Pat Steir

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LOCKS GALLERY

PAT STEIR'S FLOW

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When Pat Steir stopped painting she began to make her most compelling work, as well as, by my lights, some of the most captivating paintings produced anywhere today. She "stopped painting" in the sense of refraining from making cumulative marks on a support with a brush (or other implement) so as to realize a composition. In the late 1970s Steir befriended John Cage, entranced by his Zen-influenced pursuit of a kind of non-intention and his corollary embrace of chaos or randomness in creative activity—tactics meant to relieve the artist of his designated role as an heroic (or egoistical) form-giver and to reorder the boundaries traditionally delimiting the aesthetic. For Steir, who readily admits her "romance" with art history, the eminently traditional medium of oil paint has remained all along irresistible. But by the late 1980s she had devised an effective, anti-traditional way to produce paintings through the agency of gravity: by pouring paint from a bucket or oversize brush while positioned atop a ladder at the upper edge of a canvas stapled to a wall. She resorted to gravity expressly in order "to leave a lot of space for accident. For chaos," she explains.[1]

With a mindset shaped in part also by Conceptual practices, Steir (a longtime friend of Sol LeWitt) devises a scheme for her paintings in advance, from which she does not normally deviate. She commits, that is, to pouring a certain sequence of colors of paint in successive layers, wet over dried, on canvases primed with a medium-toned green ground (a Renaissance device), which acts to neutralize the blinding white surface of the cotton duck. The pigment manages to fully coat even such large canvases as Steir generally prefers (up to eleven feet or so on a side) because she dilutes it with linseed oil and a turpentine derivative until it is downright watery. That extreme dilution serves further to reveal some irreducible material qualities of the pigments, including their weight (with white and cadmium paints being especially heavy, for instance, and blue quite light), as well as how or whether they atomize and how they interact with other pigments, whether by concealing, blending in with, or separating from whatever went before. (The sides of

pages 2 and 5: Steir's Vermont studio

Steir's paintings, where the canvas wraps around the stretcher bar, can serve as an informative key, as the sequence in which the pigments were applied tends to emerge more clearly there than on the painting's face.) Artists bent on material investigations, like Steir, historically tend to get segregated from artists possessed of spiritual concerns, but for her (as I understand it) there exists "no split be-tween spirit and matter," as Cage put it, adding: "And to realize this, we have only suddenly to a-wake to the fact."[2]

To empty a bucket of paint over a canvas may sound in outline like a lightning-fast way (if not a prankster's way) to make a painting. But Pat Steir's process instead enfolds and in a way traces a protracted period of time. Besides the crucial matter of pre-conceiving the scheme to be used in any given painting, Steir prepares for and precedes her pouring sessions with a breathing meditation. Then, following the act of pouring—which she calibrates both by how she mixes the paint and by how she moves the bucket or brush—each layer of oil paint has to dry, which can take a month or even several, depending on the pigment and the climatic conditions. Altogether, any given painting may take a year or more to complete—the longer the more the layers, which may number over half a dozen. Experience has taught Steir how specific pigments will tend to perform, but adding a new layer of paint to a work-in-progress still involves unforeseen variables. The drying process can compound those variables, yielding over time a spectrum of visual shifts and surprises, and Steir has trained herself not to "meddle" while the paint dries. While she does not always deem successful the results of her research or experiments (as she terms her process), she always retains them, for her most unlucky outcomes can eventually reveal themselves instead as among her most eye-opening or stirring results. It follows that Steir finds ways to "start again from a new point of view"[3] whenever her fund of experience enables her to exercise too great a degree of control, for she considers that "mistakes reveal vulnerability" and, touchingly, that art itself is "about showing vulnerability."[4]

The openness and potential for accident endemic in Steir's process have helped sustain her interest in a mode of art-making whose possibilities still impress her, over two decades in, as inexhaustible. Throughout this period her paintings' surfaces have mostly evinced a fluid aspect, yet the ways in which the effects of fluidity manifest have proven richly various. For years, the paint cascading down, and at times also flung across Steir's canvases conjured waterfalls—those enduringly picturesque natural features beloved of Chinese landscapists—and she titled the work accordingly. But lately, drawn to beauty of

a more understated kind, Steir's work suggests more subtly vaporous reaches, say, of rainwater streaming down and beading up on walls or windowpanes. At times fairly disparate, non-aqueous effects emerge, too, as of loose threads or netlike webs, craquelure, or even ceramic. In the format that Steir presently favors—with the canvas divided vertically, evenly in two—the qualities of one side of any given painting are effectively set off by the distinct qualities of the adjacent side, such that an engrossing visual dialogue usually ensues, while the seam between the sides can become especially charged. "To make the edge that meets in an unexpected way is like walking a tightrope," Steir observes; "it's a very thrilling thing to do if that's your thrill."[5]

By the time Pat Steir started to work systematically in her hands-off way, pouring paint hardly qualified as a novel, much less a radical tactic. Jackson Pollock's once-notorious methods of flinging streams of industrial paints on unprimed canvas spread flat on the floor opened the way for the so-called Stain painters (led by Helen Frankenthaler) who came to the fore in the 1960s, and Larry Poons and others have since poured paint in their turn. For Steir—who favors primed canvas because she wants the paint to "slide" rather than to soak and stain—Pollock nonetheless remains the more germane predecessor, together with his peers, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still and, above all (as regards her present body of work), Barnett Newman. Openly revisiting the work of antecedent masters amounts not merely to a calculated act of postmodern quotation for Steir, but more so to a heartfelt, if not uncomplicated expression of "homage." (For that matter, the remaking of adulated work was historically commonplace among Chinese landscape painters, from whom Steir has likewise long drawn inspiration.)

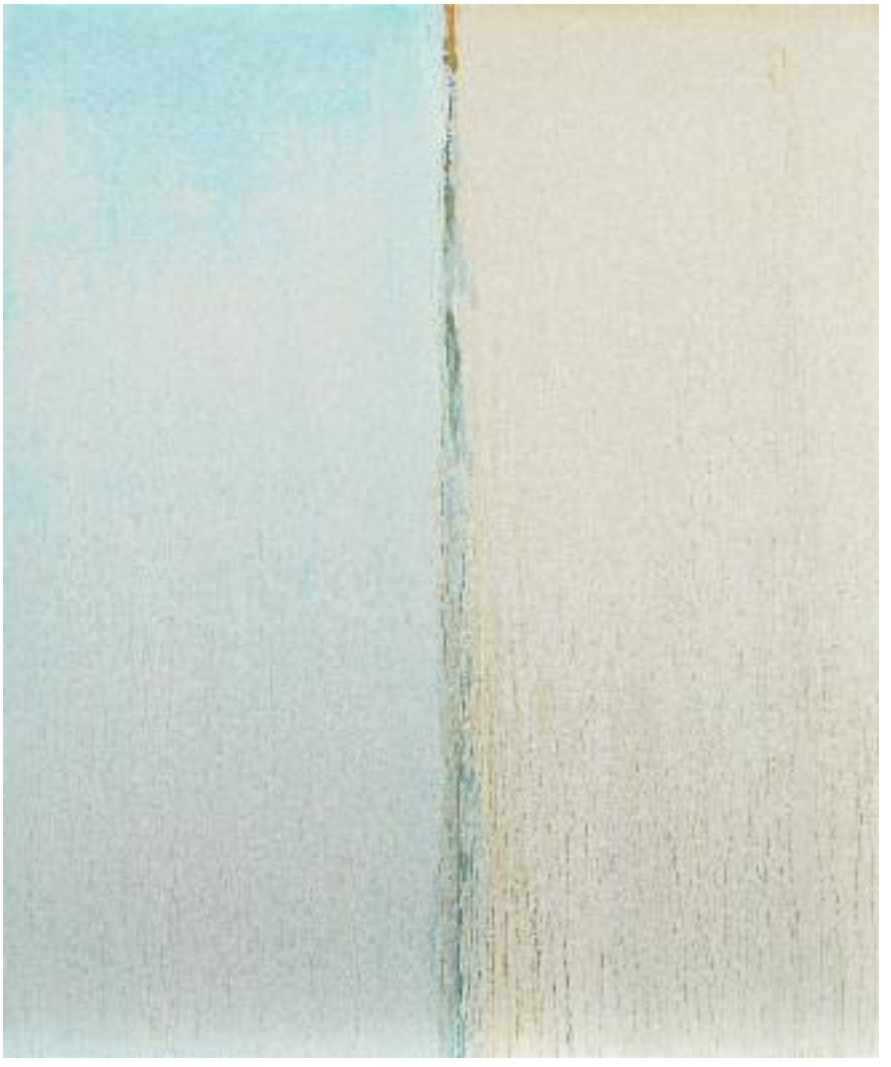
Through canvases with "zips" variously delineated down the middle, at times with masking tape, Steir has lately paid fond tribute to Newman, while the very fact of her pouring and the often sheer veils of paint that result simultaneously declare her debts respectively to Pollock and Rothko. (A fellow New York School heir, Robert Ryman, is also acknowledged here—so Steir tells me—by the choice to layer his signature white paint atop various other tones or colors in numerous of her relatively diminutive "color studies," which she conceived as preliminary to work yet to come.) The Newman to whom Steir nods in her present canvases is, in the first place, the early Newman of the 1948 *Onement* paintings, which were evenly divided down the middle by what he came to call "zips"—a gesture that suits Steir's by now deep-seated aversion to the process of composing. The generous scale of Steir's paintings, however, evokes more the later Newman, with whom

left: detail, **Paynes Grey and Naples Yellow Over Green,** 2011, oil on canvas, 72 x 72 inches

she shares an interest in providing an intensely immersive experience for the viewer. Steir's huge paintings—huger than most New York School works—are in a way landscapes, she insists: "you look at them and become a figure in a landscape. In fact, you the viewer and I the artist become the monk in a Chinese landscape painting." Steir thus positions herself as recuperating not only a Chinese aesthetic device, but also the longtime association of the New York School's abstract paintings with landscape—specifically the transporting landscapes of the sublime. Since she stopped making waterfall-like images, however, the spaces suggested by Steir's paintings have generally become less illusionistic, and a recent body of work conjures rather "the space inside, the sacred space or the space for meditation," as she conceives it.[6] (By framing her paintings as contemplative abstract landscapes, Steir aligns herself in a way also with the, however visually dissimilar example of her beloved mentor, Agnes Martin.)

While Steir openly positions her work of recent years as an at once imaginative revisiting and a lingering farewell to the New York School moment (if not that moment alone), it goes without saying that that generation, together with the art historical canon of masters generally, intently excluded women from its midst. (When Steir once took the opportunity to express in person her admiration for Rothko, he responded with the would-be gallantry of a man of his era, by complimenting her appearance and inquiring why she was unmarried.) Until the feminist movement fomented its revolution—in which Steir played a considered and committed part—women with serious creative ambitions invariably ran afoul of the ingrained biases that they "can't paint, can't write." So ran the self-defeating internal monologue of the fictional painter Lily Briscoe as she faced off with a blank canvas in Virginia Woolf's modernist classic, *To the Lighthouse*. What freed Briscoe to paint despite these prohibitions bears recollecting, however, in light of Steir's characteristic practices. For:

> as if some juice necessary for the lubrication of her faculties were spontaneously squirted, she began precariously dipping among the blues and umbers, moving her brush hither and thither… as if it had fallen in with some rhythm which was dictated to her… [a rhythm] strong enough to bear her along with it on its current. Certainly she was losing consciousness of outer things. And as she lost consciousness… her mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurting over that glaring, hideously difficult white space.[7]



White Over Green, Gold, and Scheveningens Blue, 2011, oil on canvas, 60 x 50 inches

Some age-old notions that effectually underwrite Woolf's passage—notions of the "fluidity of the feminine" and the "femininity of the fluid"—have historically tended to devolve, in fact, from "a repertory of misogyny."[8] As a case in point, in the ancient texts of the *Dao De Jing,* which Steir studied around the time she began using gravity—or "us[ing] nature to paint a picture of itself," as she also says—nature, as the "formless source of all forms," is emblematized by water; and the feminine, which invariably "submits to the masculine," equates to "the ocean which accepts whatever the rivers bring into it." As misogynist as this sounds, the same text also counsels, however, that not only for women, but for everyone, "the best way to conduct oneself may be observed in the behavior of water," since "that which is most yielding eventually overcomes what is most resistant," just as water can and does over time wear away stone.[9] Though she ultimately chose a watery grave for herself, Woolf imbued Briscoe with an irrepressible wellspring that propelled her creative agency in the face of implacable opposition. And something like this scenario, whereby an unstoppable, vital fluidity proves fundamental to women's possibilities for creative expression, would be framed polemically in the mid-1970s by French feminists Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, as a prevision of the emergence of at once insurgent and distinctly feminine new creative forms. "That woman-thing speaks… 'fluid,'" Irigaray declaimed in 1974 (placing "fluid" pointedly in quotation marks); "… it is continuous, compressible, dilatable, viscous, conductible, diffusible… unending… resistan[t] to the countable… change[able] in volume or in force… easily traversed by flow" and "unstable."[10]

"In the West in our time," Elizabeth Grosz hypothesized in 1994, female corporeality has been constructed, not only in terms of absence or lack, but also as "leaking," "seepage," and "viscosity, entrapping, secreting." Women's physicality has been indexed, not only to certain private, involuntary, hence uncontrollable biological functions (read: menstruation and the expression of breast milk and vaginal mucous), but, by extension, to a "formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order."[11] In the New York art world there emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s numerous women who effectively, defiantly and publicly enacted this role of the disorderly, seeping and secreting woman (as it were anticipating Cixous and Irigaray). Given that "order" has historically, tacitly meant patriarchal order, for artists harboring feminist impulses the prospect of amorphous flows auguring "a disorder that threatens all order" could well spell less a calamity, after all, than an outright feminist coup. As Irigaray asked rhetorically,

right: **Forest in Snow,** 2010, oil on canvas, 127 ¼ x 109 ¼ inches

seditiously in 1981: "Might there not be a fluid, some deluge, that could shake this social order?"[12]

In the late 1960s and '70s, Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis, and Hannah Wilke each found their own ingenious and compelling ways of experimenting with fluid materials—ranging from the traditional, such as plaster or paint, to the non-traditional, such as latex or polyurethane foam—and of deploying those materials in such a way as to openly declare their intrinsic amorphousness and capacity to freely re-form (rather than disguising that capacity, as was historically, typically done with, say, plaster). Their profoundly challenging, category-dissolving work proved key in instigating paradigm shifts that ended up remaking the field of contemporary art practice broadly—an achievement that has at last been widely acknowledged, at least in the case of the short-lived Hesse. As for Benglis (Steir's near-peer and longtime friend), in 1969, for instance, she assumed the role of the perilously oozing woman (defined, paradoxically, by her lack of containment) who leaks *Contraband*—the title of a work ejected from a Whitney show on account of its flagrant excesses—by loosing and leaving puddled inertly on the floor garishly contrasting Day-Glo pigments made thickly viscous with latex, like sculpted paint. As the 1970s unfolded, a generation of women intent on making explicitly, programmatically feminist art would follow, experimenting, for example, with expressly menstrual initiatives conceived in part as a retort to the tropes of virility (or explicitly of ejaculation, in Pollock's case) that so long surrounded men's art practice.

In the 1970s, Steir (and most other female artists) disdained Judy Chicago's concept that women had long been impelled to, and that feminists ought to, make artwork imbued with a (vaginally- inspired) "central core"—though Steir did then experiment intriguingly with painting roses (which are naturally vulva-like) crossed out with Xs. Later, however, Steir's work might be said to have belatedly rejoined a more unofficial or sub rosa trajectory of feminist art practice through its investigation of fluidity. "My paintings are about flow," she observes; "among other things: waterfalls, rivers, and oceans, rainstorms and time—all things that flow and return in other forms. A release." Where art traditionally entails form-giving, fluids are intrinsically form-less, though they can assume infinitely various forms and qualities, whether hard or soft, dangerous or benign. Steir points also to the bodily, and specifically feminine overtones of the fluid: "Like us, water is linked to the moon; women in their cycles are tied to the moon's cycle, and our emotions are directed by the moon in just the same way as water is, like the tide," she notes.[13] In a recent

interview, Steir disarmingly mentioned having once instructed a doctor that, "I can't have a hysterectomy. I need my hormones," while showing him a book of her art by way of illustrating what purpose those hormones served. (Steir's own period of conspicuous painterly flows has generally coincided more with the menopausal interval of her life, however, a still more taboo topic, which she nonetheless also introduced in the same interview).[14] But paint cannot be reduced either to aqueous or to bodily flows for Steir, in whose poetic view paint functions (for artist and viewer alike) "like a Rorschach test and a litmus test and a blood test and a test of your pulse."[15]

That Steir took her own time and her own path in arriving at a fluid-centered practice does not mark her as a throwback. Over the course of recent decades numerous important younger women—Kiki Smith, Polly Apfelbaum, Ann Hamilton, Petah Coyne, Jeanne Silverthorne, Pipilotti Rist, and Mika Rottenberg come to mind—have also deployed fluid in their art practice, again with, however cryptically feminist overtones. Diverse as the work of these figures is, it might all be said somehow to conjure (as does Steir's) what Rebecca Solnit recently called a "sense of the body [which] isn't of this neat, discrete, solid object that we get from art history's marble forms; it's an open import-export system of orifices, fluids, dissolution, and generation; it's a more female body where fluids [and]... orifices are more present, or at least less repressed." Such work, Solnit suggests, "re-imagines embodiment as this perilous, vital, interpenetrated, alive system, part of a rethinking of the self in relation to the world."[16]

In the act of layering her canvases with paint, Pat Steir layers also markers of self, of time, and of art history. Initially, or from a distance, many of the recent paintings may look almost like twinned monochromes. But with sustained and close viewing, the paintings' magnetically sensual surfaces emerge instead as effectively porous, and as a kind of palimpsest constituted at once by pigments and by an array of art historical referents: shades of the New York School, shades of Chinese painting, shades of landscape. By cataloguing those referents I am adding nothing new to the extant accounts of Pat Steir's work: What I have to add is that her work embeds yet another shade, namely of a somewhat underground, but on that account all the more earthshaking vein of feminist art practice.

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Notes

1 Anne Waldman, "Pat Steir," *Bomb* 83 (Spring 2003): 36.

2 John Cage, "Julliard Lecture" (1952), in *A Year From Monday: New Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1963), 111. Orthography as in original.

3 Waldman, 36.

4 Doris von Drathen, *Pat Steir: Installations* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2006), 48.

5 Phong Bui, "In Conversation: Pat Steir with Phong Bui," *The Brooklyn Rail,* March 2011 (http://www.brooklynrail.org/2011/03/art/pat-steir-with-phong-bui).

6 Phong Bui, as above.

7 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1927), 237-38. My thanks to Chris Reed for reminding me of this passage.

8 Naomi Schor, "This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray," in Carolyn Burke, Schor, and Margaret Whitford, eds., *Engaging With Irigaray* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 68.

9 Phong Bui, as above; Lao Tzu, *Tao Teh King* (a.k.a. Lao Zi, Dao De Jing) (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1958), 21, 55, 16, 44.

10 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One,* trans. Catherine Porter ([1977] Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 111, 112.

11 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward A Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 203.

12 Irigaray, cited in Schor, 67. (My translation from the French.)

13 von Drathen, 17, 48.

14 Judith Richards, Interview of Pat Steir, March 1 and 2, 2008, Smithsonian Archives of American Art. (Steir was spared the operation, but not on account of the doctor's regard for her artwork.)

15 Waldman, 35.

16 Petah Coyne and Rebecca Solnit, "Interview," in Denise Markonish, et al., *Petah Coyne: Everything That Rises Must Converge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 46-7.