

Between the Work and the Wall

Of the many small drawings on canvas (some no bigger than 2 x 2 inches) spread out on the gallery walls, one was placed higher than all the others. With its left edge less than an inch away from the neighboring wall, it seemed as if, at any moment, the work might disengage itself from the implied grid structuring the installation and drift into the stratosphere, like a planet breaking free from its orbit. The provocative gap between this drawing and the corner of the room evoked a sort of magnetic field, a buoyant force that both stabilized the position of the object and endowed it with the potential to ascend.

The drawing situated to its immediate left, lower down on the adjoining wall, elicited a different response. Wedged into the corner, two of its facets flush against two walls, it was going nowhere. This work appeared anchored to its architectural context like a brick with mortar, as if it were part of an incomplete wall, either in the process of being built or extraordinarily old, a treasured remnant of some ancient rampart selected for exhibition and preservation.

There are at least two forces operating in Mary Judge's art. The first is the sheer allure of her imagery, its simple, undiluted beauty. Powdered pigment, peat moss, gold, bronze, and other media mined directly from the earth are at the root of her organic aesthetic, which she articulates through a few, mainly two, signature designs. Both of them are quatrefoil in format: a pattern of concentric curvilinear forms, uvula shaped, with baroque embellishments; and a grid with a single repeated image depicting circles of various sizes densely crowded into two dimensions. The designs are derived from stencils made of tracing paper with punched holes (a process the artist describes in an interview elsewhere in this volume) or of Mylar with caulking squeezed onto its surface to form a relief, which is then used to create monoprints. Despite the underlying consistency of the quatrefoil shape and the use of stencils to replicate forms, each work is unique. Within the repetition, Judge's private, meditative commitment to a set of basic formal principles, she has discovered a world of possibilities.

Like Josef Albers, Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Ryman, and Agnes Martin, Judge finds that setting strict parameters for her project ultimately leads to a sense of freedom. Unlike these other artists, however, she does not attain this by putting together discrete parts to complete a composition. The freedom is not something that must be worked out like a puzzle or constructed but, rather, is something she allows to happen. It suffuses her smoky images just as the dry pigment, metallic filings, and other dustlike substances subject to chance wash over her supports. Judge's art embodies a certain natural beauty, both literally, in terms of its raw, unbound primary materials, and methodologically, in processes that are impulsive (characteristic of pouncing dry pigment), passive (the dust falls where it may), and generally expressive, demonstrating a cosmic sense of reason. As a result, the drawings and monoprints are strong advocates for visceral as opposed to mediated experience. Reproductions unfortunately do not do them justice.

The second force in Judge's art is a power to transport the viewer that makes interpretation seem an inevitable consequence of perception. The natural beauty of the work is not only enticing but mesmerizing, fueling the imagination and linking aesthetic experience to realms and issues far removed from the picture or the person looking at it. The list is long, including the Italian Renaissance, Paleolithic cave painting, minimalism, a history of women's art, studies in the aesthetics of geological phenomena, the future of modernism, archaeology, and the stratosphere. Within the simplicity of the forms and the abiding focus on iconic images lies an extraordinary seriousness. The concentric rings, the dizzying array of circles, and the loops, twists, and waves that one finds elsewhere in the imagery encourage the mind to wander, to consider, for example, a drawing's position on the wall, its place in history, and its spiritual underpinnings. Mundane though these diversions may seem, to contemplate, interpret, and dream about a framed field of peat moss is, in its own special way, to engage in an essential dialogue about aesthetics, with nature as the medium. By connecting with these primary substances, the viewer may reach a better understanding of their inherent value and perhaps make a contribution, however small, to the conservation of the natural world. It may then seem a somewhat different place, indeed a bit better, not unlike the peat moss: the same as it was, yet now transformed.

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