

WATCHER IN THE WOODS

Lissa Bockrath observes nature through a screen of materials

BY DOUGLAS MAX UTTER

INTUITIVE, PROCESS-ORIENTED ABSTRACTION imitates nature, at times almost too well. A thin line (or maybe a fat smudge) separates depiction from abstraction. If you work upward from the bottom of the picture plane, spreading a band of umber, a shaky half-inch of dark green, and a few light splashes of blue and white to top it all off, the eye says "landscape!" Or the resemblance can be less literal, in works that call to mind natural processes. In one way or another synaesthesia comes into play, mixing the senses on the palette of vision, evoking touch and sound, and echoing the internal organization and movement of our own bodies.

Lissa Bockrath's paintings are essentially abstract oil compositions on canvas, which she allows to resemble landscapes. Sometimes she actively encourages that relationship, but there are also times when she lets the brushstrokes and sidelong swipes hover at the edge of chaos. She states that these are meditations on landscape, inspired by the river and woods and sky near where she lives. This body of work (there are more than 30 paintings in the show) marks a change in life circumstances. The artist moved to a more rural area from Cleveland's Little Italy about three years ago, where she owned and operated the Bockrath Gallery in Murray Hill School. She opened that space not long after graduating from the Cleveland Institute of Art in the mid-'90s, showing her own work occasionally, but most often mounting one- or two-person exhibits of exciting local talent. The gallery enjoyed an unusually long run, keeping its doors open for nine years despite Cleveland's habitual indifference to art venues.

Leonardo Da Vinci advised young artists to seek compositional inspiration from stains on the wall. British landscape painters John Constable and William Mallord Turner working in the early 19th century became so wrapped up in the bluster and beauty of the natural world that their paintings often seemed to anticipate much later developments in art. Similar tendencies became even more obvious as French Impressionism gained momentum later in the century, when dots and scrapes and splashes became the signature marks of a new kind of realism, one that acknowledged facts of movement and constant flux. A little later Wassily Kandinsky developed a type of abstract painting that resembled landscape depiction at times, composed of elements that were at one remove from the real, glimpses of the outskirts of an ideal realm.

are expressive or procedural, as if made like a photographic image (or a retinal one), upside down in the dark box of the mind, then projected outward, reversed again onto the painted surface. They feel swished around and half-melted into place, combining elements of scenes that are a large part of the painter's daily visual reality. They also seem to move fast, dwelling briefly on phenomena like crepuscular clouds, juxtaposed with dark masses of wind-blown brown and green paint. The skies resemble real Northern Ohio skies, featuring only a little blue, but lots of luminously dirty cream and gray. Many feel like views along a river bank, sometimes seen from above, as in "Arousing the Senses," which suggests the meandering course of a misty stream, seen from a hillside.

Looking around the gallery there are numerous flashes of red and orange or a combination of the two, burning like quick campfires in short bursts or long, smoul-

dering, half-buried flames, fueled by peat or desire. Partly, such passages, as in "Over the River and Through the Woods," are there simply to generate visual interest. But they seem to signify more than that, evoking an almost mythical, alchemical scene of burning water, of funeral pyres on wild, lonesome rivers.

"Refraction" might be a cloudscape at sunrise or sunset, made up of the sort of clouds we're familiar with in Northern skies, full of personality. On the left, a thick, glistening patch of luminous auburn paint resembles a dissolving mesa or a hank of auburn hair. A conical gray-umber form at the extreme right next to a tilted, peaked mass could almost be the outline of a house in deep shadow, except for its frayed edges. The sky is full of color. Yellows and greens and blues compete and are at their most intense below the cloud shapes, just above a sort of roofline mass edged by two almost straight dark lines, running across and then slanting down to the right.

A few of Bockrath's paintings in *Dissolving Nature* are downright apocalyptic, suggesting a world burning to the ground or swept away by mighty forces. The suggestively titled "Competing Interest," for one, looks like the aftermath of an atomic bomb or some other horrific event, such as the fire bombings of WWII. Toward the center, dark orange paint burns hotly along the lower margin of a disintegrating structure. Dark, ruined towers rise above it while crumbling walls teeter just

DISSOLVING NATURE

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to the right. Sunlight, maybe, on the lower left and spreads a Naples yellow, blending into gray bottom edge of the work. A str

blows or has just blown through. Bockrath shows us; something unhas happened only moments before. For much of her career Bockrath noted for works that are very literal based, in the sense that they are built directly on top of large-scale color photographs. In those reclaimed a more hands-on, direct type of experience from the of the camera. Tending to chaotic very expressive, painterly technique urban and suburban scenes are drama of the city, especially at night. Her new works seem like peeled from those photos and directly to canvas. Re-imagined painted from observation, they logical moments, and the language question are distilled from experience general, whether firsthand or second photographic or retinal. The mind hand of the artist act as a device boundaries of daily perception.

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