

the Seen and the Unseen

Jeannie Motherwell and
Deborah Barlow Show
New Work

by Brenner Thomas

It is ironic that abstract art, a category described as one of the freest and most open forms of expression, is often the most difficult to pin down. How do we begin to understand an image when we don't know exactly what we're looking at? How do you apply language to something that is often a nonverbal enterprise?

Part of the confusion stems from the fact that abstract art isn't one thing; the aesthetic can be applied in varying degrees. The work of early abstractionists—Picasso and earlier Cezanne—were literal abstractions: the distillation of real objects, landscapes etc. into more basic, essential forms. The artistic process involved reducing more traditional imagery into something else: buildings into rectangles, faces into circles, a mountain into triangles for instance.

Later, in the high Formalism of the mid-20th century, the demigods of abstraction like Pollock and Kandinsky, made images that made no reference to the "real" world. Their splatters of paint and line and color were nothing more or less than visual. They were not meant to be "read" or "understood" beyond the pigments of the picture plane itself. The triangle no longer stood for a mountain. The triangle was a triangle. In short, what you saw is what you got.

The work of Jeannie Motherwell and Deborah Barlow, two contemporary artists whose work will be showcased in a two-(wo)man show at the Lyman-Eyer Gallery opening Friday, June 25, falls somewhere in between. Neither considers themselves a realist but nevertheless the real world plays a crucial yet equally specific role in both of their work.

Jeannie Motherwell, a longtime practitioner of collage, has with her new work gotten back to her roots: painting. The new series of small images, inspired by a catalogue of work by her stepmother that were titled after Provincetown locations, is her most painterly to date. Having spent much of her childhood here with her parents, icons of American art Robert Motherwell and Helen Frankenthaler, Jeannie says her stepmother's images spawned a nostalgia and sentimentality toward Provincetown. It's been nearly half a decade since Jeannie sold her Provincetown studio, where she had worked off and on for thirty years. Seeing her stepmother's renderings of the Provincelands encouraged Jeannie to revisit the landscapes of the Outer Cape in her work. She calls it "an homage to Provincetown and the view out the window" from her studio here.



In "Bay 1 for HF" by Jeannie Motherwell, the horizon line breaks down. Or does the sky become the sea?

The window, as metaphor and an image, is important to Jeannie. Last time *Provincetown Magazine* spoke to her two years ago she was on the verge of revealing a group of pieces entitled the Window series, collages of realistic digital images and abstract design in paint framed in deep shadow boxes. She had created views into impossible yet poetic landscapes, collaborations of paint and photography. She called the window in that interview her "symbol of looking into how I see the world."

Jeannie likes to work in series. Considering that creative possibilities for an abstractionist are endless, she says this gives her something "to rely on." Though the new "Provincelands" series represent considerable formal changes in Jeannie's work—they are, for instance, all works on paper which make use of a good deal more color—windows still influence her. Gone are the deep shadow box frames, which have been replaced by a wide thick matting. "I wanted to frame them the way you'd frame a photograph," Jeannie explains. But the effect is window-like, the white space drawing you into the world of the painting which seems beyond the plane of the frame, as in "Bay 1 for HF."

But you're never really sure what that world is. The line between abstraction and realism in Jeannie's work is always tenuous. In "Bay," this line is literalized between the digital image of the dune on the right and the painterly, impressionistic sky above. Here, the realistic and the nonrepresentational meet at the horizon line. But this system breaks down as the image advances right to left, the acrylic paint of the sky encroaching on the land in cautious blue steps. Has the sky bled? Or is it water? You can't know anything for sure besides understanding that Jeannie's work never totally reveals itself. It's the nature of the aesthetic. She says she's always trying to find the fine line between abstraction and realism. "Painters that can do that just really hit me in the gut," she says. "That's the kind of look I am always seeking."

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