

## Kathryn Hart Excavates Mystery from the Palpable

“A painting with heart should come from the gut,” says Kathryn Hart, “expose a piece of the artist in a very raw way. My works reflect the human condition, all of the crags and crevices, what we want others to see and what we hide... who we are when we are alone and our endless ability to rise from the ashes.”

Indeed some of the mixed media works on wood panel in the series that Hart calls “Metamorphosis” — most particularly the irregularly shaped and proportioned triptych “Metamorphosis III” — give the impression of fragments from antiquity, with their scarred and distressed surfaces caked so thick with rugged layers of pigment as to create the weighty effect of stone tablets. Others, such as “Metamorphosis I,” with its piled and pocked tactility and prominent fissures and cracks, are almost all about surface in the manner of the European branch of Abstract Expressionism, “Tachism,” or the mixed media works of the leading Spanish painter Antoni Tàpies, who was obsessed with what he called the “noumenal” or essential spirit of materials.

In Hart’s case, in keeping with her use of the phrase “from the gut,” the surface takes on a visceral, almost sentient quality of skin, although paradoxically when figures appear in her compositions, they seep into her cracked and fissured epidermal surfaces like phantoms or shadows. It has been noted in previous reviews of Hart’s work that these haunting faceless humanoids appear to be distant relatives of Alberto Giacometti’s rail-thin sculpted personages. But while Giacometti, like his literary soul mate Samuel Beckett, was plagued for his entire career by existential doubts concerning the efficacy and meaning of art, Hart possesses an apparently unshakable sense of purpose and certainty about her creative vocation. Perhaps this comes of having discovered her true calling when she was already deeply involved in a career as a market researcher in the medical field, and suddenly finding it irresistible.

“I was always artsy as a young child, but being the youngest in a predominantly scientific family, that spark got overwhelmed. . . . One summer I took a drawing class and all of my childhood creativity and passion for art came flooding back to me. My life had always involved art but now I was the one creating. I delved into my passion, studying with artists I admire and catching up with the art education I never got.”

After first establishing a national reputation as an award winning representational painter, Hart evolved her more abstract style of personal expression, inspired by a diverse selection of older artists ranging from Bay Area (California) Expressionists like Thiebaud and Park to New York School masters such as Motherwell, Rothko, de Kooning, as well as European painters of earlier centuries — particularly Degas.

Obviously, it did not take long for Hart to meld all of these early influences into a unique personal style, which imparts a relief-like sculptural dimension to the art of painting (and comes to the forefront in Hart’s freestanding assemblage painting “Metamorphosis VI”), even while preserving the sanctity of the two dimensional picture plane so central to modernist aesthetics. For there is no room for illusion in Hart’s paintings, which excavate a deep mystery from the actual physically palpable substance of pigment, as seen in “Cocoon I.”

Here, a ghostly white figure emerges from built up layers of white-on-white impasto. Beside the figure, like something it has just shed, floats a black collage torso-like shape enlivened by white splashes and drips and connected to the panel by a length of black wire suggesting an intravenous hookup or a lifeline of some sort. Immediately above, near the top of the composition, a cloud-like form, created with crumpled, white-paint-saturated cloth, also floats freely, enhancing the sense of a submerged narrative that lends Hart’s work much of its mystery, depth, and poetry.

Those qualities come across in a subtler but no less powerful manner in “Cocoon IX,” where most of the figure vanishes into the thick, rough monochrome tactility of the paint surface, except for the contour of the head, neck, and shoulders, with a single vertical line of red extending downward from the shoulder, where the arm would normally be, like a streak of blood or an X-ray view of an artery. This, like the cracks and crevices that play such a vital part in her compositions, is an exquisite touch, demonstrating the delicacy that, along with their ruggedness of her surfaces, lends yet another asset to the paintings of Kathryn Hart.

— Ed McCormack



“Cocoon I”



“Cocoon IX”

Kathryn Hart, New Century Artists Gallery,  
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