

# Neysa Grassi

## Dissolver

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LOCKS GALLERY

## DISSOLVER

Barry Schwabsky

The artist wondered aloud whether the range of her new paintings might not be confusing to some viewers. Her concern is realistic, no doubt, at a time when some painters consider it sufficient to turn out several versions of the same painting, only in different colors, and when the easiest way to achieve installation art is to reiterate a single form or gesture ad libitum until the given room has been filled. Still, she needn't have given it a second thought -- and probably didn't. The stylistic consistency of her work, which is not hard to discern, derives from its inward coherence, and has no need to rely on the compulsive repetition of some signature motif or technical device. "The knot from the last show is unraveling," she remarked, referring to the interlacing lines which were a more consistent feature of the works in her 1996 painting exhibition; but the observation is just as apt for the more general sense that her paintings have become looser, freer.

Nor need the work secure an otherwise questionable identity by disowning the long history that's made it possible. Neysa Grassi's paintings are full of reminiscences of predecessors whose works they may only tangentially resemble, from Soutine to Guston, from medieval woodcuts and anonymous folk paintings to Leonardo's drawings of floods, from the flickering light of the 16th century Venetians to the moonlit reveries of Albert Pinkham Ryder -- not to mention contemporaries like Brice Marden, Ross Bleckner, or Bill Jensen. But take Mondrian as possibly the most unlikely source, for no form of abstract art would seem as far from the purity and clarity of his Neo-plasticism than her rich and pungent painterly introspection, an art full of the shadings and arabesques his was compelled to renounce. And yet a glance at Grassi's Map, with its nearly rectilinear network of red, yellow, and blue lines on a white field -- the Dutchman's beloved primaries, yet in Grassi's hands never unmixed, always conditional -- shows how its maker must have been trying to get a glimpse of the emotional truth of her precursor's purist esthetic without abandoning her own ruminative and introspective standpoint. And once having seen that, you'll have a hard time not seeing see Mondrian's seminal "plus-minus" paintings

somewhere back behind the knurly clouds of horizontal and vertical dashes, usually meeting in plus-sign configurations, in Grassi's *Flight and How a Bird Flies*. That unlikely recognition means something quite different, more mysterious and more moving, from the automatic identification of Mondrian's influence on a contemporary practitioner of hard-edge geometrical abstraction.

To mention her work's recall of other art is hardly to imply that Grassi is indulging in commentary, or that her work is "art about art" in the narrow sense of the phrase. Nor is it fashionably retro. It no more aims at being comfortingly familiar than it does at being shockingly new, nor even (with the latest twist) at being shockingly familiar. It's just that Grassi's is a cultivated art, though it does not exclude raw emotion, and the knowledge that underpins it, which is among other things a knowledge of what has been possible in painting so far, is part of the substance of the work, something that has been assimilated into its weft and woof.

Spare as they often are, these paintings are full. Their capaciousness makes room for many reminiscences, and not only of art, but also of other realities: ordinary experiences like the flickering of fireflies, the fur of animals, the shadowy interiors of dimly lit churches, knots that are coming undone or nets that may later grow taut with their catch, diagrams of the body's inner workings, landscapes full of mist, skin that's been scarred... things everybody knows. But isn't it curious they are, for the most part, things that are either known more through touch than by sight, or that are known by sight under conditions of reduced vision? There may be points of intense illumination here, but they arise with contexts of, often, profound obscurity.

For all that, the paintings are abstract. You will find no flower depicted in *Blue Rose*, nothing of interest to the ornithologist as such in *How a Bird Flies*. Neither of the paintings called *Red Room* is such by virtue of anything resembling walls, floor, or ceiling. But you may discern a burgeoning in *Blue Rose*, an ascent in *How a Bird Flies*, a beckoning enclosure in *Red Room #1*. The paintings neither exclude resemblance nor rely on it. Its point is to aid us in approaching the singularity of the pictorial sensation, not lead away from it.

As we get nearer that singularity, however, language gets murky. And not just mine. Haven't you ever noticed that painters themselves always, sooner or later, have a way of going all mystical about what it is they do? I think that tendency comes, surprisingly enough, from the peculiarly tactile nature of a painter's relationship with his or her materials. Although usually mediated by a tool such as a brush

or palette knife, there is nonetheless, in most cases, an unbroken physical link between the artist's body and the materials being worked -- paint, canvas or rigid support, and so on. This means there can be a kind of continuous feedback between outer substance and inner sensation, between perception and proprioception. That's what distinguishes touch from the other senses, after all. If what I mean isn't clear, then just press your finger against, say, the chair you're sitting in. With the one action, you feel the chair and the finger. There is a communion between inner and outer realities, not the distance vision normally registers. "I can't tell where I end and you begin": what every mystic longs to say to the Godhead and every lover to the beloved (which is why the same language works for the two experiences). And it's what painters, it seems, sometimes feel about their work when they're in the midst of it -- not when they stand back to judge what they've just done, but when they're "in the picture" (Pollock's phrase, of course).

In painting too, that communion between interior and exterior takes place in and through touch. So can surmise that paintings that emphasize their tactile aspect -- that exercise a rhetoric of touch -- have something to say about that experience. In general, painting can be described as a dialectic between the sense of touch and sight, sometimes dominated by one, sometimes by the other. Grassi's oeuvre appears to me as one of the instances in which the visual exists more for the sake of a tactile effect than the other way round. Her work is all about the sense of touch as an extinguisher of boundaries -- thus the title *Dissolver of Sugar*, a phrase she borrowed from the 13th century Persian poet of Sufi mysticism, Jalaluddin Rumi. That's why the paintings contain so few internal edges -- they're almost all transition. Her paint is always marking the surface as such and then dissolving it, using the interaction of light and texture to render it poignantly nebulous.

Notice the way her color is intensified by being held in check. It evokes light, for sure, but primarily in order to communicate heat -- a visual phenomenon for the sake of its tactile analogue. It would be easy enough to make a list of paintings that burn among Grassi's works, and these would not only include the flame-colored ones, whose intense reds shade into yellows, like the two called *Red Room* or the extraordinary *Sick Rose*, but even ones where nominally cool colors take fire, like the eponymous hue in *Blue Rose*. As color becomes darker or more muted in the paintings, it correspondingly tends to become ashen in tone, most obviously in a work like *The Guest House* -- again, the contrary not so much of light as of heat.

Having said that, I'm immediately tempted to contradict myself and point out how beautiful and various is Grassi's use of the effects of light as such within her paintings, and how they range from ones based on dramatic extremes of bright and dark redolent of the Baroque, as in Dissolver of Sugar #2 or Red Room #1, to ones with the most subtly modulated all-over suffusion of illumination, as in the large grey and white untitled painting which for me is the most fascinating of all these paintings. (I take its resistance to being titled as a sign that even the artist does not yet know quite what to make of it.) But I'd rather not indulge my self-revisionist impulse to give fair play to the soft splendor of light in these paintings, because I can't shake the feeling that they talk to my skin even more than to my eyes.

Barry Schwabsky writes regularly for such publications as Artforum, Art in America, and The New York Times, and he is a Contributing Editor to Art On Paper and Art/Text. His book *The Widening Circle: Consequences of Modernism in Contemporary Art*, is published by Cambridge University Press.