

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

I'll Know It When I See It: Thoughts on Rebecca Rutstein's "Afterglow"

Gerard Brown

When Rebecca Rutstein mounted her 2013 exhibition "Deep Rift" at Bridgette Mayer Gallery, a seismic shift was already underway in her painting. References to fantastical architecture and to specific scientific and geological imagery were becoming more abstract. What had looked like a blossoming Romanticism in earlier exhibits had become a full body embrace of sublime scale and fulgent color. Dense linear structures competed for space with clouds of painterly space. And (perhaps most prophetically of all) a breakthrough wall piece, a lacy cloud of plasma cut, powder coated steel appeared which has echoed through her work to the current show.

Over the last year, Rutstein has been paring things down. Her current exhibit, "Afterglow", is almost entirely composed of relationships between lines and spaces (and, as we shall see, the kind of spaces such relationships imply). And although we may not be sure from what vantage point we regard her atmospheric, invented spaces, it often feels as if we are looking at some remove, as if through the lens of a microscope or telescope. Through this simultaneous pleasure in seeing and sensation of objective distance, Rutstein's work challenges the relationship between vision and knowledge.

The advances science has made through observation over the last several centuries reverberate through everyday life. But, in many ways, we now observe not merely the invisible but also the un-seeable. Using tools like reflected sound waves, radio waves, or magnetic resonance, we 'see' or in the more contemporary parlance, we *image*, an ocean floor where no light could reach, the most distant reaches of space, and the inner most workings of our bodies and minds.

Rutstein's imagery — reminiscent of both molecular constructions and mountain ranges — suggests the unlikely image of the scientist in the studio and an artist in the research lab. What is the use of an artist to science? An excellent answer comes from Stephen Wilson, former Professor of Conceptual and Information Arts at San Francisco State University and author of *Information Arts: Intersections of Art, Science, and Technology*. Wilson argues that the arts have important contributions to make to research in a number of areas, and boldly claims that "within research labs artist participation in research teams could add a perspective that could help drive the research process".

Wilson specifically identifies five habits of mind cultivated by artistic training that differ from the methods of scientific education and which can benefit research in areas beyond the arts. Artists' 'iconoclasm' and willingness to take up unpopular ideas, the value they place on social commentary and relevance, the capacity to employ 'celebration and wonder' in their work, the inherent aim of communication that is part of the arts, and artists' affinity for creativity and innovation are all attributes that can benefit not only artists but the researchers, entrepreneurs, and innovators daring enough to invite their collaboration.

Many artists are engaged in scientific or technical imagery, but Rutstein's involvement in her subject transcends mere aesthetics. One could look to her research into the work of pioneering undersea cartographer Marie Tharp, whose presence loomed large in earlier works. This summer, Rutstein embarks on a three week expedition as one of twenty two Science Communication Fellows aboard

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the Exploration Vessel *Nautilus*, where she will bring much of what Wilson claims scientific research needs from art practice.

Though it's interesting to talk about Rutstein's work in terms of its reflection of our view of the scientific world, the way her work relates to the discourse of painting itself should not be overlooked. Painters of Rutstein's generation have witnessed a tremendous loosening of the constraints that bound the medium in the last days of modernism. Both formalist paeans to medium-specific purity and calls for anything-goes abandon have been inscribed into the curricula of contemporary painters' educations; they are little more than two weeks of readings in a buffet of theories everyone who wishes to participate in the academic training of artists is expected to sample, then consume and digest.

In recent years, Rutstein has moved with greater freedom and confidence across disciplinary boundaries in her work. Paintings have slipped beyond their rectangular borders with the incorporation of cut vinyl or tinted walls. She employs scale for dramatic effect, turning each large painting into a window onto a sublime cosmic or microscopic space. What began as networks of linear paint have blossomed into full-blown sculptural installations. A major aspect of the current show is a large-scale installation, *Sky Terrain*, of floor mounted, powder-coated, bent steel sculptures reminiscent of clouds.

Considering the variety of her output, one is struck by the recursive nature of Rutstein's practice. Images and processes repeat, subtly changing as they are fed into new media or investigated at a different scale. She inventively seeks new ways to produce marks through pouring, brushing, glazing, scumbling, scraping, and other means. These changes compound, feedback, echo, and overspill individual works to turn up again in unexpected places and relationships elsewhere in the gallery. I find it at once surprising and at the same time perfectly logical that Rutstein, who has been so preoccupied with the contours of the ocean floor in earlier work, would come to see the floor of the gallery as a site for her to explore.

The goal of interesting art is neither to illustrate ideas advanced by another discipline nor to neatly follow an historical trajectory along a path that makes work seem 'inevitable'. The goal of art is to move the spirit by means of the senses. Rebecca Rutstein's works engage us. They employ dichotomies of control and surrender, proximity and distance, micro and macro, hand and machine, painterly and graphic to challenge us to locate ourselves in the midst of a constantly shifting terrain.

As intellectually rewarding as their allusions to scientific seeing or connections to contemporary art may be, they are ultimately about making spaces that reflect the artist's (and our own) changing emotional and psychological landscapes. By providing spaces into which we can project our imaginations, that we explore and investigate, Rutstein invites us to feel alive through seeing and learning. Fulfilling the promise of her earlier work, Rutstein reveals something magical through her current body of work that had been present in her paintings all along. But like researchers whose hypothesis must be tested through observation, we had to wait to see it to know it.

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