

Neysa Grassi

Rose Gatherer
2001–2011

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LOCKS GALLERY



Rose Gatherer, 2001, oil on linen, 18 x 16 inches

COLORS WITHOUT NAMES

Susan Stewart

In *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*, Honoré de Balzac's little narrative masterpiece about a visual masterpiece, the genius Frenhofer, an imaginary Northern painter of the early seventeenth century, is driven insane by his endless search for the perfect pictorial translation of reality. His masterwork, "La Belle Noiseuse" ("The Beautiful Nut-Gatherer," or "The Beautiful Trouble-maker," depending on the translation), is an incomplete portrait of a now-vanished woman model of that nickname who long had been the object of all of Frenhofer's painterly and erotic desires. By a series of plot machinations that bring him a comparably beautiful model, Frenhofer is able to finish the painting. But at the moment the work is revealed to the two young artists, Pourbus and Poussin, who have befriended the elderly master, they see that the portrait has become a formless daub, built up of countless superimposed layers of paint. In a lower corner of the canvas one exquisite bare foot can be detected, the only bit remaining of Frenhofer's original creation. For the two younger artists all else is invisible. Only the aged artist can see, with his mind's eye, the chef-d'oeuvre forever "inconnu."

Balzac's parable has had a powerful effect on later artists; Cezanne was fascinated by it and it inspired Picasso's "Guernica," which was painted in the very Parisian building—N° 7 rue des Grandes-Augustin—where Frenhofer supposedly had his studio. And it seems of particular relevance to the practice of the Philadelphia painter Neysa Grassi, whose work in many ways solves the problem of Frenhofer's unintelligibility. For in her analogous use of superimposed layers of paint, Grassi makes paintings that do not suffer the losses of pictorial

representation. Indeed, contrary both to the tradition of paintings as windows, where images are contained or captured within the perspective grid, and to certain practices of abstraction, those where gestures and marks are often retrospectively calculated as expressing pre-existing emotions, Grassi has developed a way of making art that takes in the seen and unseen, the known and unknowable, through accumulated touches. Each of Grassi's paintings is itself; it does not point elsewhere. Nor, obviously, does it allude to a constantly deferred erotic object. It is an erotic object—one that records, and bears in its essence, all the immediacy, tactility, and depth that have gone into its making.

To speak of the work's eroticism may seem metaphorical, but in fact, in Grassi's case, the work is truly, erotically, embodied. Such embodiment is central from the very moment of the work's instantiation. As she begins a painting by choosing its substrate—either a stretched linen canvas or a wood panel—Grassi chooses not only the work's materials, but also its scale, for in her total oeuvre she tends to move between three different sizes: small works that evoke an individual face or head and ask to be read as a face is read; works the size of a body or torso that can be approached as we approach a person; and works beyond human scale that evoke enclosed spaces, rooms or altars and thereby give the viewer a sense of entering a painted space. Each of these models of presence—face, torso, room—has its own conventions of respect, distanciation, approach, interpretation, touch, apprehension, and penetration. The choice of how far to stand, how deeply to read, how much to care is thrown upon both the painter, who first will build up the specificity of the surface and the eventual viewer, who will stand before and—perhaps, at least, in his or her imagination—within the completed work.

Yet long before that meeting with a viewer, Grassi will continue to elaborate the “embodied” work. Once she establishes the painting's scale, she lays down a first layer—for wooden panels, shellac and oil priming white; for linen, rabbit-skin glue and oil priming white. She then usually paints one oil color over the entire surface. And then she begins to make marks. She continues to build up the paint, wielding brushes and palette knives, using



Small Stream, 2010, oil on linen, 17 1/8 x 16 1/8 inches



the edge of the flat side of the knife, applying the paint more thickly. In all of these gestures, Grassi does not come closer to an external reality; instead she is building a reality through the application of the paint—she describes this as a “feeling about the materials.” At a point where the work still yields to the touch, but is no longer “wet,” she also is able to sand it—a technique that illumines, actually adds light to, the mark. If the three-dimensionality of the paint has a sculptural quality here, it equally resembles weaving, for the “surface” is made of interiors and exteriors that have their own rhythm and reciprocity. This complexity is built up, not only through Grassi’s use of sanding, but also by her frequent practice of “burnishing”—rubbing a rag, a finger, or the palm of a hand, over the paint to deepen its luminosity. The viscosity of the outer layer of texture is at once present and hidden under light. There is a “below” and “above,” an “under” and “over,” a “within” determined against boundaries and borders, but the objects of these prepositions start to vanish into an emerging system of relations.

Grassi recounts that when she has a feeling a work is “painted” but “not yet a body,” she knows she is approximately three-fourths of the way through her process. When this moment arrives, she places a veil or film of paint over the entirety of the work. And then she wipes more color over the available surface and continues with her process of pushing or embedding color within color. Color is indeed the material of Grassi’s work and often its surprising theme. The titles she eventually gives her paintings—almost always in a period after they are completed—often call on the chemical, mineral, even solar, forces of fire and heat that have formed the pigments she uses. She is drawn to the hand-made paint of the Williamsburg Art Materials company, which produces supplies that vary in texture as much as color: a recent company brochure explains, for example, that whereas “Cerulean Blue” has “a velvet light-absorbing surface,” “siennas will often be gritty enough to allow light to travel through the vehicle, exposing rich, golden or mahogany undertones.” After the year or two that it takes to make a painting, every tube of paint in Grassi’s studio is covered with fingerprints and worn with use to the point where she no longer can read its name. Here is one of the most deeply original

dimensions of her work, for, as she says, she is “moving toward a presentation of colors that have no names, that have not yet been named.” A viewer looking at her work must truly look; the mind and eye cannot “land” on a layer or region of the painting and identify a name, term, or concept that already exists; the only solution is to keep looking.

In the end, any given work by Grassi may bear 30 layers of paint between its final surface and the birch panel or linen support that underlies it. If several everyday activities resemble the repetitive, yet modulated, gestures of Grassi as she builds these layers—preparing a flower bed, say, or weaving a Persian rug, or certain processes of assembling cooked dishes—the dominant analogy continues to be an erotic one. Grassi records an erotic engagement with each painting, “a sense of wanting to be close to it,” with touch and smell dominating the more rational senses of sight and hearing. These qualities reinforce the aura of eroticism that pervades her practice and the reception of her work. In making love, the body is touched, tasted, smelled, apprehended in parts, yet it is the mystery and integrity of the person as other that suffuses the whole. The dance of absorption and reflection; the quick motion between positive and negative space; the use of dark borders that draw in and center the viewer; the invitation to touch, enter, and embrace in these paintings—all these connections to one of our most fundamental and mysterious human experiences only increase the work of art’s own mystery and power.

For Grassi, painting is a calling; she moves from one painting to the next, not knowing where she will arrive. After she completed her studies at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where she was trained in the figural tradition and worked as well with a range of abstract processes, she stopped painting for ten years. When she returned to her practice, she had abandoned much of her earlier direction and found her work completely changed—by the hiatus, by other experiences, she cannot say. The new work in this exhibit is inspired in part by a relation she has to a new living space where she daily works in a garden. Its wild and refined regions, its edges and borders; the motion and change it evokes; the imagination she must



Untitled, 2002–04, monotype, 21 x 21 inches (sheet), 9 x 9 inches (plate)

exercise in caring for it—every feature plays a part in her current patterns of work. She has always been influenced by the sense of water and air that moves through the drawings of Leonardo da Vinci and Vincent Van Gogh, and she now often feels the force of those elements within the space of the garden. Eddying and swirling effects—suggesting, by material means, forces that do not manifest themselves materially—underline the paradox of painting light and moving between two and three dimensions.

What do you see when you look at a painting by Neysa Grassi? Colors for which you have no name, certainly. You as well may have the sensation of looking deep into an alchemist's pot, or of floating far above the work as you look down on the patchwork of a landscape. In some works, as the lower edge weighs and tips the painting, you may feel you are plunging into it. Meanwhile, you may detect fleeting allusions to ribs, roots, and trees, to your root-like nerves and the “floaters” behind your closed eyes, to what you see in after-images, or at the periphery, or whenever you surrender to the sublimity of patterns you cannot grasp. Grassi is a master of what we see when we do not see, of the invisible without a preconceived metaphysics. To look at her paintings, you must go into them, without quite knowing either how and when you will return to reality—that mere reality she has declined to represent and has, instead, extended.

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Cover: detail, *Rivers in Oceans*, 2010, oil on panel, 19 7/8 x 19 7/8 inches

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