

In Passing: The Enigmatic Paintings of Janna Watson

Written by Donald Brackett on February 10, 2024

Embodied Meanings: The Brackett Newsletter



A Glory Cloud, 2023, mixed media on birch panel, 36 x 72 in.

“Tantra is a technique that allows you to connect with your inner energy and experience transformation. One can visualize energy moving through the body with each and every breath.” - David Frawley.

“Wu wei invites spontaneous and inevitable behaviors to happen naturally. Rather than painting a pre-planned idea, I let go of the ego in order to unify myself with the environment.” - Janna Watson

Tantric diagrams. The visually compelling paintings of Flesherton-born and Toronto-based artist Janna Watson, usually produced on sensual birch wood panels, represent a significant development in what has been called biomorphic abstraction. With their energetic dance-like forms coming together, gently colliding and receding apart, they also provide an added visual bonus of taking gestural abstraction itself to new heights of emotive splendor. Viewing her colourful and almost calligraphic work offers us a chance to vividly remember a time when our tired retinas, less lulled by flickering digital pixels, were much more open to being transported out of ourselves and into the open-ended narrative that great painting always invites and provides.

Her expressionistic ballet of sinuous wave shapes often also references the naturally occurring patterns of living organisms which serve as masterful motifs of biological rhythm, almost like, dare I say it...surfing orgone energy. She deftly choreographs her vibrant wave crashes in a combination of acrylic, gouache, oil pastel and ink, giving them an organic quality of raw graphic elegance when they meet the smooth paper-like surface of the birch base. Biomorph forms and images are those that evoke embodied meanings: while abstract in shape or tone, they still echo living forms such as plants and bodies, and maybe even our thoughts and dreams. As echoes of our own essence, we recognize their passage before us as if projected in a shining mirror.

Watson's kind of dramatic abstraction utilizes a visual language with repeated patterns incorporating biomorph shapes which, while not being literally representational, nonetheless mirror natural and organic exchanges of energy which the viewer instantly identifies as an uncanny symbol of something without a name, something one connects with at a primal and unconscious level. Indeed, while we do recognize the lush transformations in her paintings as intimate interior glances, they are also sub-atomic portraits of pure energy, both wave *and* particle, both subjective and objective. Consequently, her fervent images are not *about* this or that: they are about everything. "The more I create" Watson observes, "the more I realize that art is about art. The more I learn about painting, the more I learn about myself."

Studying at the Ontario College of Art during the ascendance of alternate delivery media systems for images, which very likely required Watson to hold fast to the primacy of paint in a competitive domain often dominated by photography, video, performance, installation and conceptual art. Luckily for us she is also a conceptual painter of the highest caliber, and she has indeed held fast in a most powerful and *haptic* manner, most especially by embracing the brushstroke itself as her principal signature content, subject and theme. For me, a prime example of this optical holding fast process might be a work such as the relatively recent "Cloud Masquerade", a 2023 piece in a square format, as many of her works are.



Cloud Masquerade, 2023, 54 x 54 in. (left)
Cumulus in Feeling, 24 x 24 in. (right)

This subtle yet vigorous work also brings us face to face with something at the heart of all great painting, from its ancient to its postmodern formats: the dilemma of what something *looks* like versus what something *feels* like. Her works can often appear hallucinatory in tone as they gently push and pull at our eyes while we're busily engaged in absorbing their fabula, their visual story. Who among us has not as a child, or even as a daydreaming adult, lay down in a field and gazed up at the dance of cloud formations with their constantly changing shapes, as ethereal objects without solid substance that seem to reflect the passage of time itself once we suspend our conscious thought process? Her paintings such as "A Glory Cloud", "Cumulus in Feeling" or "Stratocumulus in Feeling" all evoke either bouquets of flowers exploding or a cloud dance to some uncanny silent music only they can hear.



Stratocumulus in Feeling, 36 x 48 in.

If you imagine yourself laying on your back and watching them as fleeting shadows across the ceiling for instance, the coded but concrete messages they all convey will remind you of the kind of visual free association we all engaged in as kids, wasting time perhaps, and yet also making the most productive use of time imaginable: seeing deeply into ourselves through their mystic veils. Scientists call the phenomenon I'm referring to *pareidolia*: the tendency for human perception to superimpose a meaningful interpretation on a basically nebulous optical stimulus, so that one sees an object, pattern or physical reference where there may or may not be one. It's all about our natural inclination to perceive a meaningful image in a mostly random or at least ambiguous visual field. The classic abstract expressionists had to contend with that challenge back in the 1950's, with Mark Rothko emphatically going all the way, "These

paintings are not representations of an experience, they *are* an experience.” And so it is with Watson’s.

This is not to suggest, however, that the reveries, pictures and even stories that emerge from within us are not valid projections, on the contrary, they are the direct conduit leading to the heart of both a painting and its maker. Indeed, most of my work involves processing what I see, or imagine that I see, and responding emotionally through one poetic idea or another to the work of art confronting me. I say confronting me rather than me confronting it, largely because that is the origin of all *ekphrasis*, a classical Greek literary term having to do with the immediate sensation, emotive archiving and response in words, usually via poems or songs, to the mostly wordless inspiration provoked by a painting, sculpture, or even an elegantly designed building.

When I am confronted for instance by another masterful square work such as her “Film Noir”, with its hovering cluster of interloping loops suspended above a subtly suggested body of water, I have to pause in between breaths. Am I only imagining circular ripples in a non-existent lake above which this gorgeous tangle of strokes is floating and about to plunge into its dark depths, or did the artist actually configure this drama in order to induce my own hallucinatory dark cinematic reverie? But no either/or binary state is necessary or called for in Watson’s painted *moments* (as she often calls them): everything is true, everything is exactly what it is. Thus I like to call her paintings *situations*, in which your suspended daydream is just as valid as mine.

This very absence of a correctly enforced polarity in her images is also an active vehicle for conveying the exuberant yet placid impetus behind all her work: the meditative state associated with non-action, what in the east is termed *wu wei*. It’s a poetic Taoist notion referring to the practice of taking no action that is not in complete accord with the natural course of things. In some cases I have also encountered a translation suggesting *no mind*, which amounts to the same thing: doing without doing, inaction and effortless action, all without the usual mental noise of our egos whispering in our ear. Which is why Watson says she leaves her ego outside the studio door. Essentially it means returning to our basic oneness with all being. “When I am conscious of being under the sky, I feel so small.” Watson has stated succinctly. “The omnipresent air connects me to my spirit and I want to share my perspective of the emotive sky. I like personifying clouds and adopting their feelings.”

That last sentence of hers is one of the most brilliant and insightful observations I've ever heard an artist make. That kind of effortless approach to achieving intensely resonant results brings us to consider another fancy classical Greek word, one that is a cousin of *pareidolia*, the notion of active *apophenia*. Like most fancy classical words, its meaning is actually quite simple: the ability to make inter-connected visual insights between apparently unrelated things. A third member of this exotic family of seeing is one that is much more commonly familiar, that of *synchronicity*, the notion of meaningful coincidences first posited by the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. These last two ideas best clarify our skill at imagining the content of what we see while staring, with or without intention. The best painters merely point the way.



Moon is a Pulse That Runs Itself, 72 x 72 in.

While all of Watson's works are opulent, to be sure, some achieve a degree of visual complexity which is belied by their apparent characters as unified fields. More complexity arrives for instance in her works in which the drama moves through and outside of the frame of reference, thus creating a figure/ground relationship seldom explored in traditional abstraction. The wonderfully titled "Moon is a Pulse That Runs Itself" and "Happiness As a Shade", for example, involve the viewer in even more active narratives. And the situational arrival of much more intense colour fields behind the *actions* themselves, as in the arresting magenta of "Tao

Calligraphy”, sensual orange-grays of “Winter’s Peach” and surreal pinkish tones of “Porphyra” (a form of algae), all indicate this artist’s interest in and capacity for a wild pigment theatre set.



Tao Calligraphy, 60 x 60 in.

Biomorphic abstraction, in a formal sense, was first coined by MOMA in a catalogue essay from 1936 by Alfred Barr in which he asserted that it was curvilinear rather than rectilinear, emotive rather than structural, and romantic rather than classical in its exaltation of the mystical, the spontaneous and the non-rational. That feature aligns ideally with Watson’s entire raison d’etre, which clearly extols a kind of automatism celebrating the unpredictable outcomes of free expression. “Air Signs Talking” and “Air Sign Combustion” are both ideal examples of her multivalent ability to control the material energy at her disposal without controlling the unforeseen outcomes of how she throws caution to the winds, so to speak. Never has the open air appeared so palpable and yet so evanescent: empty space as an invisible mandala.

“The sky is my muse.” the artist explains, “It is no-place and all-place, and as a subject matter, it connects me to nature. As opposed to landscape – which references a topography of a specific place – the sky is a numinous experience that connects us to a greater power.” This is why her emblems of the enigma of existence feel so physically powerful at the same time as so gentle and almost translucent. Soon passing out of sight and memory, quickly fading or disappearing before our eyes: each image, whether it is a painting, a limited edition print, or indeed, a bespoke designed carpet woven from designs which her parallel studio practice also produces, is a fugitive glance over our shoulder at life, in passing.



Lavendar Breeze, 48 x 48 in.

Considering how her painting style focuses so profoundly on impermanence and change, as in the superbly ethereal “Let Go Lightly”, or the robust amplitude of “Lavender Breeze”, it often feels ironic that the style continuum she has mastered still occupies pride of place in the school of *action painting*, which some of us still call gestural abstraction, the name that my favourite art critic Harold Rosenberg bestowed on this kind of image-making. And this despite her avowed interest in the creative principle of effortless *non-action*. “I meditate when I paint and really try to shut out all thoughts. I let the materials become themselves so that I become an equal player to each pigment. My intent is to honor the essence and energy that is around at all times.”

Along with her joyous paintings, equally impressive is that parallel design craft practice of hers which, like the grand Aubusson Studio in France (as far back as the 15th century) and the innovative Bauhaus institution in Germany (in the early 20th) is actively engaged in the design and fabrication of limited edition carpets and tapestries inspired by the overall unified field of her artistic endeavour. Art you can not only touch but actually walk on. Imagine that. A near utopian arrangement for me would be stretching out on one of her carpets with a meditation pillow and gazing into the rippling energies of one of her sensual vistas unfolding in a work such as the boldly intimate and revealing “I Enjoy Gazing Down Through the Layers of Myself.”



I Enjoy Gazing Down Through Layers of Myself, 60 x 60 in.

Maybe it's because that is precisely what we seem to be doing when we encounter her splendid creations, but I almost hope that title gets used for one of the several upcoming exhibitions for this busy artist. As in nature, so in aesthetics: continuity is everything. Which is why the work she is currently in dialogue with for her upcoming 2024 exhibitions at Bau-Xi Gallery in Vancouver, Laura Rathe Fine Art in Dallas, and New Zones Gallery in San Francisco, all promise to be equally surprising and reassuring at the same time. Up ahead lies her Fall debut show in New York, a city whose aesthetic aura she will autograph too, just as elegantly as everything else I've ever seen her do. Her enigmatic works are essentially virtual diagrams of our quantum

world. What better way to celebrate gazing down through the layers of oneself. Especially when that gaze can be shared with all of us. In works that feel like haiku poetry in paint.

