

Terrell James: Witnessing Places by Stephanie Buhmann

Terrell James' work is far from being overtly referential, but it is highly evocative and opens itself to interpretation. It is a personal code, a stream of thoughts let loose to gather on the blank page or canvas. On occasion, faint faces or objects of nature might seem to surface before vanishing in the complex layers of the composition. This occurrence may be allowed, but it is not intentional. Transition and transformation are key contemplations here not methodology. James creates hybrids of dense information that are embracive of constant change – they are like letters addressed to our individual perception. Multi-layered, rhythmically colored, James' compositions establish luminous spaces, in which the viewer is encouraged to project his or her thoughts and find questions. In their frail resemblance of things familiar, like a landscape that while viewed through milky glass is sizzling in the desert heat, James' compositions become imaginary hideaways. They establish places where our likes and dislikes can be re-iterated and prejudices as well as favoritism might pale.

Like any captivating story told, James' canvases fuse opposites - parts that border on the lush and beautiful with areas of toughness. In James' visual language, this can translate into stark contrasts of color or interplays of gentle curves and angular shapes. James is not interested in making it easy, being pleasing or brushing over life lightly. To the contrary, she prefers things to be honest, direct, and lacking superficial dramatization. In her work she likes to get to the bottom of her obsessions not by means of theorization but simply by the act of painting. Her works might embrace mysteriousness, but they avoid foggy uncertainty. On canvas and paper, her marks are always determined without seeming harsh or controlled. As she approaches the blank surface, she has no preconceived notions or particular plans. In that sense, the content of her paintings are emergent. They mirror the rhythmic brainstorm initiated by her discoveries in literature, music, conversation or landscapes.

As an individual James might be referred to as an idealist realist, someone who is able to navigate life's ups and downs as they come. As a painter, she is lyrical rather than romantic. Her work serves as an invitation instead of claiming to be a testament. It lacks protocol and is transcendental in that it grants us entrance without giving confined directions. James is more interested in the expressive foreword leading into an experience than in unfolding a contained narrative. Since the 1970s, she has been interested in the writings of French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941), who stressed the importance of pure intuition and liberty. In *Time and Free Will* (1889) for example, Bergson examined different modes of knowledge and the data of experience, exploring whether the mind reads from nature or into nature. He considered an object's duration and intensity as being exclusively bound to man's inner, temporal intuition. James' work joins Bergson's quest in that it is both a personal witness account of an experience in nature and a retrospective interpretation of it.

James' many notebook sketches are filled with dynamic line studies of landscapes, in particular the Big Bend region in the Chihuahuan Desert, which is also home to Marfa. Stretching into Western Texas, it is one of the least explored deserts in the world, where only few roads or buildings serve as human signifiers. In this sprawling terrain distance is difficult to judge and impossible to measure. Born and raised in Houston, TX, where her family has been settled for

generations, James began visiting the Trans-Pecos in 1991. The monumentality, openness, as well as the wealth of colors and natural forms of this region also referred to as *El Despoblado* (the land of no people), have since found their way into her work - not openly, but as a document of a cathartic and conscious-altering experience. While travels, such as a trip this past spring to Lago De Atitlán, a lake in southwestern Guatemala that is surrounded by three cone-shaped volcanoes, do have an obvious effect on James' subsequent work, they are only keynotes in a convoluted mosaic of impressions. Freely associative, James' work is intimate and the creative process highly personal.

Visually, James can be contextualized with the tradition of 20th Century abstract painting. She believes in the immediacy of gesture and the spontaneity of impulse as key expressive elements. However, she does not consider her work as product of self-analysis. She is not interested in defining a concrete image. Instead, James concentrates on the harmonious alignment of floating thoughts and feels a kinship to the Surrealist technique of automatic drawing, which is spontaneous and practiced without conscious aesthetic or moral self-censorship. James has a deep appreciation for Cy Twombly, in whose work she finds exactly these elements. She is particularly interested in his sculptural works and the more spare paintings from the 1960s and 1970s. Since discovering his work while in art school in the 1970s, James' has re-visited and written about Twombly's work repeatedly. During a shared visit to The Cy Twombly Gallery of the Menil Collection in Houston near James' studio, James described to me how she admired the free flow of personal notations and suggestions of words that vanish into the overall grouping of detailed marks and paint. In her work she follows a similar attempt to lose the traces of definite meaning and specific details due to fragmentation. To her, it is through visual remains that we can grasp the energy of the moment and read into the sentiment without the constraints of certainty.

It is misleading to approach James' work as if trying to solve a riddle, as there is not only one solution. Instead, she builds connections. She has emancipated herself from the normative need to dictate every step of the process. While working, she likes to jump from one thought to another, vigorously stringing them together. Her work combines color fields with lines that designate, lead through and bridge different planes. Her use of perspective is more Asian than Western and we might read her work from below up or look at it with the sensation of an aerial view rather than searching the vantage point in front of us. She finds formal inspiration in a large variety of historical and cultural riches, including African sculpture, Oceanic art, the frescoes by Florentine artist Cimabue (c. 1240-1360), John Cage's music notations, the work of J. M. W. Turner or Mark Tobey's use of light. Regarding content, she is interested in old myths and how they manifest in different cultures over time. Her palette can be almost grisaille, capturing sub-forms in shades of grey, or be vividly saturated. It might reflect the nuances found in the industrial parts of downtown Houston, where James has her studio close to the railroad tracks, or capture the deep blue shadows cast by the Santa Elena Canyon in the Big Bend National Park.

In his book "Wisdom sits in Places" Keith H. Basso writes: "What do people make of places? The question is as old as people and places themselves, as old as human attachments to portions of the earth. [...] Places, we realize, are as much a part of us as we are part of them".¹

James ponders this idea in her work. In her freely associative manner, she attempts to establish a sense of place. Basso points out that “place-making” involves “multiple acts of remembering and imagining”² and with James this is certainly true. In her work, past and present converge in that the memory of a place and how she interprets her experience become a fused entity. Shapes, colors, contours, sounds, and climate of the land become milestones for the artist’s imagination and affect each step of the creative process.

It is arguably in the truly personal that an artist touches on universal truths. Through her absorbent nature, and liberated approach to art-making James unmask layers of thought that surround contemporary civilizations and landscapes. Each of James’ works encapsulates its very own sense of feeling. To her, the accumulation of information is a personal need; the processing of it is what informs her art; her work itself is her invitation to us to begin our own dialogue.

---*Stephanie Buhmann*

¹ Basso, Keith H., *Wisdom Sits in Places; Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996, xiii

² *Ibid*, p.5