

Being and Belief: The Paintings of Frances Barth

By Barbara O'Brien

For both artist and viewer, resolving seeming incompatibilities is at the heart of a Frances Barth painting. In 1988, Barth started thinking about and acting on the following questions: How can I make a painting that is both panoramic and an object at the same time? How can a painting be both expansive and weighty in terms of its representation of the landscape? And if I can do all this, what size would the painting be? Over time, she added another imperative to her inquiry --- to create a painting that is in itself a new form, "a credible world that has a seamlessness about it." The paintings on exhibit at Dartmouth, nearly two dozen acrylics on canvas or panel, produced between 1997 and 2005, are a continuation of that investigation. Barth is translating the inexorably slow movement of geologic and art historic time and creating a counterpoint with the experience of viewers who stand in front of one of her paintings. Ultimately we move in tandem with the painting, a pas de deux set to our own rhythm keeping sometimes awkward, sometimes elegant time with the story, be it tragic or comic, of the painting. Don't be waylaid by the broken geometries (*I'm in a dangerous mood*, 2004) or the vertigo-inducing sensation of forms seeming to slide off the picture plane (*y-co*, and *della pink*, 2003). Barth is leading us along the path of narratives --- the biography of painting itself and the autobiography of one painter --- that reposition our knowledge of naturalism and abstraction, observation and phenomenology, the history of art and the experience of the viewer.

In conversation, Barth reveals some of the complexity of thought that goes into each painting. "The weight of and association attached to every line is considered in exacting detail. The idea for the painting is based on the premise that something that was there is no longer there. I make a fault or make signs for sedimentation. I use a stencil so that a line feels more like an artificial line than a hard drawn line." The insistent, slashing form of stenciled lines appears in *meander-o* (2003). The lines' diagonal direction quickens our reading of the painting. A band of pale salmon -- perhaps a false horizon or the edge of a built form -- stops the progress of the lines and of our gaze, but this is not a slowing down that leads to repose, as a tawny yellow winding form forces our gaze from left to right. The pelting rain and the opposing movement of forms call to mind Utagawa Hiroshige's *Ohashi Bridge Sudden Shower Near Atake* (color woodblock print, 1857) in which a row of small figures rush head-long from right to left across a mustardy-yellow bridge. The "rain" is a screen of lines that creates a separate frontal plane through which we must peer to see the action of the moment. The bridge spans the picture plane and creates a second horizon while a slim skiff rowed by a single

standing figure moves back into the picture plane. Hiroshige creates an indelible image in which the drama of rushing figures is precipitated by a brief moment in time – the “sudden shower.” The rain of Summer Shower emerges from a mulberry-black cloud that seems to be alternately atmosphere and solid mass, impressionistic moment and geometric form. This dynamic shift happens during a single viewing of Summer Shower as it does for I’m in a dangerous mood with its aerial view of a scientific representation of topography sitting on a visible, perceivable plane of land. “All of these things keep negotiating themselves, what we have kept as separate pictorial languages; Western art, Eastern art, modernism, postmodernism.”

Each color in a Barth painting is a protagonist in this drama and as a creator of scene and tableaux, she is aware of the art historical and the psychological implications as well as the contemporary and emotional resonance that each specific hue brings to bear on the reading of the painting. One tone may rest and rely quietly upon another or may activate a charged relationship. The artist is concerned that colors not make a painting “too pleasant,” but rather that all of the colors she uses relate to real spaces without being representational. The dramatic arc begins and ends with the expanded reality of the painting. In ptol. B (2003) a fragile barely-there blue could be under the ground or it could shift and be a plane or a plateau. In China BI (2003) a fault line seems to move toward a surface that is both water and the edge of the plane, both cross-section and side view. This tension is deliberate and intended to create a spatial phenomenon. The success of this strategy is intimately tied to the masterful way in which Barth creates light. “I use a particular color to introduce a kind of real light – and experience of an outdoor light.”

Each format resolves the questions of time, object, experience and meaning in a different way and attaches specific interpretations. Emo (1997) is 8 feet high x 4 feet, 4 inches wide. This format (also used by Barth for Fault, 1998) is large enough to suggest to viewers that they might enter the space of the painting. However, there is no ‘space’ in which to enter; there is a brick wall and a pattern of bars resting just behind/over/under a mountain range that is both shifting form and diagrammatic certainty. Barth relays a sense of something larger than the self, like the sea, where you can swim in it, be ensconced all around by it, but still never be able to call it your own or grasp the enormity of it. All you can perceive is the immediate, but her compositions give both simultaneous glimpses of the surface of the earth, the shifting plates on the bed of the ocean, and the endless horizon above the planet. “The motif of the brick,” says Barth “comes and goes. It is a map sign for sedimentation. Millions of years would have happened from the top of the painting to the bottom. The bigger paintings almost

become signs for things that have happened. They tell geological stories. But, the canvas is just wide enough and pretty much right at the edge of your peripheral vision. It keeps trying to move away. That makes it seem vast with a space that has expansiveness.”

The slim dimensions (both 20” x 8’) of *meander-o*, 2003 and *ptol. B*, 2003 set us up to move our gaze quickly to the edge of the painting, the edge of the painted world. In *fl-std*, 2001 (10” x 10”) the jagged geometry of fault lines meeting an architectonic form in the distance --- suggesting both surface and domicile, intimacy and expansiveness --- try to slow that down. The right-hand third of the painting is viewed through what appears to be a blue scrim creating an alternate picture plane. There is no stasis in these paintings. Barth seems to imply that indeed the insistent, invisibly slow and relentless movement of the earth itself, both above and below its surface is an honorable metaphor for the dogged pursuit of painting with its uncertain notions of success.

Barth has spent her life in New York City yet chooses to paint unpeopled abstractions of the land. She has succeeded in representing mute and inexorable change in the midst of the city that is proudly never still, meaning in the midst of a sometimes turbulent contemporary art practice where “movements” are measured in decades, not centuries. Barth long ago made her peace and kept it with the notions that have found new favor – geometric abstraction, the topographic, and Beauty – notions that may yet again fall from grace. She has not been compelled by the whims of fashion but by the imperatives of her practice; with quiet, insistent grace she has continued to paint. These are the paintings of an artist who has held faith with what every great artist must – the discovery and nurturing of her own systems of being and belief. She creates paintings that are indeed “seamless” in their breathtaking synthesis of vision, philosophy and form. And perhaps the “new form of painting” that Barth is so actively seeking in the silent dialogue of the studio and realizing in the active space of the gallery could be called Being and Belief.

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All quotes by the artist are taken from conversations between O’Brien and Barth that took place in the artist’s studio.