

Sally Bowring
Walking: An Exhibition of Works on Paper
W/S Gallery, Charlottesville, VA
April 2012

Sally Bowring has always thought of herself as an abstract painter, a part of that international attitude, for it is hardly a movement, that began in the early years of the last century and continues to the present. Her recent works, paintings on paper collectively titled “Walking,” don’t deviate from this. They not only stand in opposition to figurative work based on Pop sensibilities and commercial culture, but also reject the various strains of technology-based art promoted as the latest manifestation of the avant-garde.

However, this does not mean she sees her work as related to an International-style abstraction that has become such a staple of the marketplace in recent years, the kind of work that has a sense of place-less-ness about it, belonging everywhere and yet nowhere, all at the same time. Such work reflects what Donald Kuspit has called “aesthetic management,” the manipulation of visual elements to produce an aesthetically acceptable work, something pleasing to the eye but otherwise undemanding of the viewer.

In rejecting such approaches Bowring should not be seen as a retrograde artist, someone taking an anti-avant-garde position. No, she is simply ignoring approaches she deems no longer relevant to art-making in the 21st century—the idea of the avant-garde is, after all, over 100 years old. The approach she does take has, in a certain sense, something in common with that of Kandinsky, especially as seen in his early abstractions from around 1913. It is not just the improvisatory feel of her work or the way she combines drawing with gestural brushwork that recalls Kandinsky. It is something more important, a shared belief that art can do more than simply adorn a wall, that it can provide a deeply felt and meaningful experience for the viewer.

Where Bowring and Kandinsky differ is that her lyrical abstractions are not in the service of an apocalyptic vision of some cosmic world. They are grounded, literally, in the experience of walking outdoors and looking carefully at nature. What she offers in doing this is a world of quiet contemplation, something that comes from paying careful attention to small events, to those little things that make up the everyday—the way light hits a tree in the autumn; the way berries ripen in the late summer sun; the way a branch curls and twists against the afternoon sky. Her close-ups of such things, often combined with more distant views, result in collage-like compositions that bring attention back to the here and now that is the everyday. Grounded as they are in the particulars of the world around us, the paintings in “Walking” are gentle reminders that seemingly insignificant things form the background against which life itself is lived.

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