

Kathy Goodell
Infra-Loop:
A Survey of Work 1994-2020

“Painting is the adventure into an inner space which cannot be measured by yardsticks nor light-years. A space where thought travels faster than light, where the nearest is also the farthest, where the smallest sea-shell curves are as meaningful as the galactic spiral and the eye of the mind at once beholds worlds gone and to come.”

-Wolfgang Paalen, for the catalog of
the *Dynaton* exhibition at SFMA in 1951

Kathy Goodell’s work remains a mysterious synthesis. It has always determined itself as a kind of *non-specificity*, one that resists easy classification and interpretation. The meaning of her work, and context through which we are to understand it, is simultaneous and withheld- west coast spiritualism meets east coast abstraction; procedural non-objectivity blends with painterly biomorphism; protean theosophy informs post-modernist contemporary. If she is a mystic, she is a mystic of incommensurability, developing an I Ching of opposition and contradiction. Happily, Goodell is beginning to be appreciated for this complexity and versatility, as curators and critics become increasingly suspicious of the over-professionalization of artists and studio practices oriented around marketable singularity. Goodell embraces metonymic works as a rejection of this commercial impulse. Her work continues to be responsive, both to the changing parameters and conventions of painting and also to non-hierarchical material play and techniques. Associated with many movements and contemporaries, Goodell’s career charts a path and fills in the gaps of what we think about art in the ‘90s, ‘00s, and the present. She remains a moving target, an artist that is constantly challenging and reinventing her practice.

But within her work there is an internal ellipse, an infra-loop that connects her work across materialist exploration and the decades of her career—one that is backwards, forwards, and transpositional. The dialectics and investigations Goodell pursues within the metaphysical and transcendental span across mediums. They are renegotiated, re-examined, and returned to in a forever horizontality. In many ways she is the literalization of Henri Focillon’s theory of forms in *Vie des Formes*, a belief that abstract forms are re-occurring, cyclical, and responsive to their time rather than unique and individualistic. Goodell’s metaphysical search and the themes of her work seem like the epigenetic recognitions of reincarnation, a removed familiarity felt between objects, drawings, and paintings sometimes decades apart. To recognize this reborn familiar, we have to walk the transcendental path as well, witching for objects, auguring for images, and feeling out the needs and indecipherable groans of Platonic forms through an aesthetic haruspexia.

Goodell was born in San Francisco, where she studied at Sacramento State University under Jim Nutt before transferring to the San Francisco Art Institute. At the Art Institute, she more directly assimilated west coast counter-culture. Her education came from Frank Owen, his skin paintings and tool building; Jay Defeo, and the internal journey that expresses itself as a monumental flex; and maybe even in the empty pools and conceptual mysticism of Matt Mullican, the conceptual wing of the Pictures Generation. But perhaps even more relevant is a

relationship to the transcendentalist desert painters of Southern California—of which she was only twice removed—Agnes Pelton, the illustrations and writings of Annie Besant's *Thought Forms*, Raymond Jonson and Emil Bisttram, and, potentially even Morris Graves' spiritualism that isn't constructed or unconstructed, a practice merging mystery, mysticism, and spirituality with non-objective painting.

I believe it is important to understand this relationship and its departure, specifically when it comes to her painting. The artists surrounding *Thought Forms* utilized it as a painterly manifesto that adhered to a rigor of shape making, form, and color choice—each earnestly developed out of a belief that there could be a tangible language of spiritual enlightenment. Their painting was biblical, a product of earnest channeling and divination that informed their automatic drawing. Goodell has managed to keep the rigor while jettisoning the didactic, which may be in large part due to her move to New York in the '80s. Potentially, it was the company she kept, conceptual artists like Hannah Wilke, that relaxed the requirements and theory of theosophy and motivated it towards a cooler formalism.

Goodell's earliest work took the form of sculpture, and was well received in the late '80s and '90s, establishing her as a well-respected materialist and sculptor. In *New York Art World*, Donald Goddard wrote about her exhibition at the Queens College Art Center in 2000:

"One approaches Kathy Goodell's sculptures with caution and a sense of immanence, not necessarily as opposed to transcendence but as of another presence—in addition to our own, that is, circumscribed as it is. They appear to have life; they must be capable of movement or heat or light, or even perceiving, an instinctual rather than conscious or threatening indication of being. Partly it is because they seem to be, like ourselves, vulnerable. They are armored but the armor itself is vulnerable."

Similar to her current paintings, the sculptures seemed to *express themselves*, to offer themselves as a specificity that is undisclosed or withheld from us. Color within these works, was largely left to process and material investigation rather than application, the serious affectual modesty of monumental minimalist sculpture. Translucency and space were balanced with weight and physicality.

Take *Conjunctio*, Goodell's sculptural piece from 1994. Organizing glass and salt into two long, criss-crossing rows, the piece addresses symmetry, physical vs. felt weight, and nods towards Minimalism in its usage of non-art material, as it becomes something akin to a science fiction of itself. It hovers just a few inches above the ground, the tension is felt in the small space between the work and the floor while the sculpture itself is allowed to remain elegant. But this suspension is what activates the magical. The small space (just a few inches) contains so much energy—and the interesting contradictions between weight made weightless.

But counter to Serra's verb sculptures, Goodell's sculpture resisted the certainty of action in exchange for theosophical and perceptual questioning. In the Buzzcocks 1978 song "I Don't Mind" Peter Shelley sings

"Reality's a dream
A game in which I seem to never find out just what I am
I don't know if I'm an actor or ham

A shaman or sham, but if you don't mind, I don't mind”

This is a theosophy that could be sung by Goodell's objects just as easily as it could be expressed by her. The objects seem to be devout in a language of mysticism or spiritualism that our reality doesn't have. At times, they become Platonic and pantheistic—religious without doctrine. They play with light and weight, translucency, stacks, and weaving. They adhere to a strict language of materials and processes for their formal investigations. The repetition apparent in the making lends itself to this spiritualist reading, as the repetition works towards symmetry without function, an intensity that refuses purpose.

After her sculptural works, Goodell shifted towards abstract painting through her focus on the convex lens in her monumental work *Mesmer Eyes*, followed by her closer examinations in the “Phantasmagoria” series. Her lens drawings are created through a complex, performance of letting inks and paint situate on the surface of yupo in a bath, borrowing from the craft of paper marbling. Each of these lens drawings hits a sharp edge, creating a sculptural image-object form on the page. You can see her working through the drawings like a sculptor: the colors are chosen, but their manipulation is largely left to process. Form and shape are privileged.

But since these drawings, Goodell has stepped squarely into the languages of abstract painting. There's a playfulness with color and shape making, and a relationship to contemporary updates to push/pull abstraction—Ron Gorchov with some more moves and complexity; the early etchings of Howard Hodgkin, shapes spilling over cut-out window spaces.

Goodell's latest paintings grapple with more traditional archetypes- stretched canvas, rectilinear format, oil and acrylic paint. The new addition is airbrush which Goodell uses to find the mystic voice in the more traditional framework. It provides another link to Raymond Jonson's early watercolors that were applied with an airbrush and compressor. The marks come in and out of focus; the floating, cloud-like lines of spray react to the graphic and plastic marks. The canvas acts like a formless apeiron, letting the immaterial marks slowly grow edges and boundaries. This seems like it acts as an update to her earlier interest in pentimento, replacing physicality and labor with illusion. But it acts the same way; we are made aware of an “underneath” to the images, and an excavation happening to retrieve it.

Arabesque and *Visitation* have a graphic sex appeal to them. Goodell allows for a distinctive image/ground relationship that is calming and formal, while engaging an electric play of color. Both of them came from drawings Goodell made on her iPad, and they both retain a relationship to the screen. But the surprise to these paintings is in the subtle depth achieved in the negative space. In *Visitation*, Goodell's use of airbrush sends the “sea-shell curves” deep into the surface of the painting, allowing the hard edge shapes (which have a very painterly application) to form a floating, vibrating screen of a deep black blue (achieved through several glazes of Ultramarine and Prussian Blue). A space where “The nearest is also the farthest” as Paalen would say. The colors subvert the complexity and formal rigor of the painting, and keep it dazzling rather than over-serious and high-minded. But don't lose sight of the serious aesthetic lift—it's a stunning visual accomplishment.

Goodell stays away from the rote images of pantheism. There are no signs of rebirth, of eyes, of flight, or of soul. Instead, it seems like the brushiness of Elaine De Kooning is scattered

across a field, carved into distinct metonyms that are missing the in-between joints and hardware that would allow for recognition and representation.

Consider *Cathexis* and *In a Land Where We Never Grow Old*, their similarities and differences. Both work with a scattered field, where we are thinking of direction but not finality. But *In a Land Where We Never Grow Old* the work seems topographical in a way that *Cathexis* isn't. We seem to have an aerial or drone view on a series of razor-thin marks that conjure relationships to De Kooning's *Excavation* painting, Twombly without the diagonals and overlap, and Pollock—more spots than long drips. The work is related to the grid and has more of an up-down left-right composition. *Cathexis*, on the other hand, creates a swirl of these flourishing marks of color, where marks have a closer relationship to words and language than geography and aerial perspective.

It is a kind of painting that rewards close looking and extended contemplation. The surface of the paintings aren't meant to hold together. They don't resolve. Instead, they provide an endless dance of dashes and curls of color. At times it is possible to interpret a great collision, or an energetic unraveling, as marks condense towards a churning mass. But overall, there is a wariness of figure/ground, of distinction, of difference, that borders on the early all-over fields of Georgiana Houghton, the fragmented windows into a supernatural and non-physical reality. Gestural, twirling marks made of round brushes dance up the sides as an archaeology of color traps space towards the center. Each surface can almost be read as a parsed out image flow—a dictionary of marks that it would take to make up a painting we can't materialize, a floating index.

These drawings and paintings flourish in every direction, but allow for different investigations—language and geography. For Goodell, this slower speed of reception is to explore “the cathexis of painting,” a condition that is allowed by creating multiple points of entry and exit within each picture. “I want my paintings to reveal that life is ever changing, hence, why I only present fragments of information from 'our' world which might only be noticed for a moment, only long enough to engage but not long enough to stay still and be named. The multiple entry points in the painting prevent a state of stillness.”

A tantric vibration. An infra-loop. Recognition without the comfort of knowledge. We are all invited to engage in this slow unwind, a spiritual paradox, a map to nowhere but the soul through a mortal and material coil.