

Mara Held

GARY SNYDER GALLERY JANUARY 24–MARCH 2, 2013

BY PHONG BUI JANUARY 13, 2013

“In this net it’s not just the strings that count
But also the air that escapes through the meshes.”
—Pablo Neruda

Despite the painter’s subtlety, the reference to Far Eastern painting in Mara Held’s latest work is evident. She particularly invokes Hiroshige’s “36 Views of Mount Fuji” and the so-called Pure Land Buddhist painting with her use of fluctuating water and cloud imagery.

As one walks in the main space of the gallery, “Navigator” (2011) introduces the show’s leitmotif: contrasted vertical/horizontal bands in palimpsest. With its dissimilar groups of looped semi-circles and squares floating on top, the work sets up her exploration in forms that simultaneously contract and expand by degrees, depending on how each painting operates. Held’s masterful use of a traditional technique like egg tempera insists on the sensual and personal dexterity of the hand, while her deployment of stenciling educes impersonal and industrial autonomy.

For example, the heavily worked surface and dark palette, which modulates the four separate, distorted concentric forms and their background in “Gong-Gong” (2008) achieves the opposite of the increased spatial fluidity and equal distribution in “Errant Traveler” (2012), where in-between painted forms are exposed. Both nevertheless elevate Held’s awareness of objective and subjective differences in terms of identical formats (both works are 24 by 32 inches, one with horizontal orientation, the other vertical).

Likewise, while “Hiroshige I” (2009) and “Ostinato” (2007) exert their lightness and adherent flatness, “Ogee” (2012) and “Hiroshige II (2009),” through their treatment of edges, display their optical effects. And as complex as “Between Island and Mainland” (2012) and “Ferryman” (2012) appear, with their swirling/organic forms with interlocking edges, painted with varying differences in thinness, thickness, and modeling, they evoke so distinctly the serenity and simplicity of the Buddha Amitābha’s ascendance, the grace of which was so essential to Pure Land Buddhist painting for over a millennium.

The most surprising painting in the exhibit is “Pileus” (2009), partly because of its graphic use of iconography and visible contrast between background and foreground. The painting is divided in half; the left side depicts an embryo-like image, and the right a near-identical image upside down. What unites the painting is the formation of minus marks, which revolve in the center in a spherical aura. “Pileus” seems to invoke the ceremonial creation of a mythical image that, in spite of the unending chaos of our visual culture, conceives of painting as an act that gives new substance, as in Barnett Newman’s early paintings whose titles originated from the Book of Genesis.

Held’s relentless search for pictorial synthesis is even more apparent with the small paintings in the gallery’s second space. “Torus” (2012), “Revolving Door” (2012), and especially “Gates of Cilicia” (2011), demonstrate the extent of Held’s forethought and consideration. With respect to all possible relationships between forms (compression vs. expansion, darkness vs. lightness, static vs. movement, flatness vs. illusion), her painterly ambition has never been more cogent. One comes away from the exhibition with a Neruda-esque sense of absence, desire, and hope, as well as the poet’s love for the sea and all things maritime (as though one has just returned from Casa de Isla Negra itself), mingled with lightness of spirit imported from the Far East.



Between Island and Mainland, 2012, egg tempera on linen mounted to board, 48 × 32 inches