

# ART REVIEWS

**Betsy Stewart: Pond Totems**  
Troyer Gallery, Washington DC  
January 5 — February 17, 2001

**B**etsy Stewart celebrated the millennium and summed up a long career in her lyrical show of nineteen paintings at the Troyer Gallery early in the year. The Troyer exhibition was preceded by her show at the Walter Wickiser Gallery in New York City the previous fall. While nature based, the images she creates seem to hover between realism and abstraction. The overall effect is in keeping with the tradition of painting in Washington and the influence of the Washington Color School. Since Stewart was actively painting in the 70s while works of artists such as Gene Davis and Sam Gilliam dominated the art scene, it is not unlikely that she absorbed certain characteristics of style common to these artists that were in the art atmosphere of the time. One of these is thinness of paint surface. Although there will be exceptions (such as Gilliam's "raked" series), in general, one could say that most of the Color artists like to spread the paint thinly in order to take advantage of the whiteness of the underlying canvas, to illuminate from within, so to speak. Stewart's surfaces are uniformly delicate, almost wash-like in their textures, and a luminosity is always present, even in darker-hued works. Painting on wood panel as she does in some of the pieces in this show also increases the effect of delicacy as there is no texture from the canvas to draw attention away from the fluid surface. Another heritage from the Color School noticeable in Stewart's paintings is her shaping of the canvas or support away from the traditional squarish format. Ken Noland's target shapes, and Gilliam's "drapes", which got rid of a supporting shape altogether, show some of the ways artists worked who shared this point of view. In Stewart's show the concept is carried out in the "Pond Totem" series, a grouping of tall, thin 59' x 10" steles. The unusual format relates to a prominent sculptural sense that has been evident in her work since Stewart began exhibiting constructions and painted assemblages in the 70s and 80s. These wall sculptures were freely painted in flowing colors with expressionist brush work and exhibited a refined color sense characteristic of her own personal palette. In her use of color, however, Stewart departs from Color School art, which featured color at its maximum, unmixed strength. Finally, in composition the influence of the earlier artists is most felt, that is, in a balanced arrangement of eye-catching objects, whether realistic or abstract, throughout a shallow picture plane. Her *Natos 1999* series, acrylic and sumi ink on wood panel, particu-

larly demonstrates this overall pattern. One has only to recall a Gene Davis painting to see what is meant by no one area of the painting dominating over the rest.

As to the sources of Stewart's imagery seen in this show, on first glance one sees biomorphic shapes reminiscent of paramecia, pollywogs, dividing cells and their ilk that might be lurking in a drop of pond water seen under a microscope. Most of these forms, however, seem to be more or less generic growing things, rather than specific realistic objects. An exception might be the white-and-sumi ink areas where the degree of detail put in with the pen would seem to suggest a particular creature. The pollywogs are merely indicated by curving brush strokes, not as specific things, and some of the squiggles, while suggesting worms, are more like abstract symbols. A floating bar in *Naxos # 4 1999*, draws attention to itself both by its strongly abstract black-and-white pattern and its rectangularity in contrast to the rounded, fluid forms that surround it. Stewart's latest show might be pointing the way toward more nature-based imagery, or perhaps this will go in the direction of the symbolic abstraction that seems to be making its appearance here. In any event, the poetic and lyrical character of Stewart's work will predominate.

—Terry Parmelee

Betsy Stewart  
"Pond Totem #15 (2000)  
60" X 10"  
Acrylic & sumi ink on Canvas

