

RANDI RUSSO: LINE AND PLANE TO SPACE

By Peter Frank

However much it may rely on principles of good design, abstract art ultimately concerns not what we see so much as how we see. An abstract artwork triggers perception – of all kinds. It works not only upon our eyes but upon our minds, our knowledge, our previous experience, not positing so much as suggesting, or perhaps inciting, associations both “pure” and lived. One viewer’s square is another’s house; one viewer’s curve is another’s hill, or torso. Randi Russo’s paintings and drawings rely on – indeed, quite consciously address – the breadth and intricacy of abstraction’s effect, potential and actual, on viewers. Each work (more and more as Russo allows herself greater and greater complexity) engages each pair of eyes in a dialogue about seeing.

That dialogue is a rich one. Russo’s pictorial thinking, however consistent from painting to painting and body of work to body of work, proves mercurial within any one tableau. Images flicker within and among Russo’s stacked forms and tangled lines, promising to burst forth as a depiction of some kind but rarely if ever coalescing completely into an admitted “picture.” Forms jostle against one another, tones and shades modulate to describe volumes and motions: something lives amidst the whiplashing tendrils and bent edges, but recognizing, much less defining, that something proves evasive.

As evinced by the persistence in her work of blurred contours and shadowy, apparitional presences, Russo has taken inspiration from mid 20th-century abstract painting, especially surrealism and abstract expressionism. As in the work of Miro and Matta, Gorky and DeKooning, Krasner and Hartigan, there always seems to be something *else* in her paintings, something struggling against the entropy of the universe to come into existence. Ultimately, Russo brings to the fore not the thing itself but its force, and presents that to us as energy itself, in all its variability and seeming instability. As she has written, “I’m asking the viewer to ‘keep looking’ -- to follow a line or shape and notice that it’ll pull you into another direction. The tug allows you to discover a shape as part of another shape, as if entering into another realm. Just when you see something, you see something else, like picking up little hidden notes on a treasure hunt.”

Russo’s cultivation of these deft optical dynamics relies on her manipulation – choreographing, if you will – of forms. The thrill of the paintings’ kinesis results not simply from the placement of elements, or from the elements’ inherent fluidity, but from the poise they maintain while in motion. Russo gives her overall compositions a subtly classical, almost monumental, contraposition, one that, despite the volatility of her line, often comes close to symmetry. Even so, that line, with all its suppleness and tensile strength, is the basis for Russo’s approach, providing the armature that defines not just shape, but composition. It is hardly a rigid armature: these lines are not girders but living spines, animating the fields across which they whip and crawl. But that armature is a powerful one.

Given this metaphorical cast, Russo’s abstractions can be read as ecological analogs, conjurations of fauna and flora at once adrift in indistinct seas and burgeoning up against the picture plane. But this is hardly a fixed equivalency. As suggested earlier, the compositions allow us to infer some sort of recessional, atmospheric space, and certain paintings (and certain titles) make this landscape analogy overt. The compositions maintain the earmarks of foreground-background relationships – although these constantly shift and even flip in unstinting push-pull tension. For all this, however, Russo’s lines do not order themselves into conventional landscape pictures. She inscribes her landscape/spaces on the

picture plane, working with *and* against the primacy of the plane so as to unmoor the landscape-structure from our fixed observation. Rather than present us with dramatic or pastoral picture-postcard configurations, Russo renders her landscape spaces as something more geologically profound. Her lines as nervous and expansive as ever, she paints these abstract spaces in tectonic terms, proposing that the topographical image masks, but is formed by, ever-active elements in the earth itself. Thus, Russo posits, our ground and our air are as fluid and dynamic as is our biosphere.

In this regard, Russo addresses herself to contemporary ecological anxieties. We cannot control our environment, she avers; it will change and move with or without us, and all we can determine is our own perception of its impact upon us. In other words, when we seek to save nature, we seek simply to maintain the stability of our presence in nature rather than of nature itself. Nature has its own logic: in her art Russo regards it as an integral organism, a spiritual as much as biochemical phenomenon.

But, while reliant on the image of nature, Russo's art is not about nature per se so much as it is about our perception(s) of nature, and equally about the nature(s) of perception. Indeed, especially in her more recent work, the "nature" Russo proposes displays modifications that betray the human hand or at least human logic, modifications that infer an architectonic (sometimes almost architectural) reasoning. Nature and culture thus flow together in harmonious symbiosis. Distinctively stylized in both its pictorial logic and its painterly manner, this work challenges its audience to reflect upon the conditions of observation. There is a self-expressive aspect to it, to be sure; the ambitious reach of her line and the rhythmicity of her composition bespeak the vitality of a human mind and body *making* something. (They also bespeak Russo's musical bent, indeed, her musical grasp of the world.) But Russo's paintings and drawings invariably exhibit a care, even calculation, that tempers, or at least orders, her verve so that she might continue to pose the epistemological questions driving her aesthetic.

Randi Russo's art is not an art of message; nor is it an art of therapy. For all its evident freedom, it is an art of discourse, one engaged with the physical and metaphysical world in dialogic fashion. It manifests a quest not for answers but for the most urgent and most enduring questions. Russo approaches artmaking as something bigger than herself and her audience: she comprehends art as a way of understanding existence, and a way of bringing others along in that process of understanding. Whatever form(s) it takes, art for Russo is a process, a calling, and a continual source of revelation.

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