

Capturing the Beast in the Beauty – Cindy Moore

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Heather Hutchison, Heaven's Harvest. Courtesy of Margaret Thatcher Projects.

More akin to the simplified beauty of James Turrell than the stark face of minimalism, Heather Hutchison's recent work elaborates on her trademark technique of suggested space through veiled color. The panels consist of simplified planes in translucent hues. Fluid strokes of tinted wax appear as bands across a Lucite surface. A soft glow emanates from within the wooden frames, shallow, pine boxes that appear to capture the alchemical reaction between light and color.

Hutchison's paintings are impossible to experience through reproductions. No matter how skilled the photographer, they cannot be captured in a fixed moment. The work is responsive in a way alien to traditional painting; as the light shifts so does the hue. These paintings demand an active perception and in the process, they make transparent the act of looking.

I met with the artist recently at Margaret Thatcher Projects to learn more about her unique history with wax and to discuss the latest show, "Night Clear as Day." As she explained, this work was born of serendipity. Her first introduction to beeswax was 18 years ago while working as an assistant to the painter, Joseph Amar. Simultaneously, she was living above the Plexicraft shop on 24th Street, experimenting with their scraps. It was only a matter of time before the Plexiglas and wax came together.

Hutchison was 24 at the time and had only recently moved to New York; it was a period of great intensity in the studio. She recalls, ironically "I had never been to the East Coast and I came to New York in search of the light of Edward Hopper and Guy Pene Du Bois." Instead, like a number of exiled Californians, it was the yearning for lost light that inspired her. "I do think the early work that was consistently blue had its genesis in my longing for sky. I was creating sky in New York City where there was none."

Owing to her early success, the work that followed developed in the public eye. But as her work matured, the process retained its immediacy. Still very much a dialogue between the painting and the artist, there is no mistaking these objects as anything other than handmade. The waver in the brushstrokes offers glimpses of her hand; drips of excess paint accentuate the edges of the frame. Despite the otherworldliness of the paintings, these small touches remind the viewer that this is a very human pursuit.

The recent show has a number of innovations that, like the paintings, are seemingly slight but overwhelmingly powerful. Areas of black now punctuate the panels. The utter opacity of the paint serves as a point of reference for the areas of translucent color, like the sensation of holding your breath to appreciate the first gasp of air. In discrete areas, strips of unadorned Plexiglas reveal the wood of the frame beneath, highlighting the slight imperfections that inspire Hutchison as she works, "the grain, the warp of the plywood I've ripped, the rhythm where the knots appear." Pigment now extends past the picture plane onto the edges, producing a reflective light that alters the hue of the shadows around it, optically engaging the gallery walls. The paintings are reactive, not meant to be looked at so much as looked through.

Many of these changes started to appear in Hutchison's work while she was working with images of Hurricane Katrina fresh in her mind. Like many worldwide, she was deeply affected by the extreme brutality of the natural force while drawn to its innate beauty. The "Night Clear as the Day" exhibition is an ode to that conflict, an attempt to acknowledge the devastating beauty through paint.

Although its economy of means is more reminiscent of the LA Light and Space movement, this body of work is Romantic at its core. The sense of wonder it evokes is akin to more grandiose predecessors, 19th Century painters such as Caspar David Friedrich and Albert Bierstadt. Admiration tinged with fear is ever-present in their sublime vistas. The natural wonders they reveal are underscored by man's minuscule role in the machinations of the earth, a humbling yet spiritual experience. Throughout Heather Hutchison's work, we find a similar Emersonian belief in transcendence.

I was reminded of the literary connections when I asked her about the naming of the work. She confessed that the titles were borrowed from poetry. After the paintings are complete she sits down in front of them with a pile of books, reading until a phrase resonates. The process strikes me as a perfect example of the directed intuitiveness that drives this work. After meeting with Heather Hutchison, I am also struck by how much of the artist is contained within these seemingly reductive paintings. Both reflect an intensity that is without pretension, a genuine openness. In this body of work, Heather Hutchison invites a more active perception, one that takes places outside of explanation.

If Heather Hutchison's paintings are impossible to experience through reproductions, they are equally difficult to capture through words. These I will borrow from the artist; "since their creation was not driven by conceptualization but by instinct, what I can say about them is only a fragment of what they are."

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