

# *Common Ground*

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Barbara Bartholomew

Chinyee

Betsy Stewart

Annette Turow

WALTER WICKISER GALLERY

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## **Common Ground:**

Gesture in the Art of Barbara Bartholomew, Chinyee, Betsy Stewart, and Annette Turow

In abstract painting the gesture remains of paramount importance. It is a way of communicating sensuousness and feeling; it provides a glimpse of the internal mind-state of the painter, who, in accordance with the tradition of abstract impressionism, communicates awareness and emotion in a language aptly suited to their description. The gesture is a flurry of meaning, a glance at the larger content suggested by the mark of the brush. It offers the artist the opportunity to pass on something of the self, something inherently particular to the painter's sensibility and vision. It is the way we experience the artist's essential energies, for the mark or sign on the canvas teaches us the idiom of that person alone. Despite the fact that the heyday of abstract expressionism is over, such painting remains an option, among others, to be taken up and continued within the embrace of a tradition perfectly suited to inquiry and investigation, thought as well as sentiment.

It is interesting to speculate on the affinities in the art of other cultures with the Western origins of abstract painting. There are elements in the Chinese landscape of a style whose gestural efflorescences quite nicely mimic certain elements of Western abstraction; however, the motion of the Chinese brush may express a parallel without being similar in conception. It also works the same way in reverse; for example, while the paintings of Franz Kline may look like Chinese calligraphy writ large, it is not necessarily so that his art takes such calligraphy as its model. The point is that art may well seem to imitate earlier examples of painting and yet not be beholden, in any real way, to what preceded it historically. Discoveries are made and lost and made again in the passion of the moment, whose immediate intensity often argues for a style linked to the eternal present. There are times when the explosion of a style manifests itself in a way that precludes whatever mode of art that existed before it, as though one were entirely free of any inherited influence. Abstract expressionism is a movement that at first looked *sui generis*, being so completely enclosed within the protections of its idiom.

In the work of the four women artists in "Common Ground," we can see a reaching toward an autonomous language in painting, in which the hand corresponds to the intention of the painter. Although the artists included here -- Barbara Bartholomew, Chinyee, Betsy Stewart, and Annette Turow -- are distinct from each other in their style, they share a predilection for gestural abstraction, to some extent muted by Asian example. One can, in the case of these painters, see how two traditions are accessed and interwoven in a search for contemporary meaningfulness, so their art is not so much its own predecessor as it is a translation of visual elements that echo each other. This carrying over, or melding, of components belonging to different traditions into an individual style provides the viewer with an opportunity to consider how components of disparate backgrounds can in fact seem similar. "Common Ground" offers the parallels of a shared purpose--the demonstration of abstraction's innate lyricism. The artists complement each other not only in their efforts to harmoniously translate foreign impulses into reality; they also agree on an esthetic of planned, deliberate beauty.

Barbara Bartholomew's Asian influences are clearly biographical; she has been a visiting artist at Shanghai University and Suzhou Art Institute in Mainland China. The colors of her palette are both austere and luxurious--golds and grays alternate on the canvas. Her gestures seem to be closely linked to the Chinese calligraphic tradition; energetic, coiled brushstrokes activate the compositional plane, creating maelstroms and small storms of feeling. But there is an intensity to Bartholomew's art, a roiling mass of emotion that betokens the artist's Western origins. The expressiveness of her art reminds us that painting is an intuitive, felt activity, given over to a charged language of signs.

In the art of Chinyee, a native of Mainland China who has lived in America for five decades, one can see the artist work variations on the art of the New York School. Some of her paintings suggest Robert Motherwell, and others call into mind Mark Rothko, whom Chinyee claims as an influence. Essentially there is a disciplined lyricism in her work, whose effects echo the works of artists ascendant in New York when Chinyee first arrived from China. As someone whose cultural heritage includes a vocabulary of sustained abstract effect, she produces an art that incorporates into its expression the poetry of the evanescent as well as the ample spaces of the color field. Her watercolors are particularly redolent of Chinese painting.

Betsy Stewart is an abstract painter whose inspiration comes from nature; series titles such as "Pond Totem" and "River Scroll" acknowledge the influence of water and natural surroundings in her art. Stewart claims a relationship to Japanese decoration with her focus on intricate, beautiful surface complexities; her paintings are created with acrylic and sumi ink. At the same time, in addition to her concern with the visual consequences of Asian philosophy (a subject she studied while in college), Stewart seems to draw from microcellular structures and forms. Her lushly varying language involves many kinds of shapes--linear, elliptical, and hazy. But the complexity of her elements is subsumed within compositions of free-spirited elegance.

Annette Turow moved from Chicago to a bluff on the edge of Lake Michigan. In a statement she writes, "My life changed when we moved ....The landscape became a vehicle for me to record the reflections off the water, weather changes, shadows, and uneven surfaces of the earth." The now-changed nature of her imagery results from her scrutiny of light and its effect on her view. Her series describes the bluff as it is reconfigured by the hours passing from day into night; her organic abstraction recalls the upstate New York imagery of Arthur Dove, another artist intensely devoted to the local.

In all four painters we can see a resolute determination to author an imagery whose lyricism is attained by a recognition of similarities in cultures and by the decorative qualities of nature. All of them seek a sublime in the moment of the gesture, its ability to move past form into a transcendent sense of being. The kinds of imagery available in their art suggest that today is a time of eclectic appropriation intended to portray the contrapuntal feelings of a painter's inner life. Today we are so clearly devoted to a multicultural appreciation of stylistic similarity that we need not argue, as might well have happened with the example of Kline, about whether the origins of the gesture are culturally indigenous. Now there is an esthetic about that records the graphic languages of another culture with increasing familiarity and precision. Bartholomew and Chinyee, Stewart and Turow share a desire for the pleasures of art as well as the recognitions of like and unlike in cultures outside their own. This pleasure is not so much culturally identifiable as it is simply human--a state of being all of us, no matter what our background, may identify and admire.

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