

Steve Woodbury / Painting and Prophecy By Jonathan Goodman

Steve Woodbury is an Australian abstract painter, whose powerful compositions suggest a painterly prophecy in regard to the world around him. The atmospheric expressiveness of his work is experienced through different series, which when seen together amount to interpretations and readings of the sublime, in a language made more beautiful by being connected to the history of abstract art. While abstract expressionism is no longer the only, or even the preferred, means of expression on the map, it is clear that Woodbury has aligned himself with a language still capable of subtle mysteries; the atmospheric effects of his earlier art suggest an awareness of color and form that would tie his sense of composition to the New York School. Internationalism in contemporary art has reached a point where the similarities seem to be thematically oriented rather than geographically tied, with the result that Woodbury can achieve remarkable effects that connect across history, in a way that does justice to those artists working similarly who have preceded him. So it happens that Woodbury balances his achievement within a sense of historical accomplishment, which lends gravity and weight to his accomplishment.

The question facing Woodbury is not how much historical awareness can he bear, but rather to what extent can the mode of time support the complex elegance of his painting. He owes a lot to gestural flair, which offers his audience a kind of controlled extravagance and a painterly justification for his search for the sublime. I see him as coming out of a tradition best that includes painters such as Franz Kline and Cy Twombly, artists for whom the gesture is made to be as transparent and far-reaching as possible, so that the viewer feels the painting as a kind of mediation between humanity and some higher plane. As Woodbury has said himself, "If we wait until a painting speaks to us as Goethe suggests, then surely the experience is more rewarding than looking for familiar imagery that makes a 'safe' and 'nice' picture ordinary." What follows from Woodbury's art, as he himself asserts, is a "reality on a finer scale." The structural universalism of abstract painting, in which color and composition and brushstroke are impressive for being representative of themselves alone, is handled extremely well in Woodbury's paintings, whose hues cast a glow or second light over his esthetic decisions.

So the brilliant residuals of Woodbury's paintings do not reflect nature so much as they subsume it, calling upon color and volume to speak in their own terms to his audience. Art does not become an excuse for representation as much as it stands in for intellectual and emotional ways of being that enhance our feeling for art and also for nature, even if we cannot decide on what exactly the artist is rendering. Abstraction is not necessarily more demonstrative of reality than figuration; however, what it does do is to insure us of the inherent substantiality of the imagination, which tends to be solely what this kind of painting is about. Woodbury titles one extensive series of paintings "In the Shadows," suggesting mystery and indefinite morphology above the relatively more pedestrian task of likeness. In addition to the influence of abstract expressionism, there is some reference to Asian painting, most specifically the effects of Chinese art. In a recent example from the series *Dying from Birth*, Woodbury has created a long vertical field, essentially a scroll, in which black and pink flow down the expanse of canvas in thick and thin lines.

In another suite of paintings from the same group, Woodbury offers black patches on white paper, the areas of black pulsing with energy bordering in its intensity on the erotic. The artist's point of view here, as in most of his work, is that the composition is an open field, meant to startle the viewer and result in an awakened state of being. Woodbury's sharp technique and fine sense of purpose enable him to do so on a regular basis.

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