

Imaginary Gardens

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When I first met Lily Stockman we soon established that we had in common an unusual (for artists) family background: we had both grown up around farms and farming, Stockman in New Jersey with horses and hay, me in California among various lettuces and cabbages. Anecdotes about tractor riding, harvests, and the foibles of livestock were exchanged. We wondered if these early experiences had had any impact on our respective art practices, since farming and painting seem at first glance to be worlds apart, and agrarian metaphors are more common to religious homily than art theory. What do the two enterprises share, besides a general concern with cultivation and a certain amount of repetitive labor?

For Stockman, what first links the fields of art and agriculture is precisely the field itself; she describes her approach to painting in terms of surveying and perambulating, of the delimitation and subdivision of a plane—what she self-effacingly calls “the dumb and pleasing mechanics of making a rounded rectangle.”¹ She works with her large paintings laid face-up on sawhorses, so as to “work fairly” on them, giving equal attention to each area of the linen. The viewer is invited to engage the paintings from a similar perspective, at first approaching them as if from above and then navigating their idiosyncratic spaces through imaginative projection. Stockman’s abstract compositions, which often seem to begin with the painter’s brush marking off the perimeters of the support (the way a tractor driver might start to turn an acreage of bare dirt into so many rows of such-and-such length and interval), suggest an approach to the craft in which preparation is inseparable from execution. In its directness, Stockman’s work first draws our attention to the practicality of the practice of painting, and by extension, to the pleasures found in attending to the business of the everyday.

But there’s more here than earthiness. The paintings are also lyrical, athletic, abstractly erotic, and one finds multiple sets of metaphorical attributes superimposed onto the unassumingly rural base I’ve sketched here. The artist works in Los Angeles and Joshua

Tree, and she studied in Cambridge, New York, Ulaanbaatar, and Jaipur, India; each locale contributes something to the way the paintings look, not to mention their inherited art history. They evoke art deco movie palaces in Southern California, the expanse and palette of the high desert, Buddhist thangka, and Rajasthani block printing, as well as recall a wide swathe of 20th-Century abstraction—from Hilma af Klint to Myron Stout to Billy Al Bengston. These are highly suggestive images—but of what, exactly? Some compositions look like ground plans for fantastic ornamental gardens or cross sections of flowers; others evoke archways, stadia, horseshoes, wombs, breasts. Their titles hint at real places (*Hondo Wash* and *Coastguard Beach*), horticulture (*Red Hook Roses*, *Muscari*) and art history (*Taliesin*, *Pontormo's Rainbow*), and at the surprising, sensual details of common objects (*Gunwale*, *Barometer*). None of these things are represented in the paintings, per se, and in this sense Stockman's work is nothing if not contemporary—in both the domain of its associations and the way we shuttle between them, as if painter, work, and viewer are always on the move.

It has often been remarked that the condition of contemporary painting (of contemporary abstract painting especially) is precisely one of restless plurality: that it could go in any number of directions and mean any number of things. I think Stockman's desire to ground her paintings in experiences of place and daily rhythms of work makes sense as a response to this condition: you could say that she is delimiting one corner of the open field of painting by recalling to us some of its particularities. Marianne Moore wrote that poems were like "imaginary gardens with real toads in them;" the same could be said for Stockman's paintings, poised as they are at some nexus of the visionary and the prosaic. Reconciling the two things may be a very modernist impulse but one springing from a different set of cultural-historical circumstances, and with similarly transformed stakes and consequences.

Color plays a special role in the effort, and links the variety of Stockman's interests—in horticulture and agriculture, ornament and the cityscape—back to the question of the particularity of painting. There's something both purposive and factual about how

color works: Stockman is fond of mentioning that the color of flowers is keyed to the preferences of pollinating insects, and that this relationship can be expressed in terms of specific wavelengths of light — suggesting the idea that, as she puts it, “beauty has a scientific purpose.” Do our own systems of aesthetic preference have a similarly hardwired basis? The artistry of Stockman’s paintings may have less to do with her expressive abstract draftsmanship than with the achievement of unexpected and satisfying color harmonies: the way a band of geranium orange-red vibrates against a field of deep Giotto blue, for example. These effects are measurable; we can say how they work, but not, perhaps, why they move us when encountered in a work of art.

It’s no wonder that the modernist critics of painting elevated color above design as one of the medium’s supposed essential qualities, since color gets us most of the way from science to desire. It also leaves us with some questions: is color really in the flower, or for that matter, on the canvas? Is sensuality an attribute of a painting, in the way its palette and facture are? Stockman’s paintings don’t propose any answers, but they do suggest that art, like desire, is all about practice and projection. Tending imaginary gardens involves real work, and makes for real pleasure.

1. All quotations from an interview with the author.