

ArtSeen

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# GREGORY AMENOFF *Trace*

by Corina Larkin

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Is it possible to be punched in the gut by a flower? This is the feeling provoked by “Pageant” (2013), the first painting that comes into view as one enters Gregory Amenoff’s recent show of paintings and drawings. Vibrant orange floral forms parade over a fluidly drawn and richly colored aquatic forest, knocking the viewer out along the way. The sheer force of the flowers above contrasts with the deeply contemplative forest below. And while the forms seem derived from observation of the natural world, they also assume their own identities, having been skillfully abstracted by the artist. Such are the contradictions that rule this work, in much the same way that they guided Symbolists such as Odilon Redon, a long-time source of inspiration for Amenoff.

These paintings benefit from an undeniable physicality. Images erupt from the canvases in the same way that these large paintings seem to burst off the walls. Certain motifs enforce this feeling, especially the floral starburst that is central to several compositions. Iterations of this asymmetric pattern repeat without being repetitive: once a dark implosion, as in “Volant” (2013), once a bright sun-star expanding from a vertical, sky-blue form as in “Kronos” (2013). Moreover, Amenoff handles the paint with muscular confidence. Complex, impasto layers of color delineate naturalistic forms, and bold, washy gestures suggest a crowded tangle of vines, as in “Trace” (2012-13). Even the smallest gestures are made with a spider-like but definitive finesse.

Compositions are informed by observation of both the organic world and architecture. Flowers, buds, petals, and vines, as well as landscape elements such as water,



Gregory Amenoff. "Kronos II," 2012-2013. Oil on canvas. 82 x 76 inches. © Gregory Amenoff. Courtesy Alexandre Gallery.

mountains, and the night sky all make appearances, or at least try to before being pressed into a higher service by the artist. Likewise, architectural remnants (a bridge? a window frame?) are so integrated into the overall structure of the paintings that they become barely recognizable. Here we see what Maurice Denis referred to as the “subjective transformation of nature” alive and well in the 21st century. Amenoff references the external world without making paintings that are “about” observable reality; instead, natural phenomena and man-made structures meld into new, unified compositions reflecting a personal and indefinable internal world.

These paintings are also the outcome of a deep attunement to the nature of light, on both the perceptual and abstract levels. “The Wish” (2012-13) seems to betray an interest in capturing the specific light of a particular situation perhaps as seen from a bridge at dawn. On the other hand, paintings like “Odillon” (2013) or “Lament” (2012-13) are more concerned with establishing a particular mood, whether suggestive of revelation or reflection. This representation of light adds a crucial element of cohesion to the work, not to mention potential layers of meaning that are subject to interpretation.

As in previous shows, the small works hold a special place of pride. *Les amuses bouches* of the exhibit were executed in Paris in the summer of 2012 and served as studies for the larger paintings, but they have singular, magnetic qualities all their own. Each has all the compositional intensity and resolution of a large-scale painting. Unusual and luscious colors that one would imagine impossible to elicit from colored pencils are packed into compact spaces. With their sensuous textures and the same dramatic compositions, they’re a set of very compelling micro-universes holding the same attractions and contradictions of the larger works.

And so we have a powerful set of images, strengthened by palpable tensions—between broad muscularity and compact subtlety, observation and the unknown, internal world. The search for light, so to speak, is the glue that binds. There is something in the human makeup that involuntarily searches for completion and tries to make the foreign recognizable. We try to find meaning in everything. The beauty of these paintings is their ability to withhold easy answers in the form of accurate representation and instead let us learn to appreciate its gorgeous traces.



Gregory Amenoff. "Trace," 2012-2013. Oil on canvas. 64 × 62 inches. © Gregory Amenoff. Courtesy Alexandre Gallery.

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