

MUSEUMS & GALLERIES



Detail of Jenn Shifflet's untitled piece.

Water World

Jenn Shifflet's visionary paintings link nature and creativity.

Roger Lipsey in *An Art of our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art* describes our contemporary, postmodern, late-capitalist mindset as one of “educated irony [and] cheerful laissez-faire.” That’s way harsh, ignoring PoMo’s impressive technical/aesthetic ingenuity and its sociopolitical bona fides, but the art of the past half-century (which includes half of modernism) has generally disclaimed the utopian spiritual aspirations that inspired modernism’s founding fathers, Kandinsky, Kupka, Malevich, Mondrian, Marc, and Delaunay (“The goal of painting is to represent the Universe”). Post-war formalist art embraced symbolic flatness as eagerly as it banished perspective, space, narrative, and illusion; the realm of the sacred, mysterious, and metaphysical that preoccupied artists for millennia was declared an aesthetic dead zone.

Nature’s creativity, rather than dead zones, is the subject of **Jenn Shifflet’s** paintings, marine fantasies that seem to derive from the biomorphic surrealists (Tanguy, Arp, Ernst) and related myth-minded souls (Baziotes, Rothko, Graves). These small- to medium-size oils on panel provide intimate views into watery realms, traditionally symbolizing the unconscious, where hidden life stirs in curvilinear waves and currents; serpentine coils of smoke and cloud; jewellike clusters of orbs either real (bubbles, eggs, pearls) or optical (lens flares, reflections, afterimages); and linear strands of protoplasm or ectoplasm. Shifflet’s works, which evolve through multiple layers of glazing, balancing accident and intuition, inhabit the old abandoned symbolic realm; they synthesize opposites, being both “ethereal and organic [poised] between movement and stillness, emergence and dissolution.” With their peeps into the depths through transparent layers and membranes, they’re poetic paeans to the natural world with its cyclical time and eternal present. With their unconscious and immortal life forms, radially organized plants and anemones, they suggest the deep past — before we bilateral vertebrate mortals came along and screwed it up — or perhaps, alternatively, the post-primate future, one million C.E.

Perhaps the apocalyptic interpretation is overly pessimistic, however. Shifflet’s titles — “Waves of Spring,” “Cherished,” “A Handful of Stardust for You,” “Spring Blossom Drops” — are full of promise rather than portent. Spinoza’s phrase “natura naturans” means “nature doing what nature does”; the romantic Coleridge defined it as “nature in the active sense.” (He also invented the word *esemplastic*: shaping or having the power to shape disparate things into a unified whole.) Just as nature and divinity were once united, perhaps the marriage of nature and humanity can be saved, and a scorned and angry Mother Earth will not need to shake us enviro-sinners from her palm into the flames. **Dream Polls, Light Drifts** runs through September 26 at **Chandra Cerrito Contemporary** (25 Grand Ave., Oakland). ChandraCerrito.com/ccc or 415-577-7537

— DeWitt Cheng