

# THE COLOR OF AIR AND MEMORY

—JOHN YAU

*“At noon*

*on the beach  
I could watch  
these glittering  
waves forever*

*follow their sound  
deep into mind  
and echoes—  
let light*

*as air  
be relief”*

*—Robert Creeley  
from “This World”*

**Memory and air.** Is it enough to say you can't have one without the other? And that simple though the case may be, it is one we tend to take for granted, file away and forget. Call it living, the complexity of being in the physical world, looking at a river, clouds floating overhead, or walking through the woods with no particular destination in mind. There is far more to these experiences than just seeing. Is it any surprise then that the elemental, the bedrock of whatever lucidity we might hope to achieve, is a phenomenon that proves difficult to make into art?

It is the experience of the elemental that Mary McDonnell is trying to get into her abstract paintings. Given the history of abstraction, its roots in symbolism, it is apparent that transcendence, with all of its signs and symbols, is a far easier state to signal. And certainly it is equally apparent that, given the long history of landscape painting, the task of arriving at the earthly (or elemental) world through abstraction is one filled with all kinds of pitfalls.

McDonnell's paintings and watercolors are unadorned in a deep sense. Hers is an art without flourishes, which is not to say they are reductive or without drawing. They are done on square formats, either woodpanels or paper. Her mediums are oil paint and watercolor. She applies numerous layers of thinned oil paint with ice scrapers, squeegees, and other things which have a flat edge. The process is one of accretion, of nearly transparent bands of color becoming an inflected tonal field which evokes a whole range of associations without ever privileging one in particular. Whatever the source or sources, the outcome is specific without being anecdotal. The kind of specificity the viewer encounters in McDonnell's painting is one of the hallmarks of convincing abstraction.

McDonnell paints on the floor, with the wood panel lying flat like an absorbent table. She works from all sides, which causes the painting to have vertical and horizontal traces, faint

striations of color imbedded within the surrounding tonal field. At the same time, the wooden surface, and whatever irregularities it has (pits, nicks, scratches, and the effects of the artist's own vigorous scrapings), alters the color, as it builds up in these niches and declivities, however small or shallow. Consequently, there is no pure or solid color. There are tonalities made up of different tonalities and colors. One area bleeds into another, as well as shifts from one tonality to another. There are no hard edges, and the linear traces are changing striations of color.

Compositionally, McDonnell tends to divide her paintings into three vertically stacked, horizontal areas. This tripartite division evokes landscape as one of the sources of her paintings. While, we are accustomed to reading such divisions as earth, water, sky, or near ground, middle ground, and deep space, McDonnell subverts our responses, makes us conscious of our own habits of reading, among other things.

Instead of bringing us somewhere, as landscape paintings attempt to do, her work returns us to ourselves and to what the poet Robert Creeley calls the "echoes." In many of the paintings the top and bottom bands echo each other coloristically. If the middle band is lighter coloristically, it can be read as light breaking through, but what it is breaking through remains a mystery. It is this mystery that remains in our mind long after we have stopped looking at McDonnell's paintings. We find ourselves making associations, drawing comparisons between a painting's particular colors and tonalities and our own memories of a certain moment of light. And yet, as we know, that light is gone forever. In this sense, McDonnell's work is both celebratory and elegiacal.

McDonnell's historical precedents can be traced to the English painter Turner, to Sung dynasty landscape painting and, in the postwar era, to Mark Rothko and Brice Marden. Like Rothko and Marden, McDonnell has developed a particular way of drawing in paint. Whereas Rothko feathered his edges and Marden in his monochromatic paintings used the literal edge of his abutted canvases as a line, McDonnell's use of squeegees and ice scrapers registers the wood panel's irregularities, its uneven surface. The result is an irregular grid that is in a state of both dissolving and becoming. We are reminded that the world is never still.

Look at *The Memory Point* or *Still Point*, for example. Their grids do not dominate the composition; they are not the anchor by which the painting came into being. Rather, they seem to be the residue, the trace of both the artist's movements and a memory of the painting's surface. At the same time, they seem on the verge of becoming stronger, more apparent.

Through their registering of the artist's process, McDonnell's paintings can be said to embody both physical and visual evidence that memory and the present coincide, overlap, as well as bleed into each other. We cannot see the present without being reminded of the past, as well as pondering the future. We live in a continuum, with chaos awaiting us all. In this sense, McDonnell's paintings are true to reality because her process reminds us that seeing can never be pure, and that transcendence is at best a fiction. This sense of the world is underscored by the painting's irregular surface. The darker flecks and striations are like a visual buzz; they remind us that the air is full and busy with all kinds of life and motion, that we can never see all that is right in front of us. By not allowing our attention to rest, by in a sense undermining our ability to have our eyes stop moving, McDonnell's paintings share something with Jasper Johns's "flag" paintings, their compression of newspaper and encaustic. As in Johns's paint-

ing, the viewer's attention shifts, moves between closer scrutiny of particular incidents within the composition to an all-over contemplation of the entire painting. We cannot stand outside the world and see it, as through a window. We cannot divorce ourselves from our physical circumstances, whatever they might be. There is this world and we are in it and part of it.

The ancient Greeks thought the world was comprised of four basic elements; earth, air, fire, water. In her best paintings, McDonnell compresses these elements even further, as well as transforms them into nameless, inextricable entities of color. A tonally yellow field may evoke associations with winter sunlight, a frozen pond, the color of a particular region's soil, or the sky in a certain place at a particular time of day. Although seemingly simple and direct, McDonnell's paintings and watercolors provoke us into speculating further upon our interaction with the physical world. Why do we remember what we do? What is it that we are drawn to? And why?

McDonnell's abstractions collapse together the exterior world with the interior one we all carry around inside ourselves. Her weather is emotional without being expressionist. It is one of mood, at once enveloping and elusive. Her work quietly reminds us that even our emotions are not pure, that they too are inflected by our visions of the past and future. In McDonnell's paintings, I am thinking of such perfect gems as *Tuck and Roll*, the world becomes at once mysterious and magnetic; it draws us back again and again. What more can we ask of art than that it sustains us as we continue our passage in time?

