



BETH KING: PAINTINGS ON CANVAS

Earl & Birdie Taylor/Pacific Beach Branch Library
November 29, 2009 to February 15, 2010

CURATOR'S STATEMENT

At first glance, Beth King's paintings come as somewhat of a shock. Their graphic power, impeccable design, stunning use of color, and perfectly resolved composition are startling in an era when conceptual approaches, more often than not, have outweighed, even usurped, formal concerns. In general, King avoids representational imagery in her paintings (she classifies them as non-objective abstractions), yet they are highly personal, unusual, engaging, and, as a testament to her skill, evoke an immediate and visceral response in the viewer.

Throughout her career, King's admirers have ranged from artists to scientists. Nobel Prize Laureate Francis Crick and his wife Odile (an accomplished artist) owned several of King's works. Other noted artists and art world figures who have collected King's paintings include Flavia Gilmore, Smithsonian curator James Goode, and the late Ethel Greene. Certainly, not many paintings created these days are imbued with the spirit of icons of modernism like Stuart Davis, Arthur Dove, Arshile Gorky, and Adolph Gottlieb.

King, now in her late seventies, continues to follow her own vision and defy art world trends. Although she is known among her peers as a "painter's painter," she exhibits her art only infrequently. Most of the works in "Beth King: Paintings on Canvas" were painted especially for this exhibition. To give viewers a broader perspective of her work, a few earlier paintings, including three on illustration board, were included. The character of these works is quite different from the others in the show, yet they are successful in their own way.

King's paintings are notable for the odd and mysterious shapes that make up their compositions, their unusual color schemes, and the boldness of their designs. By any standards, they are inventive and interesting. The starting point for King's paintings is one or two rudimentary shapes on which she subsequently builds. Often these shapes are derived from nature, but she makes a conscious effort not to convey a literal translation of anything she sees. As the notebooks from her travels (on display in this exhibition) demonstrate, anything unusual is likely to catch her eye, but she is primarily interested in form and spacial relationships. These impressions are captured on location via quick thumbnail sketches which may be revisited years later. However, King is also a colorist and she has been inspired by observations as simple as two colors playing off one another in a striking way. "I'm ruled by shapes. Sometimes I don't know whether the shapes or the colors are the most important," she confesses.

King's imagery fits so perfectly within the format of the canvas, and the images themselves are so beautifully composed, that they appear to have been meticulously preplanned. The classic symmetry of the square format that she has come to prefer adds further to the illusion of deliberateness. However, that is not the case initially. Beyond a few strokes of charcoal, King does very little preliminary drawing on a canvas or anywhere else. From that point on, she works carefully and thoughtfully, but it is entirely her intuition that guides her through the creative process. "Paintings just happen and grow from the first stroke on," she explains. "Sometimes they grow for a matter of five or six years."

The size of a painting is no indication of the amount of work that goes into one, King says, and she prefers to leave them undated. For example, for several years she kept returning to and refining *Another Unguided Tour*, a painting in this exhibition measuring only twelve inches square. "I don't paint for other people," King asserts. "It's between my head and my canvas."

King's dark palette and extensive use of black (carbon black is her favorite because of its density) are other aspects of her painting and personality that are easily misunderstood. As the curator of this exhibition, I admit that my preference for King's darkest paintings – and dark work in general – colored my selections. On the basis of several studio visits and many years following her career, I can attest that King is capable of dazzling and light-filled compositions, as well, such as *Island Group #3 – Carnival*, which is as festive and whimsical as its title suggests.

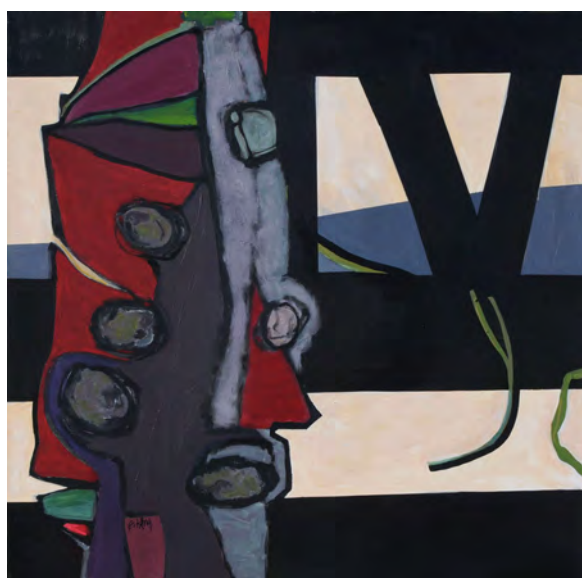
"I gravitate toward a darker palette, but that doesn't mean I think dark," says King. "My palette is dark for aesthetic reasons. I'm not morose." King can't resist adding, "I'm funnier than most of my friends." That being said, the titles of King's works, however light-hearted, often have an ironic bite, and her personal collection of paintings by others include spectacular works by San Diego artists who built their reputations on angst-ridden or morbid themes. These include Walter Wojtyla, Dan Camp, and the late David Baze.

In any event, King's extensive use of dark colors and black shapes and lines, occasionally punctuated with forms that could be interpreted as ominous, mysterious, or disquieting (two obvious examples are the silhouette of a cat-like creature looming in the background of *Silk Road* and the profile of a serpent head, complete with fangs, as a dominant element of *Feathered Serpent #2*) enormously enhance the dramatic effect of her paintings. In this vein, an artistic device King uses with great success is outlining various shapes in black; an approach that difficult to pull-off without looking contrived. Yet King does it skillfully, all the while imparting a striking three-dimensionality to her compositions.

As time goes on, the chance of encountering an artist who is capable of producing a solidly constructed and competently and classically executed painting is becoming increasingly rare. In that respect, King's current exhibition is refreshing... and somehow reassuring.

Mark-Elliott Lugo, Curator
San Diego Public Library

The San Diego Public Library's Visual Arts Program is a nationally recognized series of exhibitions, lectures, a television program, and other art-related activities. The mission of the Program is to demonstrate the Library's role as a cultural institution embracing a broad range of disciplines, while assisting San Diego's mid-career and older professional artists in achieving wider local, regional, and national attention. Visual Arts Program exhibitions are made possible, in part, by contributions from individuals, volunteer efforts, and the Friends of Central Library. For more information about the King exhibition, or tax-deductible contributions to the Visual Arts Program, please contact the library curator at (619) 238-6627.



Reflections on a Mexican Mudflat (2009) Acrylic on canvas 36 x 36 inches



Hacienda (2009) Acrylic on canvas 36 x 36 inches