

Commentary on Janice W. Mueller's Paintings

Jim McGavran

As an academic writer recently turned memoirist, I tell stories, painting pictures with words. My friend Janice Mueller paints with . . . paint. Her passionate visual speculations explore themes I regularly teach in the poetry of my great literary mentor, William Wordsworth: time, nature, spirit, self. Mueller's external interests range from the prehistoric cave-art at Lascaux in Southern France to the size and shape of the universe and the artistic media of our high-tech future. But her works plumb depths of interiority as well: the self in its relations with itself, with others, with God. Often she paints layer upon layer over underlying sketches, and then scrapes some of the paint off, as if in search for something beneath or beyond the medium. She thus creates a painterly archaeology of the world and the self, digging away the present both to explore the past and to imagine the future.

Our mutual friend, the prize-winning poet Susan Ludvigson, has already written most evocatively of several of Mueller's paintings for this website. Following her lead, I shall comment on one of those and a few others. Like Susan I am delighted by Mueller's use of color, the rich suggestiveness of her mostly non-objective canvases, and the names she selects for her works. I have to start with the most obviously Wordsworthian of the works here displayed, "Landscape." Less totally abstract than many of Mueller's works, "Landscape" has large, bright, red and yellow areas that seem non-objective, but they are divided by a rising-falling line of mostly blue-green paint that might well suggest a river, as Susan noted, or a horizon of forested hills—if it did not also suggest a stretched-out human form or possibly even the serpent, Satan, who tricked our first parents out of Eden, that perfect, lost landscape. So what are we looking at, really?—a landscape, an anti-landscape, even a send-up of landscapes by earlier masters like Turner or Monet? Or should we read the painting as proof that external nature is always at least as much what we

make of it as what is actually there for us to see? Or again, given the large reddish “sky” above the green line and the larger yellow “earth” below the line, are we looking at an interior landscape? The brightly colored areas have been worked to look partially worn away, so they resemble not actual skies or fields but deteriorating images from memories or dreams. I don’t know the answer, but I love the indeterminacy.

Another favorite of mine is “Universe Balance,” where Mueller veers away from any known earthly landscape, natural or biblical, to present us with what might be described as an astronomer’s diagram full of transcendent hints of outer space, sidereal time, interplanetary travel, and perhaps again the possibility of intermolecular travel within our brains. A large bright blue circle below and to the left of the center may seem to be a star or planet moving through pearlescent white space (but wait--isn’t outer space usually understood to be black, devoid of light?) and either following or refusing to follow vaguely circular lines that could equally suggest orbital patterns or their collapse. But the blue orb could perhaps be our own eye, or Mueller’s looking back at us as we study the painting and try to wrest meaning out of it. The seemingly eroded red-gold frame, most prominent on the lower edge of the painting, may suggest that attempts to articulate or enclose any idea of the universe, whether intergalactical or intracranial, are doomed to failure. Yet the whole work glows with that pearly light of sunshine, of springtime, of hope.

I’ll conclude by looking at two of Mueller’s huge 60 x 60 abstracts, “Poetry in Red” and “There Are Still Songs to Sing.” The red painting immediately evokes all the mythic/symbolic associations we make with the color: love, blood, danger—and might remind us of one of Mark Rothko’s great color panels except that here, with the exception of the irregular gold border, we find innumerable shades of red subtly intermixed with flecks of other strong colors—blues and violets especially—instead of the stacked areas of flat contrasting colors that often appear in Rothko’s work. I stand rapt before this grand celebration of the world’s passions and our own in a work both vaguely threatening and

strangely empowering in its boldness. Like the Grecian urn of another of my Romantic mentors, John Keats, it will remain—resplendent, monumental—telling of truth and beauty after we are gone.

With a more varied yet less obviously symbolic palette of oranges, greens, violets and dark blues, “There Are Still Songs to Sing” attracts me in a different way. Whereas “Poetry in Red” seems static, even monolithic, “Songs” seethes with energy. A river of fiery orange-gold—like the composer’s imagination, like the singer’s, like God’s, like Mueller’s—pours down from the upper left into the center of the work, where it disperses itself into fragments that could be individual notes, harmonies, or lyrics waiting to become music. Or have I got it backwards? Is the fire of imagination actually rising like a new song out of the chaos of brain and sound? Or am I, as usual, too bent upon forming an interpretation where instead I should relax and let this brilliant tapestry of paint take me wherever it will? Keats criticized Coleridge, unfairly I think, for being unable to remain content with half-knowledge. But it’s true that the greatest art—certainly Wordsworth comes again to mind here, and Shakespeare—strives not to *answer* life’s great eternal questions but just to *ask* them with beauty, dignity, and grace. Wordsworth never overtly states that he found God on the Welsh hills above Tintern Abbey, but his poem takes hold of our hearts and minds because he invites us to explore the inner and outer realities of our lives and try to understand what we find there. This is what Janice Mueller accomplishes again and again in her paintings, and it is truly a great achievement.

James McGavran is Professor of English at UNC Charlotte, where he teaches courses in the Romantic Era and nature writing. In 2006 he was the recipient of the Bank of America Award for Teaching Excellence. He has published numerous scholarly articles, mostly on topics in British Romanticism and children’s literature, and two edited collections of articles on Romanticism and children’s literature; he has a third such collection under review for publication. In 2010 the Michigan State University Press published his first non-academic book, [In the Shadow of the Bear: A Michigan Memoir](#).