

# CAROL SEARS LINESCAPES

## HYPNOGOGIC SPACES

- BY PETER FRANK
- TO WORK—ESPECIALLY TO PAINT—WITH LINE BRANDS AN ARTIST as a “mark-maker.” To be sure, this is no dismissive term; it applies to some of the most revered painters of our time (the ranks of abstract expressionists were rife with mark-makers, for instance), and the very act of mark-making is the intellectual as well as physical subject of vastly different artists throughout the world, no less now than during the last century. It is in fact not easy to distinguish oneself these days as a mark-maker, given how fundamental mark-making is to contemporary art-making in general. Especially with so many artists making marks, then, how can one make marks differently?

Carol Sears does it successfully. She makes marks differently. Not so different as to prompt confusion or excite consternation; its challenge to our perception is subtler than that, and its realization is masterful in a relatively traditional manner. Rather, Sears’ approach to drawing, painting, painting-by-drawing, and even drawing-by-painting claims for itself a distinctive look, a texture, a feel, even a reasoning that comes together not quite like anyone else’s. Its antecedents are readily apparent, but it emulates and amplifies rather than imitates those models. Blessed with a natural touch and an often moving sense of visual grace and restraint, Sears has conjured for herself a visual language that at once allows her notable depth and complexity of expression and restricts her to a highly focused idiom.

The gnarled and mottled surface patterns Sears describes on her canvases, patterns that at once seem to describe a breathing “skin” and establish a resonant depth of field, hearken to various modernist (and, in fact, pre-modernist) phenomena. In their elaborately constructed visual space, Sears’ paintings betray her knowledge of the expressionists’ dynamic compositions; of the atmospheric sensitivities of the impressionists and, in particular, neo-impressionists (or, in more common parlance, pointillists); and even of the elaboration of space through tone characteristic of Dutch 17th-century landscape painting (no less in drawings and prints than paintings). On the other hand, we can read Sears’ marks more ominously, monsters in that mysterious suggestion of skin, seeing creatures of the imagination spawning in these networks. And, as surrealism historically gave way to the gestural furies of abstract expressionism, CoBrA, art brut, and informal abstraction, so too do the beasts inferred by and among Sears’ anxious flurries ultimately dissolve into pure sensation.

Recapitulating modernist history like this, Sears oscillates in her work between picture and painting, between compositional deliberation and the happenstance accretion of strokes. Nothing seems merely accidental, but everything seems put into motion by the vast embrace of possibility. Besides looking like landscapes of a sort, Sears’ paintings—and drawings—propose an “ideoscape,” a space in which things occur neither at random nor by design—a mirror, if you will, of natural order. Controlled accident? Manufactured chaos? Handmade fractals?

Sears’ early works, especially her drawings, even as far back as her youthful work in Australia, reveal a simultaneous sensitivity and resistance to naturalistic rendition. There is an element of caricature to them overall—not the broad simplifications behind which lazy or undertrained artists hide, but an in fact tightly controlled effort to bring forth salient characteristics through careful amplification and distortion, less akin to early 20th-century expressionism than to the “new objectivity” that followed it after World War I. Also felt here is the peripheral resonance of Pop art—especially the English Pop of Richard Hamilton and David Hockney, with its narrative and humanistic overtones—and figural

precursors of Pop such as Francis Bacon, all of whom Sears was exposed to in her native land. (She cites Brett Whiteley, Australia's most prominent contribution to British Pop art, as an early influence.) Certain animal studies reveal Sears' ability to realize an almost scientific exactitude, but what catches the eye in these is the vibrancy of the line, both in its contour and its chiaroscuro.

Taking up sculpture in the mid-1980s, Sears found herself committing to abstraction, in two as well as three dimensions, as a result, although not—indeed, never—completely. As indicated, even the densest, most intricate and least referential of her paintings and drawings maintain the suggestion of a pictorial space, and, particularly in her works of the 1980s and 90s, an active, organic line often finds itself describing visual fields akin to woods and jungles and occasionally populates these sylvan spaces with figures. As she committed more and more firmly to abstraction, Sears gradually derived a fixed formal language of elaborate, line-defined, organically charged (but naturally unidentifiable) shapes. Gradually, the patterned networks described by this formal language gave way to a more fluid vocabulary, one dependent on manual gesture—on a commanding manual gesture, that is, one that can maintain the force and rhythm of those networks while embracing the indistinction of natural—arguably cosmic—space.

Sears' earlier work, then, orbited around pictorial possibilities. Her paintings and drawings up into the last decade seemed always focusing on something outside of themselves, something that already exists in the perceived world and is tantalizing the artist into capturing some essence of it, an essence that resides as much in its appearance as in anything else. But Sears' recent work presumes this essence, and focuses at once in on itself and out beyond the world of human perception. We read the paintings and drawings of the last few years as credible, even enterable spaces, and often as tangible objects. But they are spaces and objects that refuse to sit still, that refuse to be fully recognized or recognizable, that refuse even to fix themselves either out there in reality or in here in the imagination. They are not real, nor are they dreamt, but float—very actively—in the hypnagogic state between waking and sleeping. Shapes shift. Things and colors and even motions struggle to identify themselves, but the edges between things refuse to harden, rendering perceived existence porous. Space is at once close and enormous. Salvador Dali's "paranoiac-critical" style embraced this sensation, but in its Baroque technical precision ironically muffled it. Sears' far more painterly, far more willingly, abstract approach allows this hypnagogic perception full reign.

If Sears' current style is more painterly than, say, Dali's, it is not painterly per se. It does not depend on the swath of the brush or the breadth of a color field, but on the vivacity of line and the nuance of tone. Rather than painterly in the manner of the abstract expressionists, Sears' approach is now draughtsmanly—notative, as noted above—in the manner of northern European abstractionists and fantasists such as Pierre Alechinsky and Dieter Roth, albeit not reliant on even cartoonish figures as they are. This is no less true in the paintings than in the drawings, although in the paintings the "drawingness" of Sears' current style, working against the drawing-resistant qualities of paint, comes into even sharper focus. The basic unit of Sears' art is the virtuosic scribble, the invariably erratic but invariably true line or linear cluster that gratifies the eye—because it evinces the hand—but never feels as if it has been executed for its own sake. Sears does not "perform" these lines as so many shows of manual ability, but orchestrates them in an urgent-seeming search for an elusive place or thing or state of mind or being. If before Sears was abstracting from nature, she now is abstracting towards it—towards a nature neither she nor we recognize or know beforehand.

Can Sears realize such tenebrousness, such effects of insubstantiality, in material as obdurate as clay or bronze? Not to the same extent, admittedly. She has nonetheless achieved a remarkable degree of translation into her sculptures, recapitulating the quavering lines of her drawing and the rapidly shifting contours of her painting into forms no less rhythmic, and yet no less elusive and unidentifiable, when manifested as actual volumes. In her acknowledgment of back,

front, and side as equal realms of significant experience, Sears escapes the “frieze mentality” so many painters bring to working in three dimensions – despite the reliance of her aesthetic on pictorially rendered space. She is not a basically sculptural thinker the way, say, Picasso was; but in the innate understanding of disparate media, even disciplines, Sears proves herself supple in the promulgation of her vision.

It is a persuasive vision. Sears’ achievement argues not so much for her abilities as an artist as for her concept—concepts? —of space and even time. She does not simply show off what she can do, but harnesses what she can do to the description of otherwise unseen—but, our minds remind us, always sensed—conditions of being. As inventive as Sears’ approach may be, there is something revelatory about her artworks that suggests, even insists, that her vision resides in us as well and that she is bringing out rather than conjuring these inner/outer dimensions. These are everyone’s universes, and Sears is our guide into them.

Los Angeles

January 2011