

On the Paintings of Janice Mueller

Susan Ludvigson

Color is the first aspect of Janice Mueller's paintings to strike the viewer. Brilliant, bold color draws the eye even before the imagery registers. Layered and rich, Mueller's work appeals to something deep in the viewer's psyche through interplays between color and shape that suggest infinitely more than they denote. Typically working on a square panel, Mueller explores ideas of symmetry and asymmetry and their interactions, while using images evocative of mythology and of ancient history and ancient art.

One of the things I find particularly arresting in Mueller's work is the way she balances background and foreground: the dominant colors in her backgrounds are nearly always multifaceted: we see colors behind colors, where the artist

scrapes away upper layers of paint to reveal segments and fragments of what lies behind. Sometimes, as in a painting like “In Front of Strangers I Sing” (Oil & Gold Leaf on Panel), the deep gold background is mediated by yellow patches and flecks of a darker gold, this darker gold appearing as well at some of the painting’s edges. The imagery consists of a series of gold spirals of varying sizes and hues floating against the canvas and radiating from it. These spirals range from a soft red to a deep red–gold, to a pale, almost disappearing brown–gold.

The effect on the viewer can be hypnotic, for the panel is large, and the spirals, by their nature, create a sensation of spinning against a mostly stable background, the way the eye might see sunspots, if one were looking, unblinking, at the sun—the painting being an intensely pleasurable and far safer experience than looking into the actual sun, needless to say.

The spiral image appears in a number of paintings, including one called “The Other Side of Eden,” in which the panel is divided horizontally, the top third red, with the appearance of an under–layer of brown. The lower two–thirds is gold, with patches of darker gold showing through. The gold line bisecting the two colors, applied thickly toward the center of the painting, more sparsely at the edges, produces a

feeling of balance that complements the asymmetrical division, the way earth and sky meet on the horizon.

The spiral image, along with a number of empty ovals, suggests some of the ancient symbols for the feminine—the spiral traditionally representing the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, as well as the sun, itself a birth/death symbol in its rising and disappearing and rising again day after day. Mueller is certainly aware of the symbolism in her imagery, and her interest in history, especially ancient history, is a source for her work. Yet the images and the composition do not feel forced in the way that too much consciousness of what one is doing in art can sometimes produce.

In another of her spiral paintings, “Perpetuity of the Spiral,”(Oil & Gold Leaf on Panel), where the title alone tells us of her awareness, the subtlety of color and the gradations of color, as well as the formal elements of the piece, result in an uncanny impression of serenity, wholeness, mystery, and yes, discovery. On a ground of violet, two deep red circles intersect, where inside the nearly oval area of intersection, the color is a stunning purple with rivulets of black running through it. The oval, rimmed in gold, emphasizes further the shared area; simultaneously, the purple/black center seems physically deep and distant—evoking outer space, perhaps. Or the opposite: the common inner space at the intersection of

the two solid rings can be seen as wholly “other” in a frame of reference that might, as well, be human relationship. The gold rings suggest marriage in particular. The painting is multi-faceted, its beauty a combination of simplicity of design and complexity of texture and the many possibilities for interpretation.

One of the design elements I especially enjoy in Mueller’s work is her use of a divided strip running across the tops of some of the paintings, echoing the Egyptian frieze. A fine example is “Unnamed Aspirations,” (Oil & Gold Leaf on Panel). The strip itself, framed in blue, is made up of tiny panes of gold with miniature spirals and partial spirals running along the left sides of each pane. Below, a mottled gold ground, produced by layers of paint, contains four primitive ladders slanting at various angles. They all appear to aspire toward the panel at the top, although arrows are pointing from one to the other in differing directions, and the ladders are placed at uneven intervals moving irregularly from bottom to top. The goal is clearly the beautifully organized and illuminated “windows,” but the path is jagged and uncertain. The contrast between the humor of the confused ladders and the glorious goal creates a pleasing tension in the painting, as well as the recognition of how our own aspirations work.

I am drawn to the pair of paintings titled “Spirituality

Western” (Oil on Paper on Canvas), and “Spirituality Eastern” (Oil on Paper on Canvas). In the former, the image fills most of the canvas and is shaped like a crudely carved wheel, almost as square as it is round, with a black hole in the center. The background is a variegated yellow-green, the image a rusty orange over yellow. It’s an arresting image suggesting solidity and massiveness, but empty and rather frightening, at the core. The twin painting (I want to say “sister painting”) is more fluid, its outline sketchier, softer, more porous, mostly pale blue over a gold-green layered background. The image is generally spherical, but not perfectly so, and at its center, surrounded by a somewhat brighter, dense blue, is an essentially white, square-ish shape, which could, as in the other piece, be construed as a hole, but this white area has a rather more solid appearance than the circular shape surrounding it. The implications of the two pieces are made clear in their titles, it seems to me, and don’t require further comment. But I would like to mention that “Spirituality Eastern” reminds me of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “transparent eyeball”: “Standing on the bare ground, my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball--I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me--I am part or particle of God.” Emerson’s vision of the divine seems to me remarkably close to Mueller’s conception of Eastern

spirituality.

Mueller's interest in the prehistoric as well as the historic comes into play in various works, including one radiant image modeled on European cave paintings from the Neolithic period, "Homage Lascaux" (Oil & Gold Leaf on Panel). Here the image is the figure of a stag, outlined in gold leaf against a red and gold background. The image is simplicity itself, and powerfully moving. It is the kind of image that inspired Picasso and has influenced many artists since.

Another ancient image comes not from the caves, but from mythology. The piece titled "Crossing the River Styx," (Oil on Masonite Panel), contains an image we are meant to interpret as a roughly made boat seen from above, its oars made of branches, followed by a shadow that might be imagined as a partial image of Cerberus, the three-headed hound from Greek mythology, who guards the entrance to the underworld. The boat image is crudely portrayed in stick-brown, with partially rubbed out images in its center that could possibly be interpreted as a series of manuscripts, or—the linked segments could suggest the figure of a dragon. These perhaps fanciful interpretations are given full rein by the images, which function almost like a Rorschach in their subtle

patterns and areas of erasure. The background here is an uncomfortable yellow-green we can read as the flotsam and jetsam-filled river nobody wants to think about crossing.

A number of the paintings seem to me more purely abstract, our interest in them determined as much by their singular beauty as by a possibility of meaning other than the psychological effect they produce in the viewer. “Warm Wind,” (Oil on Paper), is one of these. The background is a mottled gold, the marks shades of black and purple. One line begins on the left margin, near the bottom, and slants toward the bottom, while thinner lines are placed perpendicular to the first. We see the suggestion of a small incline with trees in these slender lines. And the title, of course, suggests this way of looking at the painting. But truly, the work needs no anchoring in reality. The patterns made by the irregularly spaced and partial marks, the wisps of purple against the gold background, produce a wealth of pleasure for the eyes and the spirit in the absence of interpretation as well as through the lens of the title.

Another piece is simply titled “Landscape,” and can be read as an aerial view of a landscape with a green-blue river running through it; below the river is a field of gold with many striations;

above the river, a gold-rust. One can easily project wheat or oats on one side of the river, with irregular paths cut through the grain, and the other side going fallow. Or, here too, one can revel in the colors and the composition without looking for identifiable imagery.

I would like, before closing with a discussion of a final painting, to say one more thing about Mueller's artistry: she is a mistress of naming. I love the poetic titles of so many of these pieces. Besides the ones I've already indicated, here are a few more: "Go Placidly Amidst the Noise," "Reconciliation of Opposites," "Tracks in Santa Fe," "Echo Responds to Ka," "Lady Labyrinth," "Longboat for Macbeth," "Poetry in Red," "There Are Still Songs to Sing," "Wisdom of the Serpent," "And She Broke Her Own Heart," and "Ariadne's Twine."

It was difficult to choose among works to discuss here, because there are so many, each with its own variety of beauty and interest. But I will close with "Cassiopeia's Dust," because I discussed this painting with the artist, who told me that the work is partly the result of an accident, and accident is an element in art that I find particularly useful and exciting. For an artist to be open to chance, to surprise, to the near-disaster, and to use that unexpected and often unwelcome event as a fulcrum from which to turn the work in a different

direction is a critical element in the creative process. We will never know how many works of art, to say nothing of discoveries and inventions, came about by having a work in progress interrupted by something unforeseen. It takes talent and the artist's trust in her own inventiveness to see the possibilities that could result.

“Cassiopeia’s Dust,” having fallen to the floor while the paint was still wet, and having had some of its paint accidentally scraped where Mueller had not intended that it be scraped, led to her alter the course of the painting to take advantage of the accident. The result is a horizontal configuration of golds (including what can be seen as the five bright stars of Cassiopeia) and pinks scattered across the canvas just below the center, against a background of night blues. Thin pink horizontal lines, almost like the lines on notebook paper, contain the image and are placed slightly above and also below it. The significance of these lines remains a mystery to me. Perhaps they were part of the original intent of the painting. Or perhaps they suggest musical staves, which would remind us of the music of the spheres. No matter. Mystery is an element of pleasure—in life and in art. And our speculations about mysteries offer multitudes of riches to the imagination beyond what, if anything, was intended by the maker. Meanwhile, “Cassiopeia’s Dust,” like all Mueller’s paintings, is a thing of beauty to be

enjoyed on its own terms as well as through our projections as viewers.

Susan Ludvigson has published eight collections of poetry with Louisiana State University Press, the most recent of which is *Escaping the House of Certainty*, 2006. Her poems have appeared in many literary journals and magazines, including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Paris Review*, *The Nation*, *The Georgia Review*, *Southern Review*, *Ohio Review*, etc. She has received fellowships from the Guggenheim, Rockefeller, Fulbright and Witter Bynner Foundations, as well as from the National Endowment for the Arts. She has represented the U.S. at literary festivals in France, Belgium, Canada, and the former Yugoslavia, and recordings of her poems can be found in the archives of The Library of Congress. She has also written a number of essays about art and photography for *The Ohio Review*, *The Georgia Review*, and *21st, A Journal of Contemporary Photography*.