

GALLERIES • WEEKEND

Squeak Carnwath's Guilt-Free Zone Is Our Space

by John Yau on November 1, 2015

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Squeak Carnwath's exhibition, *What Before Comes After*, at Jane Lombard is the artist's first with the eponymous gallery (formerly Lombard Fried) and her first in New York since 2000. Well-known in the Bay Area, and the subject of a survey show, *Squeak Carnwath: Painting Is No Ordinary Object*, at the Oakland Museum (April 25-August 23, 2009), which was organized by Karen Tsujimoto (I contributed an essay to the exhibition catalogue), Carnwath is a studio painter who doesn't work from the figure or still-life. Rather, she transforms the studio's secure, enclosed spatial world into a rectilinear plane that is open and vulnerable to every variety of event, every sort of thinking and experience. Conceived by the artist as "our space," this plane becomes a repository of all kinds of information — a non-narrative record of diverse pictorial signs, abstract patterns, and excerpts drawn from a wide range of sources.

Carnwath's lexicon of motifs includes everything from trompe l'oeil sheets of lined-yellow paper written on in pencil, to Etruscan heads derived from Fayum funeral portraits, to tree trunks, LP records and clusters of stripes and squares. The excerpts come from something the artist heard in person or on the radio, or read in a book or magazine. What unites all of it is that everything must be done in paint. This is how she described her project to me in an interview (Brooklyn Rail, November 2006):

[...] there's some element of me that's very rigid where this has to be all painting, it has to be on a flat surface, and be all paint. It can't be pencil, crayon, or magic marker. It can't be anything but paint.

Carnwath's insistence that everything be done in paint distinguishes her work from that of Cy Twombly, who also combined different motifs and words, and often used oil paint, crayon and graphite in his paintings. The other difference is Carnwath's definition of "our space." As Katharina Schmidt stated in a 2011 catalogue essay,



Squeak Carnwath, "Two of Everything" (2014-2015), oil and alkyd on canvas over panel, 60 x 70 inches (all images courtesy Jane Lombard) (click to enlarge)

Twombly's work can be understood "as one vast engagement with cultural memory" that draws on historical events and classical mythology. Carnwath, on the other hand, draws most of her inspiration from the present. The crucial difference between Carnwath and Twombly, and what makes them very different artists, is their respective awareness of time. Energized by her consciousness of "time's winged chariot hurrying near," Carnwath's work is suffused by an urgency that is tempered by decorum and humor, a sense that we are all on, as one of her recurring motifs suggests, a sinking ship together.

(I want to go on record here and note that in every discussion of Twombly's influence on artists, I have never encountered mention of a woman artist. Is there a legitimate reason for such a narrow, biased reading that I don't know about?)

For those viewers who are new to Carnwath's work, the selection of eleven paintings done between 1995 and 2015, the four cigar boxes, dating between 1999 and 2015, and the wall of drawings and notes—items one would usually find on her studio wall—from 2012-2015 and titled "Crazy Papers," is a good introduction to an artist deserving wider attention. Along with the earliest painting in the exhibition, a painted-text piece, "Things Green" (1995), there are three recent works made up solely of words. Although separated by two decades, what "Things Green" (1995) and a work like "Girls" (2015) — which, like the other two newer works, is a sequence of song titles — have in common is Carnwath's tracking of the drift of her thinking, which underscores the desire to organize the terrain one's mind moves through. Moreover, the viewer gets a sense of Carnwath's ability to seamlessly mesh the offbeat with the factual, to extract from the mundane and everyday something unexpected, idiosyncratic, funny, worrisome and ongoing.



Squeak Carnwath, "Untitled (PB)" (2015), paint, cigar box (paper covered mahogany), and thumbtack, 5.25 x 10 x 55 inches (click to enlarge)



Squeak Carnwath, "Things Green" (1995), oil and alkyd on canvas, 76 x 102 inches (click to enlarge)

In the upper part of "Things Green," Carnwath lists words associated with "green" on a green ground: slime, fungus, room, salad, horn, peace, and beret. Below the list she has painted a grid of 257 numbered rectangles that covers the rest of the painting. In nearly every rectangle the artist has deposited a smeary brushstroke or daub of color that is somehow connected to "green," but not necessarily that color. The gap between the words and myriad colors is just one dance the painting sets in motion. The blank rectangles suggest that no matter how thorough, one will inevitably neglect or not know things – that everywhere there are limits that one encounters.

In the three paintings consisting solely of song titles, each of which is written on a its own band of color, Carnwath's playlist echoes the way we curate and listen to songs, often fitting the mood we are in. In the painting "A Little Sad" (2015), which is largely done in grays, blacks, and off-whites, the titles written out capital letters include "I'M SO LONESOME I COULD CRY," "ONLY LOVE COULD HURT LIKE THIS," and "GOODBYE CRUEL LOVE." An

iPod with all the painting's songs accompanies each painting, and can be listened to while viewing the work. In these paintings, Carnwath's motivations for grouping particular song titles together seem to be generated by the songs themselves. Her selections end up being both personal and collective; they are not about her.

With their process of adding, subtracting and covering over, the paintings demand scrutiny. I kept walking up to them, reading things Carnwath had written down. I never felt that I was being lectured to and, more interesting, I often found the writing quirky and poignant. She is sensitive to collective worries and fears, as well as the roundabout way they might be expressed. In one note among the many written on the "Crazy Papers," she points out that in the age of the Internet and ubiquitous surveillance, dogs have more privacy than humans. "Lucky dog," she adds.

On the left side of "Everything 2" (2002), Carnwath wonders if, when she gets old, she will have to hang signs on appliances telling her that it is an "oven" or "vacuum cleaner." Elsewhere on the left side of the painting, one reads "PLEASE HELP," "IT'S NOT AS FAR AWAY AS YOU THINK," and "GUILT FREE ZONE." The pressure of mortality and its concomitant feeling of fragility are felt throughout "Everything 2" and other paintings, but it never becomes overbearing because it is inclusive. In one way or another we have all considered where a moment of forgetfulness might lead. At the same time, Carnwath, who refuses to descend into bathos and melancholia, declares the painting to be a guilt-free zone, a place where one doesn't censor one's thoughts or pay penance for loving what you do. She is claiming that the space of painting can be paradisiacal, a sustaining place, where you don't have to ignore the world or suppress your fears. As she states on the right side of the painting, on one of three trompe l'oeil sheets of paper "affixed" to its striped surface: "IT IS THE PAINTING THAT TAKES CARE OF ME."



Squeak Carnwath, "Everything 2" (2002), oil and alkyd on canvas over panel, 77 x 154 inches (click to enlarge)

In an age that expects everyone to be ironic, to suitably demonstrate that you don't care, and prove that you are a slacker, Carnwath is fully aware of the risks of painting like this. In "Beginner" (2008), she writes in large capital letters: ENTER HERE. She recognizes that there can be no halfway measure, and that for all the details and discrete parts you encounter in the layered works, the only way to approach them is to be all in. I am reminded of what Edwin Denby wrote about his friend, Bill de Kooning: "He didn't, like a wit, imitate the appearance of acting on it; he committed himself full force to what he was imagining." Carnwath has long been dedicated to the space where painting and imagination meet, "our space," as she generously describes it. It is a space where the mental and visual merge, where the world in different ways floods in, and where reading and seeing become acts of self-reflection.

What Before Comes After continues at Jane Lombard Gallery (518 West 19th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through December 19.



Squeak Carnwath, "Nearly Perfect" (2015), oil and alkyd on canvas over panel, 70 x 60 inches (click to enlarge)