

AN ARTIST'S ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

A FOREWARD BY ALEXANDER BOROVSKY



[NATURE REVISITED 25, 2017. 12" X 12"]

In over a hundred years of its existence, the field of abstract art has been trodden flat. Countless highways, rocky roads and paths intersect here. It's not easy to find a unique way.

What matters is not scope or cost, but that both the builders of highways and the people who create tiny paths toward their homes with their own bare feet all move across virgin land along an unpaved surface. They navigate in the abstract space at their

own risk. In any other mode, abstraction cannot serve self-expression, nor further authorial development and intuition. Of course, one can always use a paved road comfortably and sometimes even elegantly.

Thousands of artists walk old ways, demonstrating high artistic culture, time investment, and often great taste and sophistication. But they are parrots, not pioneers. They deliver artistic products, and these can even be of high quality. But only personal navi-

gation in the abstract space enables one to change perspectives—one's own and those of others—at least a little. Even one tiny step into the unknown space of non-figurative art makes you a navigator, a pioneer. The artist cannot know if she's about to discover a path or a highway. A new way is being created, and that is what matters.

I believe that Susan Swartz has made her own path in abstract art. I picture it as a path in the countryside, or in the foothills: soft turf, wind-blown grass, thickets on the sides, a closeness to nature. At least, this is the impression I gathered from this artist's personal exhibition at the Ludwig Museum in Budapest (December 2016 – January 2017). And this impression deepened during the preparation of Susan Swartz's exhibition at the Russian Museum.

When I began collecting materials for this essay, it turned out that I was not the only one to think about her work in terms of pathways. Dieter Ronte did not only use the title of a painting, "Personal Path", in the title of his article, but also employed the cartographic term "mapping", speaking of the "imagistic mapping of one's own soul". My metaphors focus on the local (such as the countryside) rather than the global for a reason: these images are meant to call to mind smells, sounds, and call to mind the trembling of tree-filtered sunlight on the retina. If all this does not

sound abstract, this is because Swartz's abstractions are indeed unusual. They are closely connected to the sensorial, to what Michel Foucault called "the materiality of painting". Her paintings are full of the almost recognizably optical, the tactile, even the acoustic. It is not by chance that one of her recent series is entitled "Nature Revisited". Revisited, the way you would revisit Brideshead – with a sense of nostalgia, a sense of time...

A white fused surface, ever so slightly warm in colour. **On it, scratched with a palette knife or squeezed from a tube, there seems to the silhouette of a flower or perhaps a tiny fountain, created when a drop meets the earth.** This is not a sign – the mediation is minimal, the form is alive and procedural, be it in the process of emergence or disappearance. In any case, this process appears to be repetitive. First, the palette is being reduced to the monochrome. Painting appears as painting here, not as a medium: there are no narratives, only its own immanent content – colour, materiality, texture, a relationship with time (it was Josef Albers who introduced the concept of a colour's age into the study of abstraction). But then this monochrome, purely material and unnuanced surface is superimposed by a living silhouette, which

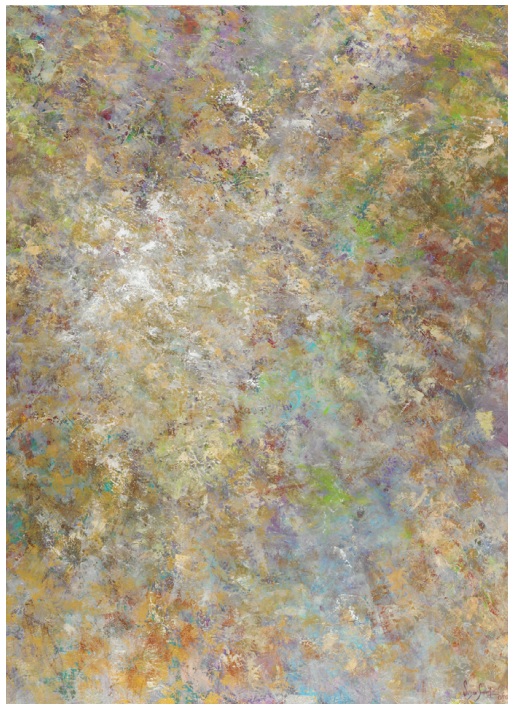
seems to be either pushed up by the pressure of the coloured surface, or else drowning in it. This creates a sense of return to the image – albeit on conditions dictated by abstraction. There is a premonition of inevitable contact with the natural on a new level. The artist, the person is changing. Nature does not let go... Surprisingly, an old poem by Pushkin known to every Russian schoolchild (and cited on the previous page in Oliver Kahn's translation), can serve as ekphrasis for this contemporary American artist's series.

Later, watching films by Louie Schwartzberg, I was not surprised at the biographical implications of the title "Nature Revisited". Susan

Swartz has two workshops: one in Park City – a snow-bound town east of Salt Lake City, Utah, near the Wasatch and Summit mountains – and one on the wind-blown island Martha's Vineyard near Cape Code, in the very east of Massachusetts. These tourist towns are almost empty of people outside the season. They differ in climate and geography, but are united in their ecological authenticity: their

true state of nature. This is what Susan returns to.

Susan Swartz attracted attention in the late 2000s by paintings with representational aspects. These works even had a touch of genre about them, the memory of genre – namely landscape painting. But I would like to begin with an earlier work, "HEAVEN",



[HEAVEN, 2002. 60" X 48"]

created in 2002. It is non-figurative, already indicative of the artist's free orientation in regard to representation and her ability to build a material plane beyond narrative and objective references. If you look you can find objective references here, but the overarching theme is spiritual, as witnessed by the title. "Heaven" has clear, sublime biblical connotations. How

does the painting live up to such a title? Visually, of course. **The canvas is densely filled with brushstrokes, reminiscent of Pollock filling up a space by dripping.** The painting is an object with certain physical characteristics – colours, forms, weight, density – and also a tangle of lines, which can perhaps be unwound.

The contact with this material plane can be sensorial or psychedelic (what Della Pollock called “hallucinatory literalism”), quite devoid of tropes and metaphors. Swartz filled the space with countless brushstrokes, which never become a relief. Instead, the acrylic surface appears to have been processed by

a painting road roller. This is rather different from abstract paintings as objects, such as those of the hard-edge variety, which create a material whole expressed by monochrome blocks. Swartz is doing something else. She is trying to create a feeling of heaven with all its connotations and associations – outside of illusory mimesis. She only uses painterly means. Her

brushstrokes make some zones lighter, and their very rhythm seems to transcend space at several points. Swartz understands that her kind of abstraction operates in indivisible optics. Therefore, there is more than one funnel of light, more than one hint of a dome. This is more than one touch of spiritual illumination; these elements are not synchronized.

It is a difficult task to use symbolism in abstrac-

tion, as it is a form of art that has long been encased in a certain conceptual framework. Swartz made a promising step forward here. She would continue the issues of “Heaven” later, in such paintings as the 2014 “Joy”. But immediately after “Heaven”, her interests led her elsewhere. To Swartz, the possi-

bilities of representational art were not yet exhausted. Crucial impulses came from nature and even from the memory storehouse of genre painting. Works from the late 2000s and the 2010s such as “Steadfast Strength”, **“FOREST GLOW”** and “Winter’s Hush III” hearken back to classic or perhaps I should say “democratic” landscape painting – some-

thing high art had not involved itself with since the times of the Hudson River School. Swartz seeks to recreate the state and temperature of the landscape.

She shares her desire to become part of the landscape, emotionally at least, with the viewer. This

non-analytical, emotional communication turns out to be highly effective – precisely because of its



[FOREST GLOW, 2010. 72" X 48"]

atavistic nature. Swartz is a contemporary artist, and she cannot help but reflect on the history of the genre. She uses mimesis in controlled doses not as a goal, but as a device. But why does she need the trees, the texture of their bark, the reflexes on the snow? Especially after the immersion into classical abstraction in "Heaven"?

This development, I believe, follows not a professional but an autobiographical logic. Swartz is simply too fascinated by these spaces, by the nature surrounding her two workshops. Her mind is full of visual images asking to be produced on canvas.

As an artist, she is fully prepared for the horizon of ultimate generalizations, for speculation, and for navigation in the world of ideal representations. However, as a human, she is not yet ready to leave behind attachment to a specific place, and its living impressions and experiences. Under the sign of genius loci, such works as "**AFTERNOON SHADOWS**" come to fruition. The artist is compelled to recreate the natural sources of her inspiration by directing rays of light into the depicted landscape.



[AFTERNOON SHADOWS, 2006. 30" X 30"]

It looks as if she was using natural light effects, but at the same time she is thinking about internal, symbolic light sources.

Remaining within her own emotional field, Swartz also reflects upon the complete experience of American luminism - from "natural" (but artistically intensified)

lighting to post-impressionistic internal luminance. Such are the paintings "Amazing Grace" and "Purple Majesty", with their internal light emerging from a hidden source and piercing the middle ground.

Swartz's emotional attachment to concrete

landscapes is crucial. In her later work, it undergoes a twofold transformation. First, there are works with a mimetic echo; some - "Turquoise Reflection", "Water Study" - point toward their essence as nature studies in their titles. Other titles suggest more complex perspectives, e.g. "Evolving Visions, Understudy". Swartz keeps flirting with mimesis, but as an artist, she is never on a tight leash. She abandons the concrete, such as the textures and

silhouettes of trees. Natural impressions are still there, but they are deeply hidden in the colour haze. What matters is the feeling of a mirage, the independent flow of colour planes. This is what connects artistic representation with semantic intention. The word “flow” is key here. Long ago, Rudolf Steiner argued that “the flow of blue or violet is an expression of spiritual reality, just like red or pink represents a material reality.” No matter if colours are really that easy to interpret in psychological terms, let us just notice this keyword: “flow”. In Swartz’s work, colours are flowing, floating, flying.

Rosalind Krauss, a thinker in many ways diametrically opposed to Steiner, writes about deep internal sight nourishing the pre-form. Krauss discusses Jackson Pollock; in regard to Swartz, I prefer to talk about natural impulses hidden in a haze, a maze of colour. While Swartz does have deep internal sight, much in her colour representation also comes from the external world. Swartz is recreating natural imprints on the retina – this is quite clear in such works as **“LAYERED LIGHT”**. She finds

different ways of connecting the theoretical and the observable. Apart from “flowing” colours, she also uses geometric devices. Several works exhibit a certain optical order, beginning with the most mimetic paintings, such as “Blue Fusion” and “Blue Fusion II”. By and by, this orderly rhythm approaches the purely geometric (“Azure Rhythm”), and finally

becomes a network of sorts (**“NATURE’S MIRAGE”**). An outstanding mid-20th century practitioner and theorist of abstract art, Ad Reinhardt used two methods to “cleanse” art from external influences, references, and allusions: the network and the monochrome painting. Swartz is



[NATURE’S MIRAGE 10, 2007. 20” X 20”]

no theorist, but she is well-versed in the culture of abstract art. Her work reflects the critical demands, but she never lets any paradigm (such as the one described above) dominate her. Apart from networks and monochrome work, a third important device in her work is systematism, or seriality, perhaps most clearly expressed in the “Contemplation” cycle. Swartz approaches a paradigm, but then takes a step sideways. There, she finds no trodden path;

she happily takes risks to find her own way.

In this context, the step Swartz takes toward the mimetic is not unexpected. **Her series “Serenade of Lilies” is reminiscent of Claude Monet not only in its motif and its multi-year length, but also in the development from the concrete to the abstract.** Of course, Swartz is consciously alluding to

Monet’s journey away from ponds and lilies toward pure colours. In his monograph on Ross Bleckner, the critic Richard Milazzo discusses the inevitability of symbolism whenever flowers are depicted in contemporary art. Flowers always stand for something, be it freshness or

approaching death. They form a prominent figurative aspect in the work of such artists as Georgia O’Keeffe, Alex Katz, Donald Baechler, Alessandro Twombly and Ross Bleckner. Milazzo speaks of paintings that are “abstract, but floral in nature”.

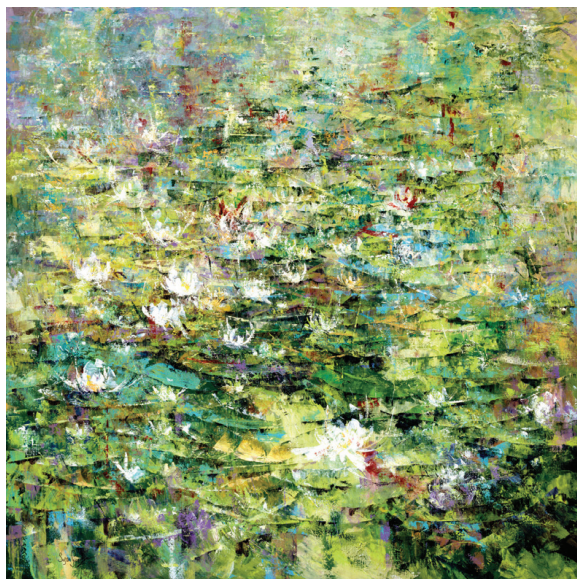
To return to Swartz: responsive as she is toward natural impressions, she keeps her emotions at bay in this series. Her goal is to fill out the canvas, to make it tactile. In “Serenade of Lilies” and “Lilies Unveiled”,

the geometric shape, the square, is densely filled by flora. The monolithic essence of this concentration overpowers all lyrical and meditative reactions. The artist is interested in the density of the plant mass, though she also recreates details with panache – leaves submerged underwater, leaves in the form of tubules on long stems on the surface, open and

closed flowers, duckweed on the water... Still, visually, this entire mass loses its figurative aspect. What remains is order and a state of compression: a breathing material whole.

As already mentioned, the masters of non-figurative art advocated that there are a variety

of immanent qualities inherent in abstraction. Josef Albers spoke about an “age”, Frank Stella about a “weight”. What seems crucial to me in Swartz’s lilies is the fact that the movement on the canvas becomes tactile. The surface seems both viscous and prickly. **Tactility acts as a sign of artistic presence, an experience that the artist shares with the audience.** In general, the touch, be it real or potential, plays an important role in the



[SERENADE OF LILIES, 2007. 72" X 72"]

poetics of Swartz – as a confirmation of identity and trace of autobiography.

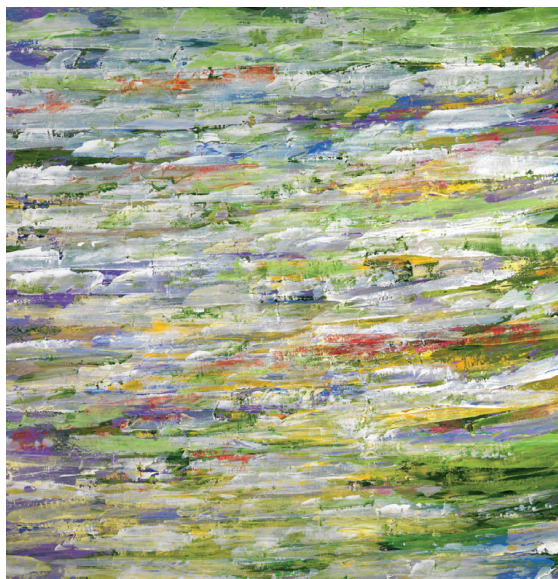
This is manifested in the works “Serenade of Lilies II” & “Serenade of Lilies III”. Here, the mimetic surface is extremely thin, allowing the works to be perceived as pure abstraction. However, these paintings do not correspond to Theo van Doesburg’s proclamations

which so intensely influenced Joseph Albers and his American followers: “The work of art should borrow nothing from nature, contain nothing sensual or sentimental...The technique should be mechanistic, in other words: anti-impressionistic.” Albers’ proficiency demanded total self-refer-

ence: no associations, no meanings outside of the artwork itself.

Swartz works rather differently. These paintings transform and combine the experience of an artist’s presence and personal contact with nature in a sublime, poetic way as well as in an unaffected everyday manner. The water lilies

and their environment are optically processed into a living structure, vibrating with a particular tonality and the gestures of brushstrokes. This is a very delicate suspension of colours; the composition develops horizontally, in bands. Structures are present both as a whole and on the level of individual elements such as bands, stripes and color rhythms. This is



[SERENADE OF LILIES 2, 2013. 60" X 60"]

not a pattern, however. Development occurs horizontally and outwardly, and as the original geometry is overcome, the image is optically pulled out beyond the frame. Moreover, the dynamics are embedded in the colour composition. The eye is perceptually oriented toward the surface, but

not invited into the interior. Instead, the viewer is provided with ample room to roam along the surface, imagining what might lie beyond it. This calls to mind perceptive memories: touching the prickly surface of an overgrown pond, hesitant to plunge the hand deeper into the viscous tangle of tubers and leaves. All as the boat keeps gliding along the pond...

In more contemporary paintings such as “Hidden Forest” and “Summer Bliss” as well as in the “Land-

scape of Resonances” and “Modern Renaissance” series, the dynamic is horizontal. There are no lines delineating certain planes, be it in regard to single brushstrokes or entire horizontal layers. Instead, brushstrokes, tonalities, textures, and directions merge harmonically. The quality and quantity of colours, lighter and darker shades, and textural changes are

in balance and flow. This is neither a pattern nor a rapport. Swartz is not in the wallpaper business; she does not work mechanically. The things she creates are hand-made. These repetitions are not copy-pasted but are instead like echoes and rhymes. The acoustic traces of authorial

presence matter greatly in Swartz’s paintings, and are why the word “resonance” appears so often in their titles.

On the whole, presence is a quality that arguably defines the path being created by Susan Swartz. Abstract representation preserves biographical “atavisms” of presence in nature: memories of colours, of eye movements in different situations – walking, jogging, lying down to look at a tree from

below... and these memories aren’t always physical. In the “Prayers” series, the differing degrees to which praying figures dissolve in the landscape make the image metaphysical. For Swartz, fully conscious perception equals requires both sensory information and memory.

“**CREATION 7**” is a diptych whose components are located not horizontally, but one above the other. Representatives of classical gestalt psychology directly linke anthropological aspects such as walking upright with the role of verticality in constructing an image of the world. In short, our humanity primes us to see vertical structures.



[CREATION 7 DIPTYCH, 2014. 60” X 60”]

This is relevant in regard to navigating a work of art, or “entering” a painting. The Russian artist and theorist Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin also wondered about the communication with an artwork when the viewer does not “see himself on the canvas...The artist and that which is represented in a painting are always parallel to each other, usually vertical, sometimes at a slant; the artist’s body becomes an unbending axis”. According to Petrov-Vodkin, the artist (who

Rudolf Arnheim calls “the agent of vision”) must transcend this traditional parallelism in order to find new contents.

Swartz probably did not consciously intend to enter the discourse of phenomenology and gestalt psychology. Yet she undoubtedly reflects a synesthetic bodily experience: a frontal parallel position, dynamic tension, maximal closeness... The increase – indeed, the doubling – of the vertical field in “Creation 7” is a signal of a stable gestalt-uniting consciousness, the visual image and the material means of embodiment. And at once, it is also a farewell.

Longitudinal division marks the beginning decline of the artist’s interest in the kinaesthetic. The next step is geometric seriality: fragmentation of the motif into geometrized sets. Swartz had created series before; however, it is only at this point that “sextets” arise, along with complex numbering and indexing (an obvious reference to the numbered works by Jackson Pollock in the late 1940s and early 1950s). This reflects a certain movement of the artist away from close contact,

from the memory of her own presence in nature to generalizations of a more abstract kind. **Her art becomes a matter of visualizing the universe, studying her relationship with it. By definition, such works cannot be close and warm – this is a space odyssey, not a walk along a forest path.**

There is a great divide between, say, “Personal

Path 2” with its nearness – the fused, concentrated world of light and shadow, the tactile immediacy of wood textures – and the **“CONTEMPLATION”** series. The title of this multipart project can refer both to thinking about something and to looking closely – indeed,

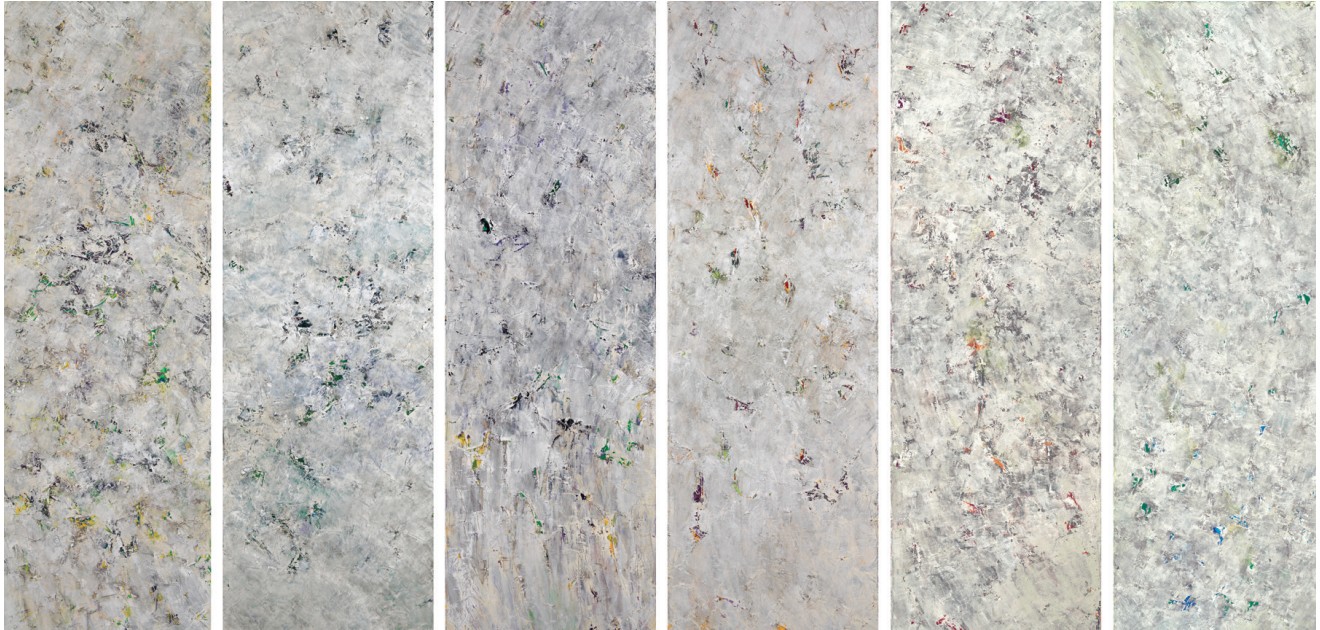


[CONTEMPLATION 23A, 2015. 20" X 20"]

the latter meaning is less befitting. This painting is not made for a close reading; there are no details to discover, nothing concrete to focus on. What we see is a spacial abyss, an irregularly pulsating material substance. Dozens of compositions are inscribed into the same geometric form marked “Contemplation.” This multiplicity almost rhymes with identity. The series’ paintings are identical in their sense of detachment and unwillingness to

engage in kinaesthetic experience, or any physical contact for that matter. This abstinence is compensated by carefully designed colour nuances: we see a complex blend of exquisite gradations in warmth and cold along with dots of luminescence hidden in suspension. A substance of the cosmic order, a

towards the monochrome. Her latest compositions, which could be described with Clement Greenberg's term "allover," have a new kind of universality. This universality consists in the special fusion of lines and colours. Her line does not separate the surface; it is thin, fragile, and it does not represent or delineate.



[CONTEMPLATION SEXTET SERIES, 2014. 72" X 24" EA.]

universe, cannot have a focal point; its pulsation is irregular, its materiality is miraculous.

Swartz's recent works – "Contemplation", "Irregular Mist", "Reverie", "Burst", "Fragmented" – are optically similar. This optic gives the viewers no hints and does not facilitate their penetration of the artistic substance. This optic is almost self-sufficient. Swartz does not seek the kind of phenomenological materiality sought by abstractionists gravitating

Visualization is not directed outwards (that is, toward the real world or the viewer), but inwards, into one's own optics. The artist is very serious about this. The titles of her works often contain words like "fractured," "textured," "fragmented." These refer to various optical functions.

And what purpose do they serve? What is behind the processes of reconfiguring optical modes? Albers wrote about the psychological effect of abstraction,

Pavel Filonov about the “psyche of painting.” Both seem to have implied internal processing in non-objective art. Do they have access to the viewer?

I believe they do, despite the importance of the immanent. Of course, optical operations are in many respects a matter of self-adjustment, but in their

in nature, to nourish one’s spirit. This, in fact, is what the “Revisited” series is all about. I believe it will resonate with the Russian audience. After all, we have some experience in the perception of abstract art and much experience in understanding the meditative lyrics of memory. Swartz loves, as



[NATURE REVISITED 8, 2016. 12" X 12"]

convincing repeatability, they set a certain plane for the viewer’s navigation in the space of abstraction. This navigation can be motoric, meditative, in standby mode, etc. The strange thing is that while Swartz has taken a long and unique path toward universals, mediations and abstract concepts, for her this journey is not to some mythic point of no return. On the contrary, there is a need to constantly come back to one’s own experience of presence



[NATURE REVISITED 19, 2017. 30" X 30"]

Pushkin puts it, to “visit once again.” Or, to cite Frost, to “take the road less travelled.”

— **Alexander Borovsky,**
Russian Art Critic & Curator of
Contemporary Art at the Russian
State Museum