

Thursday, December 7th, 2017
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Nothing Forced Yet Nothing Lax: Frances Barth in Bushwick

by David Brody

Frances Barth: New Paintings, 2011-2017 at Silas Van Morisse Gallery

November 3 to December 17, 2017

109 Ingraham Street, between Porter and Knickerbocker avenues

Brooklyn, silasvonmorisse.com



Frances Barth, *Olive*, 2017. Acrylic on gessoed wood panels (triptych), 20 x 40 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Silas von Morisse Gallery

Frances Barth's new paintings combine calm planes of beautiful color with graphic details that suggest landscape, while also subverting easy spatial readings. As with Thomas Nozkowski's cryptic modes of abstraction, Barth's uncertain terrain is precisely balanced between lucidity and mystery. An absorbing world of imagination might also be a quirky transcription of observable facts. With unerring color harmonics that are as sophisticated and seductive as those of any artist working today, Barth's paintings are almost soothing despite their unsettled space.

References to landscape became explicit in Barth's paintings of the 1980s, and since the late 1990s her work has achieved an absorbing collage-like interplay of geological diagram, topographical mapping, and flat, luminous space. In the triptych *CG* (2016), thought balloons and cutaways of what might be aquifers and subterranean drainages puncture assured, leisurely fields of carefully adjusted pinks and blacks, grays and blues. Another triptych, *Olive* (2017), is primarily green with inscribed curvy shapes that suggest golf course sand traps and artificial lakes—but with wraparound lines and misregistered contours that set them adrift.



Frances Barth, *Yellow Yellow*, 2016. Acrylic on wood on panel, 24 x 36 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Silas von Morisse Gallery

Barth makes expert use of acrylic, keeping its plasticky luster in check. Her surfaces are generally matte and opaque, almost like tempera, but she also exploits acrylic's brushy translucency for strategic contrast. In *Yellow Yellow* (2016), a spacious expanse in which a tipped up, kidney-shaped pool somehow floats in the air above a crater, two dry, grainy layers of gray reveal the yellow ground beneath like an inadequate coat of primer. The effect is mesmerizingly nonchalant, and suggests the cool shadow of an immense cloud passing across badlands. More intimate is *Genie* (2014), in which a mountain-like form placed in a white oval inset might just as well be a pie or a loaf of bread on a pan, a reading supported by the seeming occlusion of intermittent black lines by horizontal bands of liquid ochre in the background, as if a tree branch or a river were seen through Venetian blinds. Along the left edge a dry overlay of blue casts its shadow over mostly vertical ochre bands woven like loose matting. The ensemble has a porous, Bonnard-like interiority, but it could just as well be tectonic in scale.

Recently Barth has experimented with narrative, in book form and animation. In the video *End of Day, End of Day* (2007) (exhibited in her 2010 show at Sundaram Tagore) a twice-cycled sequence of line drawings, discerningly hand-drawn after photographs, it seems, of quotidian New Jersey streetscapes, combines obliquely with a married couples' scripted dialogue. A more complex animation, *Jonnie in the Lake* (2016), currently showing at festivals, makes extensive use of digital landscapes in ways that are visually consistent with the methodology of her paintings. The latter work especially, as well as her graphic novel *Ginger Smith and Billy Gee* (2016), also digitally drawn, make explicit the topological hints in the paintings, with characters diving into holes and climbing through tableaux —although neither of these narratives, which affect the innocent manner of children's bedtime stories, nor the spaces within them, are conventionally "linear."



Installation shot with works from Frances Barth's *Com* series. Courtesy of Silas von Morisse Gallery

In the current show, digital artifacts related to these bodies of work have made their way into some of the paintings as collage elements. A series of five works titled *Com 1* through *Com 5* (2011-12) is meant to be read sequentially, like an abstract comic. All of these panels include collaged digital fragments that are so consonant with Barth's layered painting process that one may not notice them at first. By and large, the digital elements function as an integral painterly texture, although the uninflected thickness of the white digital line hovering at the bottom of *Com 5* contrasts aggressively with Barth's usual subtlety of touch. (But note that Barth's hand-painted lines in general can be quite jittery, as if wrested from a digital mouse!) The larger disjunction with this group of paintings is in the insistent spatiality of certain non-digital incidents, such as a crayon-textured blue block floating in Naples yellow in *Com 2*, and a black-and-white geometric figure that casts a stark shadow on the ground in *Com 1*. If the probing of narrative genre in Barth's nascent animations and graphic novel tend to dispel the profound visual mystery of the artist's intuitions of space, the pressure of sequence on this group of five paintings, each of which is entirely coherent on its own terms, seems to have added something palpable to those intuitions.

With her new sequential work — animations, book, and the *Com* paintings — Barth brings into the open longstanding internal disputes that are the essence of her practice. The small panel *Adobe Dream* (2013), for example, is perhaps the most beautiful painting in the show, its saturated, luxurious color and just right, off-kilter geometry the result of an artist working at the top of her powers. The painting is seemingly effortless in its mastery, with nothing forced yet nothing lax. All the same, there is a fly in the ointment, which is an implicit argument between abstraction and narrative, between stillness and forward motion.