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## Provincetown Abstracts

by André van der Wende



Helen Miranda Wilson, *Double Dream*, oil on panel, 12 x 12", 2007. Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York.

found a way to create this new language of poetry, continuing the strong tradition of abstract painting in Provincetown. When Hans Hofmann came to Provincetown in 1933, he challenged the ongoing tradition of impressionist painters influenced by Charles Hawthorne. It caused an ideological rift between "traditional" and "modern" camps, and over the course of four decades, Hofmann's impact solidified the legitimacy of abstraction, paved the way for abstract expressionism, and influenced generations of artists and teachers.

Before she turned to abstraction, Helen Miranda Wilson had a successful career painting land- and skyscapes, still lifes, and figures—all beautifully observed and rendered with lofty precision and impeccable surfaces. Her work has always been categorized by the poetic acumen of her eye; in many ways, her abstractions are not so far removed from her pictorial work. A rigorous, thoughtful observer with a rich ability to look beneath the appearance of things, Wilson's step into the nonobjective is a move from the world of appearances, to a purely sensory world made of color, light, and temperature.

Wilson talks of the shift in a more pragmatic way, explaining that it was in response to the busy life she maintains outside the studio. Heavily involved in town politics, Wilson serves on several boards and committees at any one time. "I wanted to make things simpler and simpler, and I didn't want to think about reality," she says.

There are no frames, and there is no plan besides painting left to right, top to bottom, working on several small, gessoed panels at once. "I don't think about my work. I just sit down and I do it," she explains. Mixing her oils with no medium, she chooses her colors intuitively: "I use everything and I don't repeat." Her deep pigments seem to be scented by crisp mornings and hazy afternoons, a palette attuned to her bucolic setting. Besides harvesting honey, Wilson tends chickens and keeps a large vegetable garden.

About eight years ago, not long after she first started keeping bees, Wellfleet painter Helen Miranda Wilson abandoned representational subject matter for nonobjective work. It is as though she were responding to these words from Louis Malle's film *My Dinner with André*: "What we need is a new language, a language of the heart...that is a new kind of poetry, that's the poetry of the dancing bee that tells us where the honey is."

Turning out quietly sublime abstractions—first, as colored grids of rectangles and most recently, as stripes of sweet-and-sour color—Wilson makes a strong case for the enduring potency of modernism and abstraction, especially on Cape Cod, where abstraction and the confluence of land, sea, and sky have long made comfortable bedfellows.

Helen Miranda Wilson, Irene Lipton, and Mike Carroll are three contemporary painters who have



Irene Lipton, *MP401*, oil on canvas, 40 x 48", 2008.

It accounts for a certain profundity in her work. Her



Mike Carroll, *Physiognomy*, oil and graphite on panel, 8 x 11", 2008.

paintings are expansive and private, but their saturated, waxy surfaces are approachable and engaging. It's not hard to imagine her luminous fields of color as a bird's-eye view of her own verdant garden: a flurry of baby lettuces or the staunch kale that grows so freely there. She has always played with this vertiginous sense of the world, with extreme views looking up from below or down from above, creating arresting images of an azure sky or a full moon behind a bank of burnished cloud.

The drama occurs where her ribbons of color meet at their edges. In *Italian*, they leech and bleed, tenuously sampling one another's character with a feathery touch. A hush, a cool breeze, the patter of rain, or the ripple of the ocean as it meets the horizon—it's all there.

Colors ebb and flow from light to dark, like an inhale/exhale, a rhythmic coexistence of warm tones punctuated by sharp thrusts of deep plum and bottomless black. It's a sign of how good Wilson is with color, balancing the spectrum in incongruous ways without ever tipping the balance toward incoherence. A lesser artist might trip up, but for Wilson it's like the dance of the honeybee.

Michael Carroll and Irene Lipton, two mid-career painters, are further evidence that abstraction continues to maintain a tenacious hold on Cape Cod. Paul Resika has referred to Lipton's work as being within the great modern tradition of Provincetown art. And while Lipton and Carroll have an understanding of the ripple effect of Provincetown's legacy, they also share an equal understanding of their own places within it. Michael Carroll feels "the job of a painter is to discover and render the fullest articulation of what that painting is." If his notion of allowing a painting to declare itself through a refined "set of circumstances" sounds suspiciously like the modernist ethos of a painting's "essence," then Carroll's participation manages to add a contemporary sheen to a long-established precept.

He creates intimate semi-abstractions that incorporate imagery within a network of pattern. Referencing textile and wallpaper design with a graphic sensibility, Carroll's use of images enriches the work immensely. While the stream of water in *Thief of Time* can be read as simply another textural element, his co-opting of images for what they stand for, rather than for what they are, is at the heart of Carroll's emblematic form of abstraction. "I don't want to paint a boat so you can experience the feeling of buoyancy. I want to paint the experience of buoyancy," he states.

Working predominately on small, wooden panels just shy of precious, Carroll painstakingly arranges a jamboree of color and shape as a visual "metaphor" for "memory and emotional responses," he explains. "I use feelings of frustration, lateness and haste, hopefulness, other people's art, conversations that I can't shake, the temperature of the room."

Referring to the bulbous shapes on one panel as "noses and mustaches," there's a cartoonish impudence to Carroll's goofy forms and deliberately jarring color schemes that serves him well. Some panels are smothered in a decorative rush reminiscent of Rex Ray; others have the tripped-out feel of the animation for *Yellow Submarine* or Bruno Bozzetto's *Allegro Non Troppo*. Carroll's skirmishes with hot color and haughty detail spoof grand decoration, while indicating he knows the difference between beauty and frivolity.



Helen Miranda Wilson, *Russian*, oil on panel, 20 x 16", 2008. Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York.

"I like paintings that are beautiful," but, Carroll counters, "I think discomfort is very beautiful." They're seductive—but smart—paintings, "a gathering place," he says, "of different textures and different sensations."

Originally from New York City, Irene Lipton started coming to the Cape on summer vacations with her parents. Whereas the city cramped Lipton's work—there was a ten-year period in which she stopped painting—the expanse of the Cape coaxed it back into existence. "There's always been a landscape piece to my work," she says. "I've always been affected by the space and the light here." Informed by the meandering cool of the landscape, with traces of Georges Braque's still lifes, Adolph Gottlieb's pictographs, and the refined contours of Ben Nicholson, there's a bold, contemporary dynamism that's unmistakably Lipton. The result is like seeing something familiar anew.



Irene Lipton, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 36 x 48", 2007.

Last spring, at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, Irene Lipton's marvelous exhibition with Polly Burnell had the sure-footedness of an artist hitting her stride. The generosity in large paintings like *Untitled (LP301)* made it easy to embrace the comforting armature of Lipton's arcane, sculptural robustness.

On the wall of her North Truro studio, a series of small paintings hang on clayboard. Lipton is unsure of the paintings' level of completion or direction. They're much busier than usual, with variations of the embryonic fava bean form she favors, linking arms and congregating into clusters. The color is fresh and fully lit with passages of loose and leggy line. They are a lot stronger than Lipton would have you believe.

Here, the exchanges between color and drawing are thrilling—graphite lines with a mercurial velocity, set against evocative blocks of strong color. Time is marked off in the multiple hesitations, calibrations, and overlays that imbue Lipton's work with a willful exuberance. No matter whether we recognize it as a feast of the fishes, or the gentle sway of faraway hills; when we step back to take in her painting, it's like welcoming a friend we're glad to have back.

*André van der Wende is an artist and writer who lives on Cape Cod. He has been writing about art and popular culture for the past ten years, and is the art critic for The Cape Cod Times.*

Michael Carroll  
August 15–September 3, 2008  
The Schoolhouse Gallery, Provincetown, MA  
[www.schoolhouseprovincetown.com](http://www.schoolhouseprovincetown.com)

Irene Lipton  
August 22–September 10, 2008  
artSTRAND, Provincetown, MA  
[www.artstrand.com](http://www.artstrand.com)

Helen Miranda Wilson  
August 22–September 4, 2008  
Albert Merola Gallery, Provincetown, MA  
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