

Erosions, Geologies, & Terrains: The Geomantic Art of Dudley Zopp

Essay from the catalogue

DUDLEY ZOPP: erosions, geologic & terrains

Coleman Burke Gallery, New York

January 27 - March 10, 2011

Art should imitate nature not in its appearance but in its manner of operation.

-John Cage

Dudley Zopp's paintings are like palimpsests whose burnished and abraded surfaces are as compelling for the faint traces of their absent markings as they are for their visible ones. Reminiscent of monotypes, photograms, or frottages, they are surfaces that seem to bear the fragile imprint of past processes and matrices, an effect that produces a tangible, deeply felt, but hidden presence.

Inspired by her ruminations on geological evolution, gleaned from long walks along the coast of Maine, Zopp's paintings visualize what can't be seen, whether beneath the surface of the ground (fields of stones that double as cross-sections of the earth, in her *Geologies* series) or over the course of time (single frame, seemingly time-lapse images of stones blurred by moving water, the passage of time, or both, in her *Erosions* and *Terrains* series). Just as Michelangelo famously described his creative process as one of freeing pre-existing figures from blocks of marble, the surfaces of Zopp's work likewise seem to have been eroded or washed away to reveal hidden images that up until that time had lain dormant within them.

Through her empathetic but unsentimental response to the natural world, Zopp forges compelling analogs between fields of sand and the surface of paper or canvas; between rocks and pigment; and between the forces of nature and the tools of the painter. Even her materials—graphite and “earth” colors (the product of rocks and soils that have been unearthed, processed, and finely ground into pigments)—subtly connect the physical elements of her art to their subject.

In a well-known exchange between painters Hans Hoffman and Jackson Pollock, Hoffman expressed admiration for the younger artist's work but advised him that first he must work from nature; to which Pollock replied, “I am nature.” As concise, elegant, comprehensive, and paradigm-shifting as $E=mc^2$, Pollock's remark signaled a revised relationship between the artist and nature, an idea that was also important to designer and inventor Buckminster Fuller—that human

consciousness, rather than being apart from nature was in fact a part of nature: nature's way of knowing, re-imagining, and expressing itself.

It's also an artistic approach that Dudley Zopp has mastered, on her own terms, with uncommon sensitivity, agility, and effectiveness.

As in the natural world, the twin forces of evolution and entropy are at work in Zopp's creative process as well, metaphorically that is, through images that are painted, washed away, repainted, and scraped out time and again, reenacting the effects of geological processes through the chance operation of repeated erosions and abrasions. It's a methodical use of chance, to be sure, by an artist who knows the physical properties of her methods and materials as intimately as she knows her subject, but one that produces a complex, nuanced facture in the work that fosters a contemplative expression of the ineffable.

As much as Zopp's paintings are derived from and converge back on our experience of the natural world, however, they also function as independent and non-referential expressions of the human hand, spirit, and intellect—works that draw as much attention to their seductive surfaces and inherent language of mark-making as they do to their sense of representational imagery. Absent horizon lines to anchor three-dimensional space, and conventional modeling of light and dark to represent volume, the paintings can be read as either stones on a beach or more literally as random patterns of organic shapes consciously arranged on a two-dimensional field.

This convergence of geological imagery with an implied system of notation connects Zopp's work in subtle ways to a range of metaphysical approaches to the land, from geomancy to Shintoism to divination, which—each in its own way—regards the landscape and the natural world (including human kind) as sacred, interconnected, and capable of being instinctively deciphered and understood, the better to align human needs with both natural and metaphysical principles. Just as spectrographs and seismographs, among other scientific instruments, translate natural occurrences into graphic language, Zopp's paintings hint at the possibility that the natural world and its temporal dimension might be rendered symbolically—like the sequencing of DNA or the shifting of tectonic plates—through human intuition.

Rainer Maria Rilke, in *The Duino Elegies*, attributes our sense of awe in the face of nature to that kind of beauty that "serenely disdains to destroy us." Dudley Zopp transposes the timeless, indifferent, and quiet grandeur of nature from the beaches of Maine to her exquisite and equally inscrutable paintings, where the power of nature is reified through the process of art.

Mark Wethli