

Ryan Cobourn: Moving through Paint

by Jennifer Samet

My paintings are based on memories of the natural world. They are the result of impressions from nature; flowers, gardens, fields. I use drawings as the foundation for the images. I paint away from the source, which creates scenarios where forms, color, and composition can change more freely. The paintings become less of a record of something that had been seen and becomes images that are discovered. The process acts as a literal metaphor for the subject matter's inherent mutability. The natural elements depicted are elements in flux. —Ryan Cobourn

Ryan Cobourn's paintings are about movement, and he brings us into the process of discovery and flux. The visible painterly gestures and marks, which travel across his canvases, compel us, as viewers, along the journey. We move through the landscape, through the color, the paint itself. Perhaps aided by the format of the triptych, we sense this most viscerally in *Garden 32*, where the stacked calligraphic masses of blue, yellow, and orange pull our eyes across three canvases. In *Leo*, it is an arc of yellow, exploding against patches of blue and darker tones, that we are forced to follow. Even in the paintings where flower forms are more naturalistically shown, like *Iris*, *Small Quartet 2*, and *Garden 37*, Cobourn subverts the figure/ground relationship, instead preferring to use color paths to almost catapult form (and us) off the surface. In other paintings, Cobourn leads us into specific moods: for instance, the fierce sunlit reds in *Hot Summer Love* as opposed to the cooler *Camelot Mix*.

Although Cobourn was not trained in any specific style or school of representational painting, his work is, indeed, part of a specific context and legacy. It begins with Monet's late work, the paintings of Giverny, where the horizon line evaporated, making room for new possibilities in landscape painting, unimpeded by spatial conventions. This tradition was perpetuated in the work of Joan Mitchell and also that of Philip Guston, whose middle period paintings were termed "Abstract Impressionist."

The writer and painter, Fairfield Porter, stated of the Impressionists:

In their passivity before nature, and in having to learn everything by themselves, they came upon new qualities in pigment. They portrayed no ideas from outside of painting in their preoccupation with painting as a working of material. What does the paint look like, what does it do?

Porter defined, here, a paradigm shift, a liberation from the conventions of how landscape painting is constructed, which were so deeply rooted in the history of

French painting. This liberation paved the way for Clement Greenberg's idea that painting was ultimately about itself. But the complication of this Hegelian march was that even after the heyday of Abstract Expressionism, painters looked back at the work of Monet, not as a way to rid their work completely of subject, but rather, to use nature to continue to explore possibilities in paint. Cobourn's work demonstrates the continued relevance of such explorations.

The term "Abstract-Impressionism," used by painter-critic Elaine de Kooning, was analyzed in depth by Louis Finkelstein, in his 1956 article, "New Look: Abstract-Impressionism." Finkelstein explored what he saw as a trend contradictory to the one Greenberg predicted: a "growing towards rather than receding from reality." A tradition based on optics and perception. He writes, "Subject as such is not the issue; seeing is." Furthermore, Finkelstein tied the insistence on referentiality to a desire to suggest light and air, and also create order and spatial integrity in painting that might otherwise veer off into purely virtuosic showiness.

Cobourn seems specifically engaged in a painterly conversation with Monet and Guston, but contemporary painters including Robert Harms and the late Carl Plansky, who were both mentored by Joan Mitchell, are also part of this legacy. One thinks of Bill Jensen here too, as an alchemist of materials who is devoted to letting paint tell the story. Like these painters, Cobourn is involved with intensive investigations into hand-made materials; he prepares his mediums from scratch, and at times he grinds his own pigments.

The balance between the abstract gesture and the creation of form, which Finkelstein analyzed, is essential to Cobourn's project. As we see him experimenting with degrees of naturalism and the inclusion or exclusion of the horizon line, he is playing with the amount of detail and form necessary to maintain order and create space in his paintings. He began painting flowers as a way of re-introducing color and light into paintings that had become dark from a studio-based practice in New York City.

Cobourn's painting does not record a static visual scene; it refers to the human process of perception, which involves movement and temporal experience. In *Out of the Garden*, Cobourn captures time and movement especially: his "handwriting" becomes our charged activity, juxtapositions of greens and oranges are mood changes evinced through experience, drips and bare canvas are places we've just barely moved through.