

ARTS ATL

Jerry Cullum finds Benjamin Britton's exhibit at Marcia Wood Gallery both challenging and seductive.

Review: Marcel Proust and physics meet in complex, ambitious Benjamin Britton exhibit

JERRY CULLUM JANUARY 5, 2022

Benjamin Britton's *a flicker in the field*, at Marcia Wood Gallery through January 8, is the culmination of a decade's worth of exploration of combinations of dissimilar proportions and painting styles that Britton has described in terms of concepts from physics, and from the novels of Marcel Proust. The current iteration, the most ambitious yet, is described entirely in terms of painting.

Most viewers will want to experience the exhibition's primary artwork, five paintings forming a 34-foot long composition, on exactly these terms. The combination of dizzying shifts in perspective, abstraction and representation, and differences in the application of paint make it possible to study these works for a very long time on a purely formal level.



This highly charged and ambitious work is the outgrowth of decades of artistic exploration by Britton.

And yet the vertiginous body of theory that came with Britton's previous exhibition, *Desire, Broadly*, seems on one level to be more relevant than ever when it comes to explaining these paintings.

The tiny landscape paintings united in the tondos that Britton calls "wormholes" are still best explained as glimpses of remembered locations united by obscure forces of recollection explored in Proust's vast novel *In Search of Lost Time* (or in the older English translation, *Remembrance of Things Past*.)

The extracts from the novel reproduced in some of these wormholes suggest the ongoing connection, as resonant phrases appear: In one: "... register our acts ... and by magnifying ... memories must stretch ... all the peripheral aspects ... in the consciousness." In another: "... loss of one's bearings ... persists even after the ... taken the place in us ... that arrival to ours[elves] ... any pleasure" (Ellipses are the author's.)

The fact that only fragments of text appear in the circular tondo format turns Proust's page into something like the mysterious phrases found in some of the fragmentary Dead Sea Scrolls or the scraps of papyrus that contain poems of Sappho.

These not-so-random phrases bring to mind the Proustian notion of "involuntary memory" triggered by the sight, touch or taste of objects associated with emotionally charged past moments. The little hints of charged emotional moments in North American landscapes depicted in the other wormholes hold a vague power

Britton asserts that just as the wormholes of theoretical physics unite disparate points in spacetime, forming a tunnel or a bridge between two locations or points in time, his wormholes offer points of access to desires or emotional associations with vividly remembered parts of the world.

The encoded experiences can be recovered or evoked by creating a painting in which landscape is portrayed in an almost conventional painting scale in the background and portrayed differently in tiny details in the foreground. The two layers are united by dizzying forms of geometric abstraction.

The combination of large-scale composition and impossibly tiny details forces the viewer to stand at several independent distances to take in the work, never perceiving the whole thing from any single perspective. It's simultaneously challenging and seductive.

Britton is probably well advised to remove references to contemporary physics from his descriptive statements about *a flicker in the field*, but these "wormhole" tunnels or bridges that may not actually exist do form a useful analogy for the relationship between an external landscape, the visual memory of that landscape, and the desires, wishes and significant emotions associated with that landscape. It's an interior set of relationships with connections as elusive as the principles of physics behind the notion of wormholes.

Trying to translate these elusive perceptions into formal ideas of constructing and viewing a painting introduces a further level of complication, one that has preoccupied Britton for the past 10 years.

Britton will present all of this in his own words at noon on January 8, the closing day of the exhibition.