

CATALOGUE ESSAY

Tiffany Bell - 1996

Rosenberg + Kaufman Fine Art

CLAIRE SEIDL

Claire Seidl's paintings knowingly and without irony embrace the traditions of gestural abstraction. Her recent paintings allude to a wide range of sources: from the drippings of Jackson Pollock, to the more lyrical markings of Joan Mitchell or Philip Guston, or to the recent calligraphic meanderings of Brice Marden. Historical figures relevant to this legacy are also recalled. The way the yellowish, white blobs of color sit on the surface in *The Eye of the Glass Blower* (1996) is not unlike the waterlilies in some of Monet's late paintings. Similarly, the colors and forms in *Lay of the Land* (1994) are vaguely reminiscent of Marsden Hartley's landscapes. Moving up in time, Seidl's paintings also invite comparison to those of many of her own generation who work in painterly styles.

Seidl's application of the formal devices of gestural abstraction parallels her identification with its expressionist content. She believes in the emotive power of abstract form, color and line; and seeks to unleash their potential for depicting beauty and wonder. She is an "action painter" in that she works on her paintings intuitively, responding to forms and images as they emerge on the canvas. There is no sense that Seidl's paintings result from unconscious actions, however. Her intuition is highly informed and though her paintings are not planned, in her own words, they result "from a complex interplay of improvisation and conscious decision making". In her choice of process, Seidl attempts to unselfconsciously convey the personal and emotional in an immediate way.

What distinguishes Seidl's work is her lack of a signature style or gesture. To a viewer unfamiliar with the range of her interests, her paintings might look like they were done by different artists. In *The Eye of the Glassblower* (1996), the circular scribbles of white paint form tight knots that float on a deep, dark background. In *Tree Line* (1996), more open linear strokes interweave across the canvas making a denser, all-over space. In the former, the gestural marks delineate space and form; in the latter, they sit on the surface like lines on a blackboard. *Not So Fast* (1994) has no visible brushstrokes at all; it was made by pouring paint onto the canvas which created a skin of blue and yellow that hovers on the surface. In *Mother Tongue* (1994), Seidl used regular bandlike strokes in a grid pattern. She uses all the formal devices available to her: tight scribbles or broad open strokes; geometric or all-over composition; thick or thin paint; poured, scraped or brushed surfaces; bright or subdued palettes; flat or deep space; and so on.

Because of the changing look of Seidl's paintings, they do not appear to develop in a conventional linear progression. Over time themes recur, but as Seidl describes her working procedures, she moves from this to that - much as the pointer on a ouija board. Seidl is free to move randomly because she does not feel compelled to push the envelope of formal innovation, nor establish an individualized style. These outdated ambitions are less urgent in this fast paced era when nothing is new for long and consensus might serve a greater purpose than individual separatism. Instead, Seidl uses the techniques of abstract painting as an available means to communicate specifically in each painting. Her work is not derivative. The associations she makes give content and meaning to each painting individually. The references are part of the language she uses to convey her thoughts and feelings. Seidl approaches this difficult task with considerable knowledge and insight.

The limits of form and content in Seidl's recent group of work are seen in two of its early paintings: *The Purse Stealer's Eye is Yellow* (1994-95) and *Whereabouts* (1995). *The Purse Stealer's Eye is Yellow* is thinly painted with black, swirling strokes overlaid on a yellow ground. The gestural markings clump together in almost figural forms; the space is open and airy. *Whereabouts* is more colorful, composed of pinks, greens, blues, yellow, black and white that are built up in translucent glazes and unified by a web of interwoven lines. The space is tighter and tends to evoke landscape.

Seidl's newest paintings were definitely inspired by the landscape. Despite her urban residence, Seidl has always been attracted to the solitude and physical activity available in nature. In the early 80's, she spent several summers in artist colonies, and since 1986 has maintained (with her family) a summer house and studio in the western mountains of Maine. During the summer of 1995, Seidl made a group of watercolors from the landscape and took black and white photographs at night of leaves and branches silhouetted against the sky. Fascinated by the play of shapes and contrasts of flat and deep space in the photos and watercolors, she began to make oil paintings with these images in mind. Several oils on paper and four small canvas paintings have resulted so far.

The closest thing to a series in Seidl's oeuvre, the four canvas paintings are related in size and a palette of predominantly browns, greens, blues and yellows. A trace of a horizon line is delineated in three of the paintings: *Description Without Place* (one), *Description Without Place* (two), and *Treeline*, but in *The Eye of the Glass Blower* it is obliterated by the build-up of textures and shapes. In these paintings, Seidl's markings vary from washes of transparent color that might depict something - say, clumps of trees - to blackboard scribbles as previously described. The landscape falls into the background as other markings both literally and metaphorically complicate our understanding of the images. In a large painting, *The Eye of the Non-Combatant* (1995-96, made after the smaller works but related to them), Seidl uses similar techniques to complicate the image and space. The suggestion of a swampy setting made by blue and green washes and loopy gestures is contrasted to bold, black marks that sit on the surface. These calligraphic looking symbols introduce a cultural element - a sign of some sort - imposed on a natural representation. Seidl does not make outright landscapes; she complicates and obscures the reading by the inclusion of other referents.

The complexity and incongruous meaning communicated by Seidl's gestures correspond to the perplexity or uncertainty proposed by her titles. Sometimes derived from poetry (Michail Benedikt's, among others'), her titles convey ideas that cannot be visualized - *The Eye of the Non-Combatant* and *The Eye of the Glass Blower* - or allude to places without definition - *Description Without Place*, *Lay of the Land*, *Whereabouts*, and *Tree Line*. Seidl's titles, along with the openness of her approach and the fluidity of her gestures, suggest that the underlying subject of her work is the complexity of an everchanging environment. Her paintings provide a visual refuge which is both reassuring and provocative. They offer beauty with wonder.