

"What If Vermeer Were an Abstract Expressionist?"

Jennifer Wolf,
"Cavings"
Mineral
Paintings at the
sandbox, Venice

In her latest series of earthy abstractions, Los Angeles artist Jennifer Wolf demonstrates a healthy regard for the conventions and traditions of ages past. But of course she does so in a curiously modern way, making her enterprise relevant to more than just atavistic academic disciplines, contributing to a structural dialogue attractive even to the most forward-looking formalist. In point of fact she is no stranger to the academic world, having pursued advanced studies in archaeology and sixteenth century Italian painting from Cougnac to Tunisia. But unlike many students of Antiquity and the Classics, Wolf did not become afflicted with the obsession to perfect a figurative ideal. Instead, while never wholly abandoning figuration, she found herself increasingly drawn to the fundamental technology of the past; she began to practice centuries-old techniques for creating her own paint. Students of Art History will be familiar with scenarios of the Old Apothecary sort, with locked stores of delicate powders sold dearly by the ounce, which serious painters mixed into their own signature colors back at the studio, a tiny bit at a time.

To a certain kind of person - let's call it outdoorsy and adventurous - these kinds of things lead inevitably to the desire to not only mix but to gather one's very pigments, to do more and more of the manual, technical work oneself. To that end Wolf literally excavated raw materials from the rocks at Paleolithic cave sites in Southern France as the agents of Old World merchants must have done, with a pick axe. She assembled her humble bits of stone and ground, and took them back to her ivy-menaced wooden studio in Venice, and worked her mortar and pestle to hand grind these eons-old rocks into dust. She then performed some kind of inscrutable alchemy on them, fastened them in hide glue, and thus produced a palette of autumnal yellows, incandescent reds, expansive blues and absurdly complex browns not avail-

able at any paint store. Her medium descriptions read like a geology class plan: Hematite, Goethite, Indigo, and Cochineal.

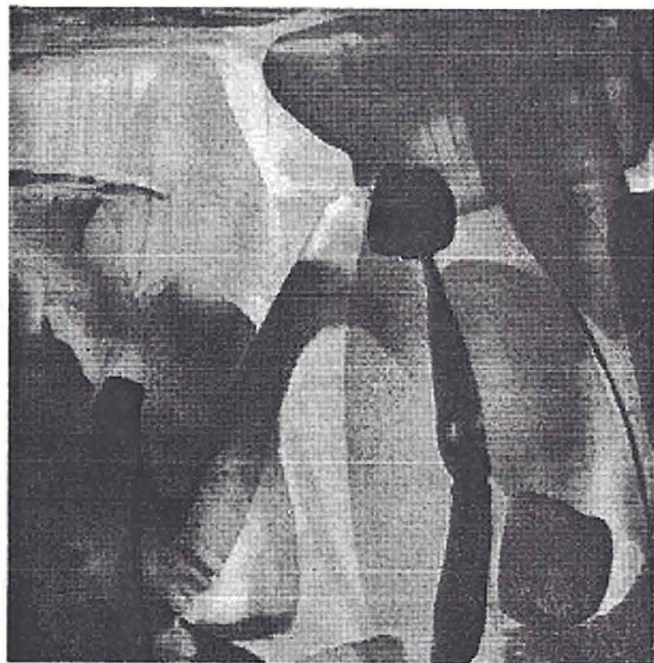
Though applied in wide, dynamic swaths of distinct color, these are the rich, lustrous hues one can recognize in Campin, Rembrandt, Van der Weyden, Van Eyck and Vermeer; the almost preternatural luminosity and depth evident in even the most commonplace detail of their time's

European masterpieces. Much of what seems to separate that kind of talent from subsequent generations of accomplished painters may lie in the qualities of the materials they employed, capable of endowing every passage in the works with a hypnotic intensity of chromatic vibrato. But there is no photorealism, no impossibly three-dimensional milk pitchers, no meticulously rendered dusty folds of domestic textiles, no crates of apples in Wolf's paintings. Instead, it's as though the landscapes she encountered on the pigment quests provided her with the inspiration for an abstract subject matter.

Wolf applies her unmitigated pigment in interweaving planes, building a sort of tectonic structure up off the wood panel both vertically and in perpendicular extension out toward the viewer. The effect is reminiscent of the optical dynamic of mountains and rock formations as they recede toward the horizon, when varying depths of hue and saturation combine with atmospheric vibration to create chimerical movement and suffuse color.

The works in "Cavings" can put you off your balance but they also anchor; they are simultaneously undulating and dense, ephemeral and impenetrable. Her respect, which

borders on reverence, for the specific sort of patient sensuality required in the painstaking process she has chosen combines with her completely individual voice, demonstrating the physical results of her emotional commitment to the materials. Wolf not only allows but actively coaxes forth the inherent properties of the pigments without preconceptions, instinctively comfortable as she is with the well-defined rules of geometry, form, shape and line. "Cavings" thus presents a series of compelling meditations on movement, mass, density, texture, and the microcosm/macrocosm duality, as the materials, under her redemptive tutelage, attempt to recreate their original forms and structures from nature on her picture plane. The images are organic but not biomorphic, evincing an energy that resonates but which is not quite consciousness. As in a portrait, the colors register their presence; in spite of years of critical training, one can eventually come to believe it is the spirit of the rocks themselves.!



by Shana
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