

Even and Cool

Ellen Welch Granter: Recent Works Maine Art Gallery/Gallery on Chase Hill through 7 September 2010

Just inside the front door of Ellen Granter's studio hangs a small round painting, a classic Chinese image of a brown and white bird sitting on a knotty branch with pink flowers. Ellen, an avid birdwatcher, isn't even sure what kind of bird it is. What's important about this painting, which her parents brought back from a trip to China in the 1980s, is its role in opening up an aesthetic that informs all of Ellen's art.

Indigo_Ibis_with_Copper_24x24 Through her deep affinity for Chinese art and culture has come a body of work focused on the natural world. When she paints sparrows or salt marshes, Ellen is responding to cues of light, shape, and color that come from the randomness and asymmetry of nature. Her gestural style seeks to capture the instant when something in the rhythms of nature play on the imagination. The result is an expressiveness very close to that found in Chinese art.

One might have expected that Ellen's time in China, where she lived and studied in the 1980s, would have been a sort of homecoming, an epiphany. "Nothing of the kind," she laughs. "It was immediately after the Cultural Revolution, and everything was gray. There were sappy Chinese propaganda songs playing everywhere and huge banners like a used car lot at the Imperial Palace."

Recently, a new Asian-inflected element has appeared in Ellen's work: gold leaf. She describes the process of working with gold leaf with precision and clarity. She is respectful of the ritualistic process necessary to manipulate this delicate and fragile substance. "I love the craft element of working with gold leaf and its textured, tactile nature," she notes. Also intriguing is how these wafer-thin metal sheets pick up surface imperfections. The burnished area with its network of skin-like wrinkles glows with ambient light. Surprisingly, the effect is opulent rather than garish.

Opulence of a different sort appears in the lotus paintings. Bold in color and scale, these works could easily be tapestry cartoons or silkscreen designs ready for



transfer onto billowing silk. The untamed blooms and their fauvist color palette offer a rich counterpoint to her other natural environments where a certain measured response prevails.

Scudding_Clouds_18x18 Though she is known primarily for her bird paintings, Ellen produced a series of landscapes following an artist-in-residence program in South Carolina in 2009. The honey-colored salt marshes, the grassy levees and the coastal birds, the moss-hung oaks and the fans of the palmetto inspired a fine group of plein-air works. This series also marks the frequent use of a favorite new pigment, a sort of rose gray, as in Marsh at Little Neck where the color is enlivened by copper metallic paint. The tallgrass common in October in the Low Country tidal flats takes on just this particular shade in its autumn coloration. In her characteristic low-horizon landscapes, she adds buttery yellows and vivid greens for an impeccable contrast. It is a light-drenched palette in which Granter's fast-moving brush records the mutability of nature as well as its restfulness.



Ellen is fond of small panels hung together to create the effect of a mosaic where every “tile” carries its own story. A series of silhouettes of the glossy ibis, a gorgeous wading bird in bronze and bottle green with a long, curved bill, focuses the eye on the distinctive shape of this bird as it hunts for fish or frogs in pools. “I’m really drawn to the calligraphic effect of the bird’s shape on a white ground,” Ellen explains. That she is sensitive to the graphic potential of the ibises’ legs and feet isn’t surprising given her knowledge of Chinese history and language.

Ellen’s bird paintings, especially her signature sparrows, typically concentrate on the gregariousness of these birds and their constant motion. In Five Through the Window, a line of five sparrows hold a tête-à-tête against a gold-leaf “window.” Paintings like Waves and Pipers or Pulse follows the dance-like movements of a group of birds scouting ceaselessly in the incoming tide. In Halo, a sparrow — alone and still! — achieves unexpected grandeur framed by a gold-leaf nimbus against vibrant red.

“People always react to the birds. They love them. I react to their color and their shapes. Bird paintings make you notice these tiny creatures more. I just don’t think there’s anything wrong with art being beautiful.”

Maine Art Gallery/Gallery on Chase Hill

Photos: paintings by Ellen Welch Granter, Indigo Ibis with Copper and Scudding Clouds
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