

Art in America

MAY 2008

Rifka Milder at Merge

Rifka Milder is an oil painter's painter. Her first major solo exhibition, this show featured abstractions of New York City's green spaces and architecture as seen reflected in urban bodies of water, ranging from puddles to a lake in Central Park. Milder's new paintings are fearless and poetic, and very different from her earlier work, which was more conventionally representational. She quickly tosses you into a luscious multi-layered abstract reality, achieving

equilibrium between the competing creative concerns of pure process and observational reporting.

The seven small- and medium-size canvases (all 2007) were developed from plein-air studies, photographs and drawings made in Central Park and downtown Manhattan. They have a strong interdisciplinary bent, channeling everything from the shimmering saturated coloration of Fauvism to contemporary graffiti.

Winter Red Sky captures the reflection of a winter sunset. It resonates on both visual and sonic planes, as it harks back to early 20th-century artists, such as Mondrian and Kandinsky, whose abstractions were inspired by contemporary music. Its bowed gridlike composition suggests winter's psychological compression. A cobalt blue background seems to seep through the city's grid, like the onset of a cold evening as the sun goes down.

Falling Sky IV is a fractured composition of blue, yellow, ocher and green forms, possibly suggesting the reflections of passing clouds and the shadows of local flora. The viewer's eye is led around the canvas by bold shapes and the

subtle interactions of the fore-, middle- and background. Milder's use of a limited palette accentuates internal rhythms, and deals as much with surface, texture and luminosity as it does with recording this fleeting sensory experience.

Urban Pond I, II and III are excellent examples of Milder's willingness to take chances. Soft abstract swirls suggest a watery surface, as if a rowboat had just swept across the canvas, disrupting everything in its wake. In *Urban Pond I*, an ocher and orange form thrusts down from the top edge, its blue spots suggesting windows; the image could be the familiar San Remo apartment building on Central Park West. Precisely modeled and heavily foreshortened fish and fowl are also visible in the watery scenes. This partnership between illusion and allusion creates multiple narrative possibilities.

—Joe Lewis

Rifka Milder: *Urban Pond I*, 2007, oil on canvas, 48 by 36 inches; at Merge.

