

The Sea Garden: Recent Paintings by Nancy Wissemann-Widrig

Starting two summers ago in 2004, Nancy Wissemann-Widrig began painting intently a patch of tidal water in front of her long-time summer home on Hawthorne Point in Cushing, Maine. From this patch of sea, she has harvested a bounty of paintings which she is collectively calling, *The Sea Garden* series. The title is apt as the images conjured by the effects of time and weather upon this body of water are as lush with variety as the successive blooms in a well-tended perennial border.

From her perspective perched on the very edge of the shore, Wissemann-Widrig offers in these works an unusual viewpoint. Looking nearly directly down to capture the specifics of her subject in the immediate foreground, she then radically and rapidly sweeps out across the surface of the water, flattening and elevating the space, so that even great distance is compressed and brought parallel to the picture plane, as in a Japanese woodcut. This approach to space creates a kind of paradoxical distance, one which is both near and enveloping, and yet also seeming to stretch without limit.

This contrapuntal attitude is a hallmark of this group of paintings. Representation plays off abstraction, near plays against far, transparency against opacity, surface against depth. Wissemann-Widrig balances these counterpoints exquisitely, creating harmonious variations on a common motif. This series, which began in Maine with nearly daily paintings made of the same tidal pool, has extended to embrace other bodies of water that the artist knows well. These are the salt-water creek of her winter home on the North Fork of Long Island and the Luis Pena Canal on the island of Culebra, where she and her husband, artist John Wissemann, have spent several months of each year for nearly a decade.

The intimate and infinite co-mingle in these works; they are at once pictures of the familiar and of the unknowable. As art historian Andrew Forge has written of Monet, “In the best of his painting there is a sense of access to the world. He is on good terms with the particular portion he is painting, and he allows that portion as an aspect of something larger.”¹ Similarly in *The Sea Garden* works, Wissemann-Widrig is “on good terms with the particular portion” she is painting, and through this familiarity suggests “an aspect of something larger.” The affinity to Monet’s thirty year infatuation with the water-lily pond in his garden at Giverny is present in these paintings. For like him, Wissemann-Widrig begins in the plein air, repeatedly visiting the same locales along the water’s edge to record directly the momentary effects of light and atmosphere.

“Say of the gulls that they are flying in light blue air over dark blue sea,” begins Wallace Stevens’ poem, *Variations on a Summer Day*, a line suggestive of Wissemann-Widrig’s *Dark Sea Garden*, 2005. From a gull’s perspective, the rock and kelp in this dazzlingly beautiful work seem islands floating in a great sea. Alternately, from our place upon the shore, we look up, to imagine a night sky with golden stars of kelp surrounding a large, white orb. We are immersed in this painted vastness; our sense of scale unsettled, with no shore to anchor us, only the high, white horizon on which to fix our eye, like a sailor

out to sea. This band of white, so necessary to the painting's spatial construct, is echoed in the white wave crest that intersects the center of the painting and crosses the vertical line created by the sun's reflection to the right. This interplay of light patterns is the abstract web that animates and gives *frisson* to the work.

In other paintings in this series, the same rock and kelp seen in *Dark Sea Garden* are portrayed to different effect. In *Cloud and Sea Garden*, 2005, the pink granite ledge of the shore is now visible in the lower right foreground. This solid mass provides a counterweight to the white rock, which in turn merges with a diaphanous white cloud, producing an arcing shape that is mirrored in the cloud reflection to the left, a single clump of golden kelp punctuating the two white wings. Seen from this vantage point, the larger kelp bed in the lower left appears as thick fingers reaching upward to touch the surface of the sky blue water.

In *Sun in the Sea Garden*, 2005, we are further to the left upon the shore and there are now two distinct rocks visible in the water. The kelp, in this work, is only present as a hint of green below the surface of the water, which shimmers all over, dressed in veils of pinks and gold reflected by the sun. Our eye skates lightly across this radiant surface to the yolk yellow horizon just visible at the painting's top edge. Ostensibly a painting of water, Wissemann-Widrig's true subject, as Ken Greenleaf has earlier written, "...is painting itself, and how consciousness of the way that illusion is constructed can generate a reality of its own, one that is more concrete, and more true, than the illusion of a picture."²

This is especially evident in *Ripples and Rock*, 2004, an unconventionally beautiful work that nearly gives way to abstraction. In this radically cropped composition, the L-shaped rock of the title looms strangely at the painting's top center, outlined by its brick-red shadow. The dark reflection cast by this form is balanced by the larger dark shapes to the left and right, which bracket the dramatic light effects that fill the painting's center. A single, large dollop of light along the lower edge provides a grace note of visual weight, critical to the work's success. From these disparate elements, Wissemann-Widrig constructs a lyrical illusion that transcends its natural source.

In considering these paintings, two poems by Wallace Stevens are recalled. The earlier mentioned *Variations on a Summer Day*, which was written in Pemaquid Point, Maine, and speaks of "...a repetition of unconscious things, letters of rock and water, words of the visible elements and of ours." And also, his *Sea Surface Full of Clouds*, which asks of us, "Who then evolved the sea-blooms from the clouds...?"³ This poem, which describes a view of the sea in its various guises, lingers in the mind, the way Wissemann-Widrig's *Sea Garden* paintings do, forever heightening our level of awareness of the visual world.

Suzette Lane McAvoy
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*The sea-clouds whitened far below the calm
And moved, as blooms move, in the swimming green
And in its water radiance, while the hue*

*Of heaven in an antique reflection rolled
Round those flotillas. And sometimes the sea
Poured brilliant iris on the glistening blue.*

Wallace Stevens
from *Sea Surface Full of Clouds*

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¹ Andrew Forge and Robert Gordon, *Monet*, 1983, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, p. 197.

² Ken Greenleaf, Art Review, *Maine Sunday Telegram*, September 20, 1992.

³ Excerpts from Wallace Stevens, *Variations on a Summer Day and Sea Surface Full of Clouds*, from *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play*, edited by Holly Stevens, Vintage Books, New York, 1972.