

CATALOGUE ESSAY

Stephen Maine - 2010
Lesley Heller Workspace

CLAIRE SEIDL

The emotional immediacy that Claire Seidl's abstract paintings convey has long set them apart from those of her contemporaries. As the autographic mark is the badge of authenticity of gestural abstraction, the genre is linked historically to Abstract Expressionism's noisy celebration of intuition and impulse. But this sort of self-expressive showmanship is not what Seidl is about; her distinct blend of materiality and atmospheric, and her focus on the strictly visual, steadily building for years, has in her recent work taken on a subtle but unmistakable sensuality.

Some observers who are familiar with Seidl's process have commented on the unpredictability of her approach to the blank canvas; she adheres to no set of procedural givens or signature style. So it is hardly surprising that this alert and voracious painter would have no wish to be "remarkably consistent" or whatever bland accolade might otherwise describe a mid-career artist on autopilot. Seidl seeks new ways to mesh surface and space convincingly. She is well aware of her skills and her strengths, but always looks for a new pictorial resolution.

And that is what is most satisfying about these paintings: each is beautifully and intelligently resolved according to its own contingencies, and unto itself an active field of compositional and procedural forces. After decades in close physical communication with her materials, Seidl knows when to impose her will upon them, and when to permit them to tell her what to do and where to go. No stylist, Seidl responds to each painting's latencies. If she ever had a bag of tricks, she checked it a long time ago and threw away the key.

What, then, is distinctly Seidlian about Seidl's new work? For one thing, she is a master of scale. Land-sakes, at 25 by 29 inches, has an oceanic pull and a swampy redolence that outweigh its relative concision. Notwithstanding its sooty, mossy palette, the painting feels aquatic, as if we are gazing into a gamey pool that teems with flitting life forms. The interplay of layers is exquisite, syncopated and seductive, and suggests that the pastoral is not reassuringly timeless, but fleeting.

In 1955, three decades after his death, Claude Monet made a huge impression on New York with the Museum of Modern Art's acquisition of an eighteen-foot-long *Water Lilies*. Painters flocked to see this canvas; it is a key reference in Louis Finkelstein's seminal essay, "New Look: Abstract-Impressionism," published in the March 1956 issue of *Art News*. The painting was soon lost in the devastating fire of 1958, but it haunted the imagination of a generation of painters, including Ellsworth Kelly, Milton Resnick, and Philip Guston, among others. MoMA's triumphant 1960 exhibition of the monumental *Water Lilies* triptych, a work that had been considered a failure by Parisian audiences, helped mark the transition of the art world's capital from Paris to New York. No less dramatic was the response of the general public and the art community to MoMA's 2009 – 2010 exhibition of Monet's *Water Lilies* in an installation that featured the full group of these late paintings. Does that help to explain New York painters' obsession with painting that makes you want to dive in, to shove the pretty weeds back and splash around?

Pray Tell pushes the materiality of Seidl's work in a strange direction. Broadly brushed, blue-black veils sparkle with the ochre and greenish fissures of previous paint layers. Simultaneously concrete and atmospheric, it does a slow dissolve — Antoni Tàpies meets Odilon Redon. Any painter will appreciate the go-for-broke attitude behind this kind of rapid, com-

plete, and irreversible overhaul of a painting's appearance, these enormous changes at the last minute.

Seidl is adept at keeping color, surface and the graphic or drawing element in her paintings in equipoise.

None dominates the other; none takes over. So it has been for years: in *Rose Colored* (2005), a trail of terre verte, among the most transparent oil colors, meanders around a bed of encrusted, dusty pink. The deceptively simple canvas blooms with visual counterpoints: form and void, warm and cool, line and mass, surface and space. The painting's chromatic restraint is exquisite, but no less so than its dynamics of surface and its graphical economy: these puffy loops might be clouds, pillows, roses?

More recently, such material atmospheric have become more piquant, as in *Bygones Will Be Bygones*. Figure and ground are utterly interchangeable, and there is no telling which of them initiated this encounter between glazy smears of deep forest green and retouched daubs of cool, opaque gray. The painting's jittery infill recalls Joan Mitchell; its overlapping systems of information, Terry Winters; its paradoxically unrefined touch, Mike Goldberg.

This old formalist chestnut, figure vs. ground, comes alive in Seidl's hands. For the *Life of Me* (2006) pits blackish brushmarks, which are just becoming shapes with some individual character, against a swarming, brushy field of variegated greens that enact pressures on those shapes. The field pushes the figures around, not the reverse.

The grid, that modernist compositional staple, goes all swoony in *Kingdom Come*. Choppy and imprecise, horizontal and vertical strokes in a nearly neutral gray make their bleary way across an expanse of earthy, loamy ochre and green, kicking up and soaking in those colors in classic, luscious wet-into-wet technique. So this grid, far from being a screen between us and the atmospheric background, introduces us to it, entices us. The visual barrier heightens our curiosity, and satisfies it at the same time.

Seidl's fifteen-year involvement with photography, having provided her with a platform to engage directly with the forms and spaces of landscape, has pushed her painting away from allusions to the landscape and into purer abstraction. One wonders if *Far Be It From Me* amounts to a sweet send-off to Seidl's attempts to reconcile painting and photography. As if illuminated by a gyrating flashlight in the hands of an inquisitive child, the space of the canvas veers from cavernously deep to glaringly shallow.

Fair is Fair is seductive in the utter straightforwardness of its charms. The modulated pink ground, doubtless the repository of considerable underpainting, is no less visually present than the feathery top layer. This last application, a poker-faced charcoal gray, skitters over the surface, enunciating both itself and the underpainting's tactility. Like figures in a carpet or in drifting clouds, the possibility of an image emerges. The delicate wipings reveal the latent imagistic possibilities of the ground. Seidl's singular achievement is to make the autographic mark, the gesture, allude not to a unique sensibility announcing itself to the world, but to the individual requirements of each painting. While she would be the first to admit to and in fact embrace her influences, it is also true that her recent paintings are like no others, not even those she herself has made in the past. As it is to painting's history, Seidl's relationship to her own painting is not settled, but dynamic and thriving; and she continually manages to re-engage and reinvigorate our appreciation of the unbounded and mysterious rectangle, the canvas.

