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## Gail Salzman . *Soundings*

by Eleanor Heartney



As Heraclitus famously noted, you can't step in the same river twice. River water is never still. It rushes around rocks, laps against river banks and flows into countless tributaries. It is ever shifting, constantly pooling, splashing, and casting up bits of flotsam and jetsam that just as quickly submerge and disappear down the rippling current. You can no more grasp a river than you can hold on to a moment in time. For Heraclitus, water is thus a metaphor for the principle of change that underlies all reality.

**Gail Salzman's *Soundings*** presents a visual evocation of this idea. In her oil paintings, energy, consciousness and matter converge to immerse the viewer in a world of movement and change. Her works present lush fields of luminous color that seem not so much consciously constructed as called into being by the elemental forces of nature. One feels in them the glint of light off the surface of water, the shadows of fauna and flora rustling in the current below, the action of wind stirring just above the skin of the water. The paintings are built of translucent layers of fluid colors, rich with the traces of half hidden markings and half suggested forms. They invite the viewer to linger on surfaces scattered with twisting tendrils, rivulets of color and veils of atmospheric paint. At the same time they draw the eye down to into mysterious depths. They evoke the feeling of double sight created when one simultaneously perceives the reflective skin and the glassy transparency of moving water.

It comes as no surprise to learn that Salzman has lived for forty years in Vermont, and that the natural world in general, and water in particular, has been her greatest inspiration. But Salzman is less interested in illustrating landscape than in becoming one with it. A sense of nature's flux informs her working process and her treatment of materials. Her paintings emerge from an intuitive interplay of a remarkable variety of mark making techniques. Actual brushwork is rare in

these works, which instead come into being through the actions of pouring, spreading, rolling, scraping, and pressing pigments against the hard surface of aluminum, wood or paper. Over the years, Salzman has created an ever evolving vocabulary of approaches to paint, many of them the result of happy accidents. The delicate patterns of capillary like drips in works like *Low Tide* or *Shallows* came about when she inadvertently pressed a scrap of wood panel over a blob of paint mixed with medium, causing the paint to seep out in this distinctive way. The palette series represented in this show originated in Salzman's practice of scraping the day's left over paint onto pieces of paper. She was intrigued by the configurations that resulted, which in many cases resembled shadow images which could serve as the basis for further compositions.

The works in this exhibition are connected, not only in their sources of inspiration, but also through Salzman's spirit of experimentation and intuition. There is a symbiotic relationship between the various formats on view here. The small works on wood were born of necessity, their portability allowing Salzman to capture her impressions during yearly trips to Maine, where larger apparatus would be impractical. The experience of this environment, rich with tidal pools, drifting seaweed and aquamarine ocean waters, lies behind the glowing transparent hues that are visible in all Salzman's works. In some cases, motifs from these small paintings, reworked and transformed, become the germ of the larger aluminum works.

These larger scaled paintings, meanwhile, originate in part from Salzman's fascination with the printmaking process. Experiments with monotypes lead her to search for other surfaces that offer similar resistance against the paint, allowing it to pool and spread without the absorption that characterizes more traditional canvas supports. Large panels of coated aluminum proved ideal for this approach. They also allowed her to create more expansive compositions that literally pull the viewer into an alternate reality. Each offers a glimpse of a distinctive world, ranging from the jewel like tones and whiplash movement evoked in *Undercurrent* to the chilly stillness of *Deep Midwinter*.

The third component of this exhibition consists of the palette series. With their reverse impressions created from scrapings from the day's detritus, they are closest to the monotype process and are filled with thinly layered color. Here again, the range of effects is quite diverse, with some compositions suggesting layers of sky and clouds settling over horizons suffused with light and others enacting the lazy pull of gravity through some fluid solution.

Taken together, the works here are full of subtle variations of color, form and line that evoke nature without defining it. In this they are in keeping with Salzman's philosophy of expression. She notes that she does not believe in pure abstraction. This is a vision she shares with inventors of painterly "abstraction" as diverse as Vasily Kandinsky, Jackson Pollock and Helen Frankenthaler, all of whom dispensed with recognizable imagery, not to depart from reality, but to go more deeply into it. For Salzman as well, the world of nature that originally inspired these paintings remains intimately embedded in them. To create these works, she bypasses her conscious mind, allowing aesthetic decisions to well up from that mysterious place within where memory mingles with perception. For the viewer, a similar abandonment of literal meaning is necessary. These paintings reach across and under the surface of everyday life, touching deeper chords that we all share.

*Soundings*, the title of this show, points to the way these paintings should be experienced. A sounding tests the depth of water, offering an apt metaphor for the immersive quality of these works. But the term also reminds us that sound has a peculiar relationship to time. A single note may last only an infinitesimal moment, but memory and anticipation give it a presence that far outlasts its literal life. Using the medium of paint, Salzman works a similar operation on the fleeting impressions of light and color that comprise our perception of the visible world. She arrests time's flow in order to thrust us more fully into its embrace.

- Eleanor Heartney is contributing editor to *Art in America* and *Artpress* and the author of many books and articles on contemporary art. Her awards include the College Art Association's Frank Jewett Mather Award and the French government's Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.