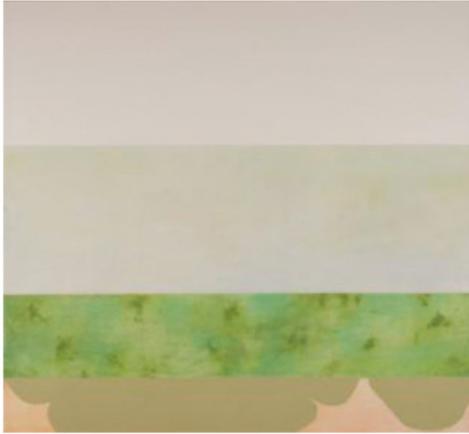


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essay

“Painting Air, Painting Light”—an essay by Lilly Wei



we breathe the future 48" x 52"
oil on canvas
2010

Sarah Hinckley is an advocate of process in art making. Although she has some idea in mind when she begins, the painting soon assumes a life of its own, an occurrence she respects and responds to stroke by stroke, shape by shape, color by color. Hinckley, a natural colorist, builds slowly, with deliberation, adjusting as the painting evolves. The process is uncertain, intuitive, but the element of surprise, of serendipitously finding something she wants to hold on to is of primary importance to her and if the painting veers in unexpected directions, so much the better. While she never predicts what the final outcome of this slow dance with her medium will be, it has its own inevitability.

An abstract painter of perceptual nuances, more or less minimalist in inclination, Hinckley's recent works are increasingly elaborated, increasingly differentiated, although these are relative terms. She continues to divide the field into three, four or more divisions to form broad stripes, their edges sometimes made by applying tape to the surface for a more precise delineation. Before, she preferred to paint them by hand, allowing the hand's wavering and the bleed of one color into the other. She still incorporates the bleed, liking the unexpected patterns that appear but now there is more "action in the field," she said. The brushwork and the layerings of color that make up the individual bands are more visible (before, she would smooth over the surface), the field itself is less monochromatic and the interplay of colors are less muted. By permitting the brushwork and other painterly incidents to remain and ramping up the color and the contrast, she increases tension and adds visual punch to her ethereal and elegant tone poems.



vibrations to the peace of the world 36" x 40"
oil on canvas
2009

Hinckley grew up in Cape Cod, with a sky, sea and earth awash in northeast light and color. The source of almost all her work, although expressed in a multitude of ways, it is both a real and imagined place in her canvases. A legendary muse, her paintings and drawings strive to be the correlative to the Cape's miraculous coloration, its rhythms, its complex, shifting light and the deceptive quiescence that overlays what is potentially fierce and unfathomable. They are not mimetic but her recent projects seem to interweave color field with landscapes, that is, abstraction with something verging on representation. She said, as an example, the drips that are present as part of the process have become a commonplace, "everyone has drips" and while they remain a significant pictorial trope in her visual syntax, she wanted her abstract imagery to suggest something more specific, such as the scalloped shapes that approximate the patterns of waves breaking on the beach. One particularly beguiling painting is divided into four sections: one band is a pale, very tender green, another a dreamy blue from somewhere over the rainbow with a pattern of white drifting through like high cirrus clouds, a landscape that is not a landscape.

“...an artist spellbound by paint...”



The overall presence of Hinckley's work is gentle, meditative and a manifestation of her longtime involvement with yogic practice. Beneath the surface, however, she has placed more assertive colors for opposition and complexity, their presence more felt than actually seen. She also titles her paintings with lyrics from rock and pop music, from Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Melissa Etheridge and Jimi Hendrix, say. She listens to music when she works and the rhythm of the painting is consciously and unconsciously in step with the rhythm of the music.

As another opposition, she sometimes reverses the bands in terms of color, placing the darkest at the top, a strategy inspired by Japanese hanging scrolls and lessens the landscape reference, or rather, makes it more ambiguous. She is also much influenced by the way space is allocated in the scrolls and how every detail is carefully thought out, including the textile patterns that are integrated into the overall composition, critical to its presentation. Although her process is wholly different, she consults pattern books of traditional Japanese textiles for motifs, not as a template but as a point of departure. An image that has recently appeared in her work



everybody talking but I don't hear a thing (detail)
30" x 20"
oil on canvas
2010

resembled a incandescent fireball, a circular form with blurred, fingered edges that in white, becomes mysterious, the whites so luscious they look like cream, ready to be licked. She has also added figures that while abstract, evokes fanciful flora and fauna that seem to have been imported from Asian still lifes, set against her bands of color. She has several preferred formats, from the largest which is 62" x 58" to the smallest at 24" x 18". Her favorite is 48" x 50" but recently she has been exploring a 30" x 25" size that is new to her repertoire, spacious enough for her to work comfortably on but also intimate. As she plays the abstract off against the representational, she finds that the larger canvases become landscapes almost immediately while the smaller ones remain more resolutely abstract, like objects.

"...as if everything solid melts into air."

Ethereal as her paintings appear to be, her watercolors are even more diaphanous, more floating, as if everything solid melts into air. More spontaneous in watercolor—partially due to the nature of the medium itself—she layers the colors, sometimes painting over them to anchor their delicacy and slow the process, leaving the ground visible, the white of the paper showing through.

As an artist spellbound by paint, Hinckley belongs to a venerable, ongoing tradition, one to which she has contributed her own marvels of hand, eye and colored earth, conjuring them out of the inexplicable human need to create, to make a mark and disrupt, for a moment, the ceaseless flux that is the universe.

—LILLY WEI

Lilly Wei is a New York-based art critic and independent curator.



west wind moves 2 (detail) 11" x 7.5"
watercolor on fabriano
2009



listen to the melody (detail) 11" x 7.5"
watercolor on fabriano
2009



looking for light (detail) 11" x 7.5"
watercolor on fabriano
2009