

GROUNDING, FLOW, RELEASE The paintings of Laura Beard

By Charles Schwall
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Walking into Laura Beard's south St. Louis studio, one immediately gets the sense of an artist who embraces the process of painting with energetic force and potency. Around the studio, paintings are either hung on the walls or placed on the floor in various stages of completion. There is a feeling of powerful action throughout the entire space. She and I discussed the dynamics of her creative process, her exhibition at the Bruno David Gallery, and her views about non-objective painting.

Laura Beard's painterly abstractions are filled with gestural and vigorous brushstrokes, often pulled across the canvas in strong horizontal and vertical actions. Beard frequently paints on large sized canvases, and often her choice of scale is larger than the human body. Through the execution of brushstrokes and marks of paint, the presence of the artist's body can be felt in the paintings. Lines and forms move across the surface of each painting with unpredictable uniformity, resulting in a conception of space that is charged with latent geometry. The surfaces of the paintings are created with thick, viscous brushstrokes, but also with more open areas where all definition of mark is completely effaced.

The handling of color in her work is bold, assertive, and characterized by sharp contrast of value and intensity of hue. In *Untitled C* (2008), dark colors are heavily layered to create an expansive impasto that is unified with the lighter colors underneath. Another large piece, *Untitled K* (2008), uses opaque whites, grays, and pinks which are filled with a sense of brightness and luminosity.

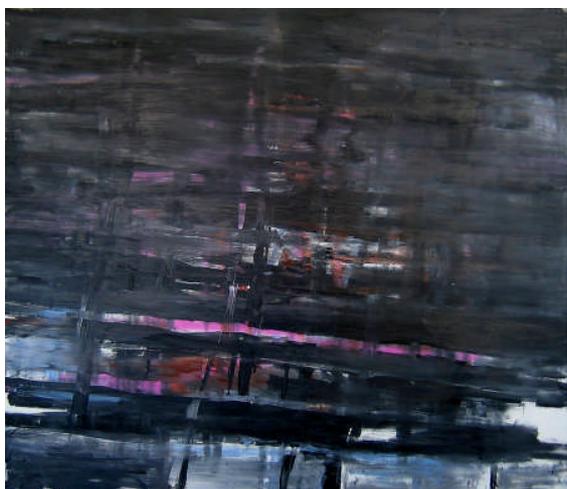
Evidence of the artist's thinking permeates each canvas. Continual revision takes place through

direct mark making, as areas of paint are at first built up, then scraped or rubbed out, and ultimately completely repainted. These processes create tension and dialogue between the opposing forces of form and formlessness; the result in the work is a sense of being almost out of control, but somehow held in balance by an implied, illusive structure.



Throughout our conversation, it became clear that Beard's creative process has no predetermined destination. One small painting on paper completed last year served as a maquette for much of the work that was included in the exhibit at Bruno David Gallery. Beard described this composition as a path or a direction to follow, rather than an end in itself. She remarked that while the maquette was a distinct beginning, it quickly becomes a formative device. She further stated by adding that once the process of making many paintings was underway, the original small maquette "became secondary, the paintings become primary."

She resists, even distrusts, the repetition of previous tactics and strategies that may have worked for her in earlier paintings. Rather, her work is born out of a continual search, discarding prior methods in favor of invention and the discovery of unforeseen solutions. This commitment to reinvention requires a cycle of ongoing effort and patience. When asked her about her studio practice, she replied, "Not knowing the outcome and exploring the process takes time." When making the work she often moves back and forth from preparation to rehearsal, then to letting go, ultimately striving to find her way into a meditative zone, a flow of energy in space and time that cannot be controlled, only released.



For Laura Beard, nonobjective painting is ultimately a way of seeing. The viewer often desires to see subject matter that is namable; Kasmir Malevich, a distinguished 20th Century

Russian abstract formalist painter, pinpointed this when he declared that people "want the promised land of representation." Beard's approach to painting, however, values process over any particular aspect or mode of representation. Her work remains detached from any specific subject matter, and she is hesitant to make associations that would send viewers in any one specific direction. Her sensibility is one that withholds the impulse to explain imagery, and instead requires the viewer to follow the artist outside the boundaries of the literal. The approach to nonobjective painting that Beard employs is not interested in subject matter, namable categories, or attached to any outside narratives. Alternatively, it is through the material of the paint and the autonomous discipline of her creative practice that Beard transcends categories and potential limitations.

—Charles Schwall

Charles Schwal is an artist, art educator and writer. Hi swork was recently shown at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, and at the Daum Museum of Contemporary Art. As an artist educator, Schwall has studied the educational system in the municipality of Reggio-Emilia, Italy, and co-edited and co-authored the book, "In the Spirit of the Studio: Learning from the Atelier of Reggio Emilia". Charles lives and works in St. Louis, Missouri. This essay is one in a series of the gallery's exhibitions written by fellow gallery artists and friends.

Images:

Untitled (black), 2008, oil on canvas, 60 x 72 inches

Untitled C, 2007-08, oil on canvas, 72 x 84 inches

ABOUT THE GALLERY

Bruno David Gallery is a contemporary art gallery and one of the most important places to see art in Saint Louis. The Gallery represents some of the best artists that Saint Louis has to offer, along with artists of national and international reputation. The editors of the St. Louis Magazine awarded the Gallery: *Best Gallery in St. Louis* in 2008. The gallery is located in the heart of the Grand Center arts district, directly opposite the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts and the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.

3721 WASHINGTON BOULEVARD SAINT LOUIS MO 63108 314.531.3030
INFO@BRUNOVIDGALLERY.COM WWW.BRUNOVIDGALLERY.COM