

REVIEWS JAN. 06, 2016

Squeak Carnwath

NEW YORK,
at Jane Lombard

by Tatiana Istomina

Squeak Carnwath's first New York exhibition in over a decade was tightly packed with paintings, sculptures and works on paper from the 1990s to the present. The earliest piece on view was the painting *Things Green* (1995). Designed as a giant chart, it presents a list of nouns floating in a field of bright green above a 12-by-21-unit grid, each cell containing a number and a dab of paint. The color swatches represent a wide range of tints, from lemon yellow and sky blue to gray and olive brown, all of which may conceivably contain green pigment. Similarly, every written word has a connection to green, through custom or association. The list includes "snake," "stone" and "grass" as well as "house," "peace" and "beret."

The list of nouns is far from exhaustive, the enumeration inaccurate and some of the cells empty, yet the flaws of the *Things Green* chart become assets of the painting, which combines poetic sensibility with irresistible physical presence. Carnwath's principal talent is her ability to transform inert materials into something akin to living matter. In her work, every wobbly line has a character, each handwritten word has its own quirky temperament, and dabs of color have different shapes and moods, like specimens in a collection of bugs.

Carnwath's most recent paintings were installed in the second gallery. Dense with titles of popular songs handwritten in block letters on narrow bands of contrasting colors, they were each accompanied by a small iPod shuffle playing the referenced songs—a pleasant but redundant gesture. In some paintings, the found poetry of individual song titles accumulates to powerful effect. In *Girls* (2015), for example, the titles painted in various shades of pink, red



Squeak Carnwath:
Everything 2, 2002, oil
and alkyd on canvas on
panel, 6½ by
12½ feet; at Jane
Lombard.

and purple reflect many different aspects of gender, from innate character to performative identity to social function: “I Was Born This Way,” “Bang Bang,” “Piece of My Heart,” “I Am Woman.”

Text and color swatches comprise only part of a large vocabulary of shapes, symbols and gestures that have recurred throughout Carnwath’s paintings over the years, traveling from one piece to another and generating a visual conversation among the works. One of the frequent motifs is a trompe l’oeil sheet of lined notebook paper. In the 2002 diptych *Everything 2*, three such sheets, covered with various marks and pencil scribbles, are depicted on the right-hand panel, painted with easy and casual confidence on top of dozens of vertical stripes of color. The diptych’s left panel features marks and vignettes scattered on a pale background: a handful of colored circles; schematic images such as a rabbit and a palm-reading chart; laconic statements painted in large block letters (“THIS IS A BRILLIANT PAINTING” and “PLEASE HELP”); another trompe l’oeil notebook page; several bits of text floating in different parts of the canvas; and dozens of painterly trifles and accidents, from doodles scraped into wet ground to droplets and streaks of multicolored paint enhancing the canvas’s already richly nuanced surface.

Like most of Carnwath’s pieces, *Everything 2* demands sustained viewing. The abundance of visual and textual information seems to imply that some kind of message is there waiting to be deciphered. The clues, however, do not point in a single direction. None of Carnwath’s works in fact offer a comprehensible statement, consistent argument or specific emotion. Instead, they mesmerize the viewer with their tremendous arsenal of painterly gestures, symbols and contradictory statements, transporting one into a state of sensory overload, intellectual excitement and puzzlement.