

Open to Experience

Gail Salzman, Furchgott Sourdiffe Gallery

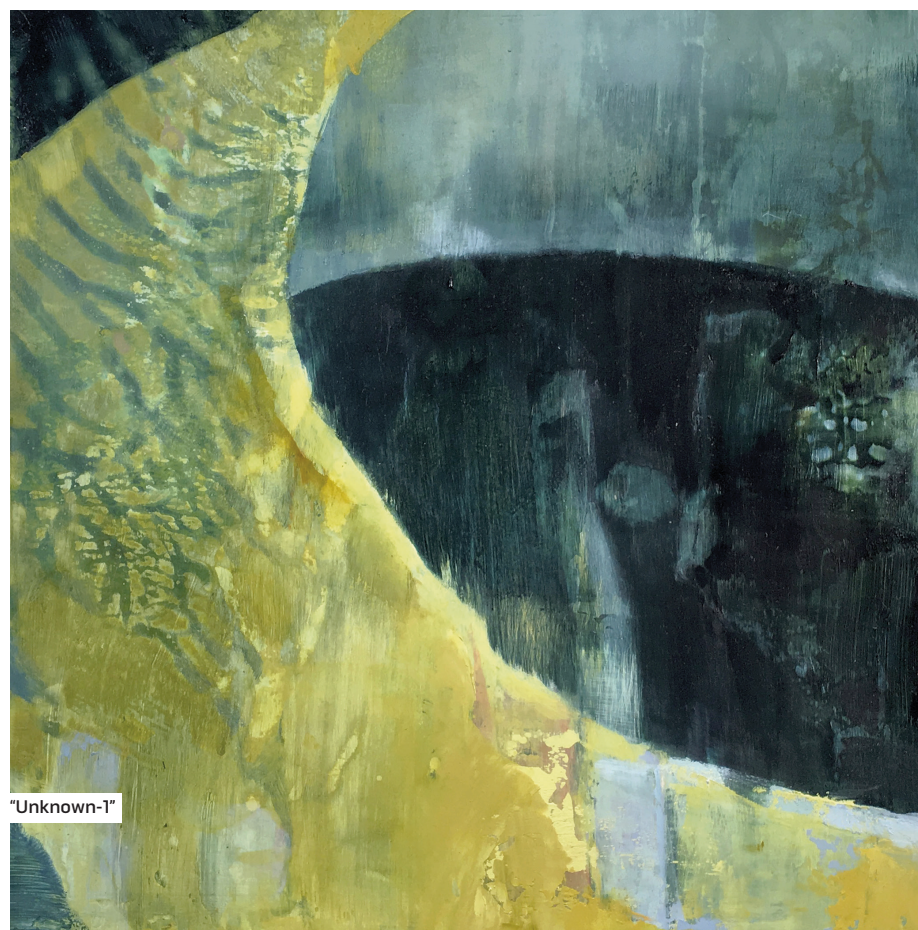
BY AMY LILLY

Gail Salzman's paintings might all be categorized as abstract, but they are not similar. Each is a unique exploration of color, texture, time and composition that has little to do with the others.

That aspect of this deeply experienced artist's work — Salzman has been painting for 54 years — is apparent at her current show at Furchgott Sourdiffe Gallery in Shelburne. "New Paintings: Unknown Time & Place" features unusually small works for this typically large-format painter: two dozen

REVIEW 8-inch-square paintings and three 14-inch-square ones, all on cotton paper mounted on wood panel. The scale — new for the artist and due partly to physical limitations — allows viewers to see a world of differences among her pieces in a single room.

Salzman works in oil layered on acrylic. Without using brushes, she applies a layer of acrylic paint to the cotton paper, letting it flow and drip almost randomly. Then she alternately builds up and sands, scrapes or presses down multiple layers of oil paint. Color patterns emerge: earthy or chartreuse greens beside rusty reds, cerulean blue and white touched with violet or accented with orange-red.



"Unknown-1"

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Paintbrushes come into play only rarely, creating the odd straight line or geometric form. Otherwise, Salzman's compositions are explorations of curves, arcs, ovals and paths of flow or blockage. At times, these nature-invoking forms appear to coalesce into landscapes: shimmering lakes, heavy cloudscapes, tall walls of dark rock.

They also can suggest specific references. "Unknown-1" evokes a yellow crescent moon or banana; "Unknown-7," a low doorway through which a sculpture-like black tangle can be glimpsed; "Unknown-20," the delicate capillaries of a lung. (Salzman achieves this effect



"Unknown-20"



"Unknown-7"

with a pressure technique borrowed from printmaking.)

The Fairfield artist means for such imaginings to occur to viewers. She believes that there is no absolute abstraction in art. It's a lesson, Salzman says by phone, that she taught students for 30 years at the Community College of Vermont and continues to teach at Burlington City Arts. (She recently retired from CCBV.) A work may look abstract, she says, but "we still draw from our memories and experiences."

And, while she usually names her paintings, Salzman left the works in "New Paintings" untitled. "I had a strong sense that each of these was a glimpse of something that had many other things going on," she explains. "I wanted them to stay open to viewers' experiences."

The works at Furchgott Sourdiffe have depth — perhaps of memory and experience, but certainly of physical texture, achieved through repeated layering and sanding over time. Salzman began this series three years ago during a fellowship with the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts.

Her work defies the current visual environment, which tends to value design that packs a punch — particularly in advertising and film. Instead of offering immediate impact, Salzman's paintings ask for a different kind of viewing: slow, concentrated, at close range.

Part of the intrigue of her works is puzzling over which aspects are due to intention and which to accident. Salzman says her process involves moving back and forth between the two until a painting is, in her estimation, finished.

For instance, in "Unknown-25" — one of the three larger paintings and a particularly striking composition — the artist appears to have left a long, central drip of orange-red in place



while adding an arc of the same color above. Reddish drips speckle the right edge, but they have been blurred. The paint seems to have been sanded down on the right of the central drip to reveal a vertical panel of deep blue, while a similarly shaped bar of white on the left seems to have been added atop other colors.

Like many artists, Salzman began as a figurative painter and has moved to (what appears to be) complete abstraction of forms in nature. Her last figurative series, from 23 years ago, featured female nudes swimming in water alive with light and shadow; the work was included in a 1995 show at Furchgott Sourdiffe titled “3 Figurative Painters.” It was during her exploration of swimmers, Salzman says, that she “became more intrigued with and emotionally connected to the water.” Eventually the figures dropped out.

Viewers of Salzman’s newest works may find themselves in a position not unlike those swimmers in her earlier work: immersed in a beautiful and constantly shifting liquid environment. ⑦

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INFO

Gail Salzman, “New Paintings: Unknown Time & Place,” through October 9 at Furchgott Sourdiffe Gallery in Shelburne. fsgallery.com