed, as are focus and wide expanse, object and ground, artist's space and the outside world. An emphasis on transition seems to have come to the fore only in recent years, but I suspect that transition has always been at the center of her work, not simply the space between abstraction and representation, but also between actual space and the illusionary space of the two-dimensional canvas.

The Red Table, A Painter's Place, and Studio, Westward View all share a compositional structure that combines the artist's physical space with the reach of her vision. In *The Red Table*, the far edge of a vermilion table acts in the same way as putti or angels often did in the Renaissance, as intercessors between the real and the unreal. Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* (1513, Gemaldergalerie, Dresden) is probably the best known example of this. In the immediate foreground of the painting, two cherubim turn and gesture toward the vision of the divine that is the true subject of the painting. The bridge that is thus established by the angels allows the viewer to enter the sacred space of the painting. In our secular age, angels have lost their universality. Instead the bits and pieces of prosaic life—like the edge of a red picnic table set beside a lake—can better serve as intermediaries between the real and the unreal, the painter and the illusionary space of the painting.

There are other functions for the red in *The Red Table* that are equally important. The red edge anchors the composition and at the same time, enlivens it by setting up a dynamic contrast of intense red and cool, distant blue. *Studio, Westward View* must have had a similar thought at its gene-

PRECEDING PAGE:

DEPARTURE (detail)

2000, oil on canvas

48 x 48 inches

RIGHT:

RED TABLE

2000, oil on canvas

12 x 18 inches



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sis. In the foreground is a colorful, striped textile that acts as a fulcrum around which shifting viewpoints in the divisions of the canvas teeter. Using the view from a window onto the city of Philadelphia, the artist develops a highly charged sequence of associations. If a painting is a window to the world, then windows in an artist's representation of her studio may or may not be what they seem. *Studio, Westward View* might be a painting of the studio with a view out the window looking west; or it might be a painting of a group of paintings in the studio that include a westward view. In either case, the witty play between reality and artifice extends beyond the window/view conundrum to the real fruits on the artist's table juxtaposed with the artist's rendition of her own painting of the fruits, and a ghostly outline of a newly conceived canvas that awaits paint and brush. The circle of inspiration, creation, inspiration is one of the intellectual underpinnings of this painter's art.

The third of this group, *A Painter's Place*, is another investigation of the artist's studio, and may also be interpreted as a self-portrait of sorts. The recurring specific objects found in these studio pictures create a vocabulary of forms that unify and expand each work's reach into the realm of another. The colorful, striped cloth is again present, and again cleverly placed so as to give the bands of color a functional role. Like Raphael's angels, they create a bridge into the imagined space of the painting. That bit of striped cloth, which is at the same time a geometric stack of color, also reminds us of the false dichotomy between abstract and real. At the center of *A Painter's Place*, in place of the painter, is an assortment of bottled pigments and paint brushes. Surrounding these materials and tools of the artist's craft are washes of color—paintings in progress, imaginary states, or architectural abstractions—and the suggestion of a stack of books. The stack of books, if that is what it is, appears again in *Color Field*; so do the colorful stripes, transformed into a suggestion of a color field painting. The most insistently geometric of these interior scenes, *Color Field* also plays with the idea of windows and paintings. Bathed in a golden light, with suggestions of paintings in progress on the walls of the interior space, the painting reinforces the notion of progress as an ongoing and continuous evolution of form. Process, progress, and evolution are important to the artist, as witnessed by the energy she spends in defining her activity inside the canvas.

Departure makes the transition from studio to the outside world. At its center lies an abstracted view of a landscape, above is the familiar striped pattern. In the painting within the painting, the warm tonality of the interior scenes begin to give way to the blues that dominate the seascapes. The sea has been a fruitful subject of the artist's inquiry for some years. In contrast to the self-referential views of her studio, the paintings of the sea are expansive and sensuous, composed with a nearly absolute reliance on the horizontal. *Early Morning* and *Shimmer* are picturesque scenes that suggest the unalloyed delights of experiencing nature as a vacationer or tourist. *Slea Head* is more like a vision of an uninhabited coastline of the

LEFT:

EARLY MORNING

2000, oil on birch panel

12 x 10 inches

RIGHT:

POND

2000, oil on canvas

10 x 12 inches



frigid North. Using a stiff brush to comb the blue pigment onto the surface of the canvas, the artist transforms the striations of rocky coast and the rhythmic motion of the water into a disciplined, linear evocation of peaceful solitude. Even *Swept Away*, structured as a series of horizontal bands of color, is redolent of a state of mind, not the dangers associated with roiling currents or dangerous undertows.

One of the joys of an exhibition is the cumulative effect that a group of related paintings has on the viewer. As this selection makes clear, the art of painting as conceived and practiced by Osborne is an ongoing investigation of the issues surrounding vision and physicality, mind and body, the imagined and the actual. While this struggle is ongoing, it is also contained; it is perhaps less a struggle than a negotiation—a civilized contest between interior and exterior that reveals the interconnectedness of the painter with the world.

DONNA GUSTAFSON is the chief curator of the American Federation of the Arts in New York. A travelling exhibition of works on paper by Thomas Moran, curated by Gustafson, will open in 2001. She writes regularly for *ARTNews* and *Commonweal*.