

Exaltation and Will in the Work of Monika Wally

By John Austin

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There is a flourish, a tumultuousness, in Monika Wally's work that belies her paintings careful construction. Seen from a distance her swirls of paint are sensuously compelling and dynamic. Coming up-close to the surface of her work the viewer takes in the minutiae of imbricated picture planes and the detailed, feathered edges of her painterly strokes. The great swelling of her vista-like textures, assume a serenely dream-like quality. It all looks so effortless: a sign of mastery. It is a truism I suppose to say that great painting is born out of ultimate freedom as well as by necessity and will yet in Monika Wally's case, her visual achievement is undeniable.

We see on one level, the pure medium that roll and wave one upon the other, replacing, to a great degree, reference with effective expression. Wally's coloristic interplay constantly evokes a liberation of the image from a narrative or symbolic reading. It essentializes by insisting on the autonomy of the two-dimensional picture plane while evoking without gratuitousness a transcendent realm of pure expression. Yet references to the outside world remain, it tactfully submerged, in the artist's work. Indeed one might even suggest that Wally's forte is the aligning of abstract codes of abstraction with representational possibilities. What is remarkable with Wally's palette and mark-making capacity, then, is its elasticity, its capacity to cleave to any number of interferences that diverge from non-objective ones, while obstinately staying within the regime of abstraction.

On yet another level, Wally sets up the contrasts in her gestural schema where the textures of dark brushstrokes deliberately interfere to create a visual resistance to the play of infinite depth seen in the passages of yellow and oranges. As in many of her strongest works she creates a "dissociation of sensibility" with the ironic lack of relation between one feeling tone and another tone within her brush marks. This evokes a pictorial illusion of deep space, which is undercut by the artist's application of darker splashes of color. The result is a heightened drama of the pure "factness" of her paint materials that seem to have their own proud volition as they assert the flatness of the picture plane and the support surface as surface itself.

What we see, therefore is not exactly what we get in Monika Wally's work. We get much more than what we bargained for. We feel contested territory in her work. Optical roller-coaster effects are held in careful balance through the artist's sheer craftsmanship and, importantly, through her judicious cropping and editing. The outer edges of her work are cadenced with exactitude and nuance allowing the spectator to enter the picture plane through multiple viewpoints. The artist's latest work reminds us that the poetry in good abstract painting is in its infinite potential to revitalize its dialog with the viewer, to resist immediate comprehensibility through formal inventiveness.

The inventiveness of transcendence that plays itself out so readily in Wally's art is particularized through the ambiguities of scale. Scale plays an important role in apprehending sensor ally the given object and its gestural components in its given context of origin. Wally's brushstrokes and spaces create a system of significance through its obstinate conflating of the near and far, the close-up and the far away, the miniature and the gigantic. It becomes very hard to pin down definitively whether the eye is to place itself at a remove from the painterly action, so as if to give it more narrative play, or if we are immersed in action which occurs at a micro logical, hence magnified, level. In the latter case, the piecemeal and personalized reading permits a greater sensation of mastery and of temporality. Analogies between us and our own status within a larger historical or social context will necessarily accrue as a residual reading of this temporal matrix.

As I mentioned earlier, Wally's work pulses with vitality through its suggestive interplay between control and spontaneity. In Friedrich Schelling's words art "reflects for us the identity of conscious and unconscious activity. The basic character of the work of art is thus an unconscious infinity (synthesis of nature and freedom)." Such integrative aspect is at the heart of Wally's probing inquiry on the conditions of how we perceive and what we perceive. Because the senses are continually exalted in the artist's paintings, a rare quality of poetic exaltation permeates Monika Wally's work, while her aesthetics is in this way raised to new, plastic heights.

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