



Meadow Brook Art Gallery

Department of Art and Art History
College of Arts and Sciences
208 Wilson Hall
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www.oakland.edu/mbag

PAINTINGS
**WENDY
ROBERTS**

Wendy Roberts

EXHIBITIONS

Gallery Artists, Robert Kidd Gallery, Birmingham, MI. 2003

Michigan Fine Arts Competition, BBAC, Birmingham, MI. 2003

Dealer's Choice, Detroit Artist's Market, Detroit, MI. 2002

Gallery Artists, Robert Kidd Gallery, Birmingham, MI. 2002

Chance and Necessity, Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, MD. 1998-1999

Juror: Power Boothe, Dean, Hartford Art School

Goya Girl Press, Baltimore, MD.

Boyden Gallery, St. Mary's City, MD.

McLean Project for the Arts, McLean, VA.

Columbia Festival of the Arts, Columbia, MD.

Kennedy Museum of Art, Ohio University, Athens, OH.

New Work, School 33 Art Center, Baltimore, MD. 1997

Small Works, Touchstone Gallery, Washington, DC. 1997

Juror: Samuel Chuen-Tsong Hoi, Curator, Corcoran Gallery of Art

Selections from New England MFA Programs, 1996

Boston University Gallery, Boston, MA.

Juried by the College Art Association

Small Works, Touchstone Gallery, Washington, DC. 1996

Juror: Terrie Sultan, Curator, Corcoran Gallery of Art

Martial Art?, Resurgam Gallery, Baltimore, MD. 1994

Women's Visionary Altar, (Group Installation) 1994

St. John's Church, Baltimore, MD.

Contemporary Art on Canvas, (merit award) 1993

Maryland Federation of Art, Annapolis, MD

Juror: William Christenberry, Artist

Juried Exhibitions, The Mill Centre, Baltimore, MD. 1989-1994

EDUCATION

Master of Fine Arts, Vermont College, Montpelier, VT. 1996

Bachelor of Fine Arts, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD. 1976

Internship, Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD. 1975

Undergraduate Studies, Bennington College, Bennington, VT. 1970-73

WENDY ROBERTS

October 16 - November 14, 2004

Curated by Dick Goody
Meadow Brook Art Gallery

Department of Art and Art History
College of Arts and Sciences
Oakland University

Veils, Depth and Surface: Paintings of Wendy Roberts

"Although I consider myself an abstract painter, I was glad when theories of 'pure' abstraction shuffled offstage. Abstraction is something the mind does, as opposed to being the property of an artwork."

(All bold italics: Wendy Roberts, 2004)

The sort of abstract painting that was pervasive from Abstract Expressionism to post-painterly abstraction in the second half of the 20th century exuded an inscrutability as dense as the tomes which justified its existence. Such writing created a new genre of art criticism that came closer to absolutism than dialectical theory. Both the writing and the art tended to be esoteric rather than accessible. Over time, the more that was written, the more reduced became the art (the more visually economic). Perhaps, in reaction, we have now learned to look at abstraction, sans theory. It is, after all, the age of post-theoretical indifference and instant gratification is apparently de rigueur even in readings of abstract art, but herein lies the inherent problem faced in elucidating the meaning of new abstraction.

In the 50s, 60s and 70s, abstraction's stance was that paintings were not to be interpreted but rather to be defended formalistically. Such defense or justification had been concretized by art critics like Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. Of course, justification and meaning are different entities, but in the 1950s Greenberg had replaced the need for meaning with the rhetoric of modernist reductionist theory. For the initiated, this made looking at Abstract Expressionism relatively unproblematic. Back then, only children and fools looked for dogs and cats in *Lavender Mist*; everyone else nodded in earnest supplication.

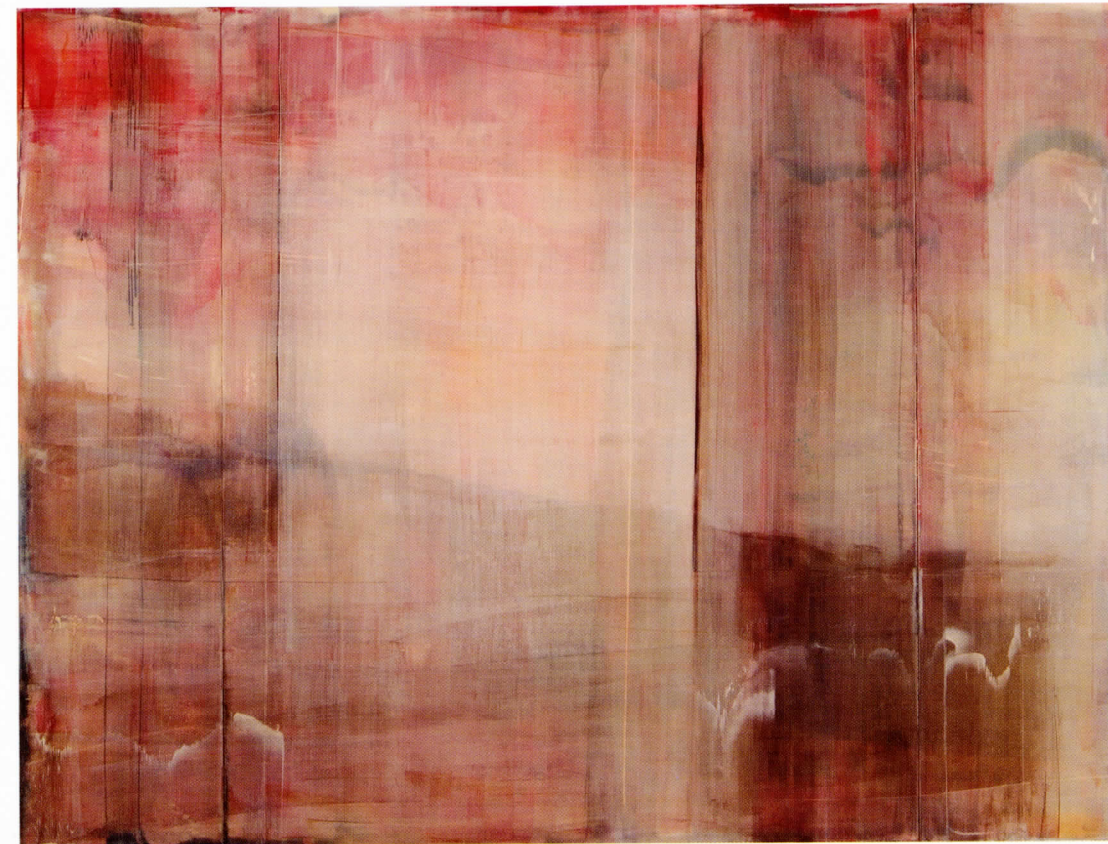
"I am wary of theory in general and have never subscribed to any particular credo. As art historian and critic Yves-Alain Bois said: 'It is not, of course, theory that I find oppressive, but the indiscriminate appeal to theory as a set of readymade tools to handle a question, as a miracle solution, no matter the problem.'"

In 1961, with the publication of *Art and Culture*, Clement Greenberg came as close to philosophical

totalitarianism as art criticism ever can. Today's taste has no tolerance for such a singular monopoly, but this was not so in the 1960s. Wendy Roberts, who grew up looking at Abstract Expressionism in New York, had to come to terms with the still pervasive law of reductionist theory when she began painting in the mid 1970s. When I asked Roberts how much she now thought about Greenberg, she replied:

"His theory? Hardly ever. Himself, sometimes; he came up to Bennington while I was a student and gave critiques. Infuriatingly articulate. I think he put words in the Abstract Expressionists' mouths, but those guys knew better than to spit out something that would feed them."

By 1967, Michael Fried's exquisitely woven justification for the abridged formalism of Minimalist Art centered on what he termed its *seriousness*, and the fact that its *wholeness* was interesting. In a parade of freshly minted Donald Judd boxes the question of meaning did not arise because as Judd said: "A work *only needs to be interesting*."



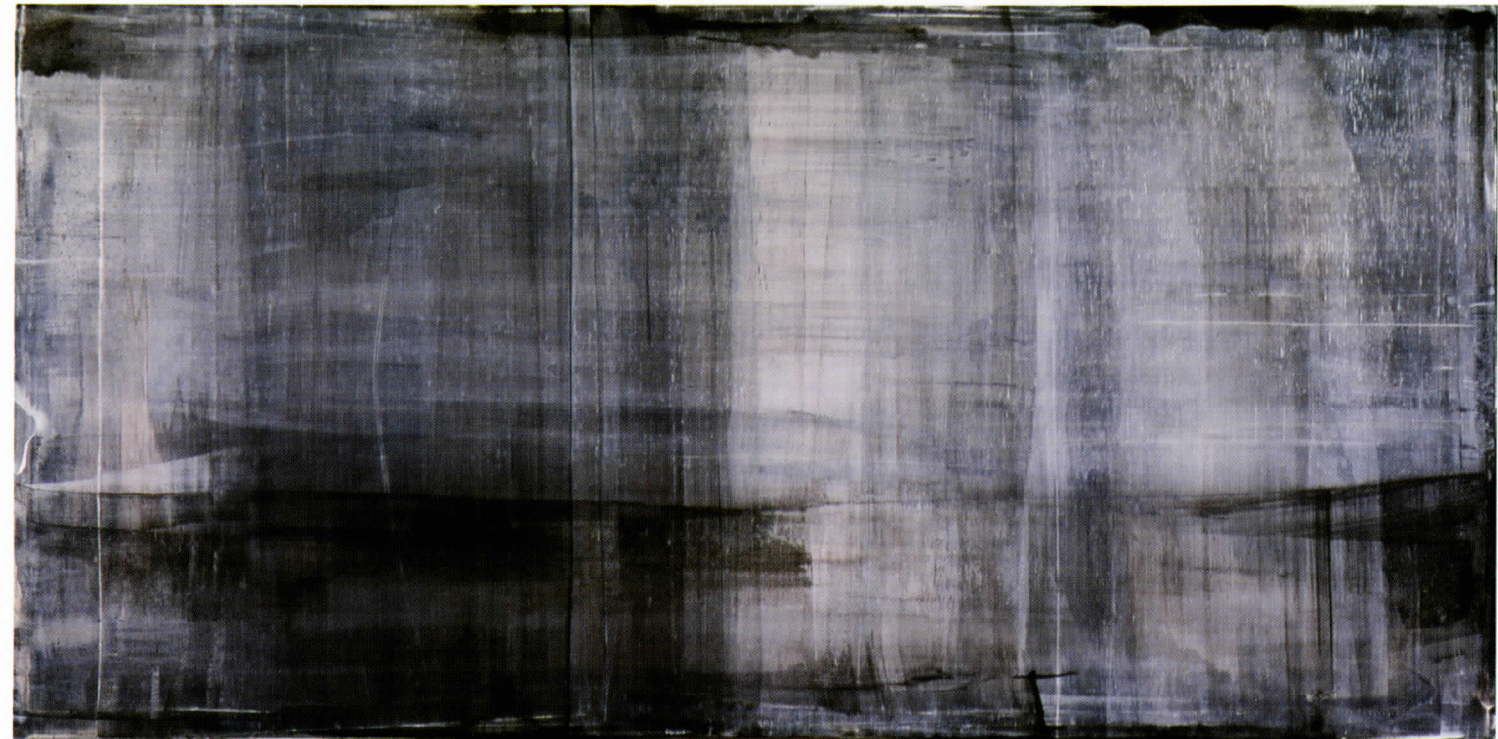
*Nothing is
native of fire*

2004
48 x 62 inches
acrylic on wood



Forgetting that we are water

2003, 30 x 60 inches, acrylic on wood



Shadows that once were ours

2001, 24 x 48 inches, acrylic on wood

abstracts a set of planar measurements, contrasting values, increments of scumbled paint, or matte passages butted up against reflective ones."

In the 60s, when the younger Pop artists deposed the super-flat abstractionists, their unabashed delight in the banality of popular icons had little use for theorizing.

Apart from the presence of critics like Arthur Danto, whose approach has tended to be more contextual and historical in its analysis – more explanatory than theoretical – no one knows for sure when American art criticism softened, that is to say became flexible, descriptive and forgiving. Warhol had something to do with it, but it was probably around the time glam rock merged into punk and Julian Schnabel's broken crockery paintings appeared; Robert Hughes, always more descriptive than critical, said of Schnabel that his work was to painting what Sylvester Stallone's was to acting.

During the past two decades art criticism has gotten snagged by the polysemy of Postmodernism,

and has tended to conjecture upon the cult of particular artists rather than attempt to wrangle them into cohesive movements. In consequence, abstract painting no longer has the critical authoritative thrust it had in the middle of the last century, but now even abstract art, like popular culture and rock-and-roll, is for everyone. In the face of this diminished authority, art criticism has become more descriptive and less strident, more subjective than objective.

The tools of reductionist theory are still available. Flatness and edge may be measured and recorded, but context is now everything. Hence, paintings are described in the context of the psychology and biography of the artist. The fact that Roberts saw Abstract Expressionism in New York as a child is as relevant as her growing up near the ocean. To describe a painting by Wendy Roberts in this context is to open a conduit for interpretation:

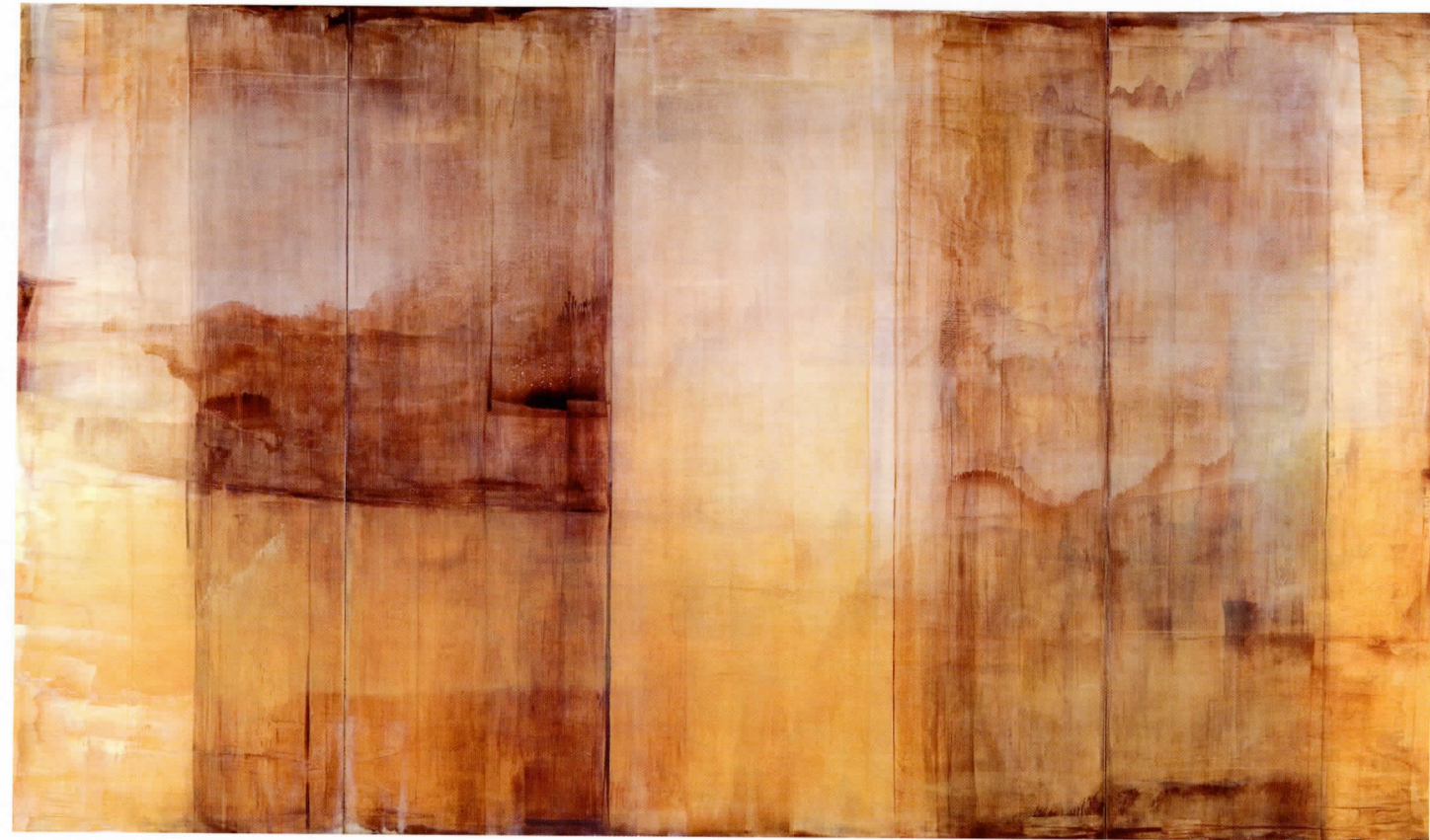
Veils and stains of aqueous pigment are laid in bands of horizontal layers. The inkiness, this wash effect, is far eastern, but the paintings are east coast.

"I spent much of my childhood in tidewater* Maryland, the inland coast of the Chesapeake Bay, where there was a marsh in our back yard and great expanses of somber, brackish water everywhere mirroring the sky and flat countryside. These are indelible visual and psychic reference points, but perhaps equally powerful are the many summers spent on the Maine coast and in the mountains of Massachusetts and Vermont."

The role of the viewer is to decipher the work viscerally rather than theoretically. Confidence in reading art has advanced into a contract of free will between the person looking at the work (the public) and the artist. The way we look at art has become all-important and the relatively new field of Cultural Studies has tended to be preoccupied with this "reader" aspect – which is perhaps why semiotics has survived relatively unscathed (if largely shelved and underutilized). As Jacques Derrida said: *"il n'y a pas de hors-texte"*, [there is nothing outside the text], there is only the production of language – you are what you speak (or what you paint) which is a tissue of allusions.

Between us and tomorrow

2004, 48 x 82 inches, acrylic on wood





The human psyche or the notion of the “individual” (the uniqueness of each person’s character) is too complex (too infinite) for deconstructive analysis. To a semiotician the biography of the producer, in this case a painter, is too unwieldy a concept. He or she would insist we go to the source: the production, the individual works, the signs and images therein. Theories of art have become too pluralistic to hone in on a single sound critical system. As a result the art too has become pluralistic. Inevitably postmodern ambivalence makes a pure reading of abstract painting impossible; certainly signification, context and biography have pushed aside the strictures of reductionist formalist rhetoric. Suddenly the old struggle between classicism and romanticism appears refreshingly sensible.

“I’m not interested in a ‘perfect’ reading of my work any more than I am in ‘pure’ abstraction. I am delighted to talk about it but I have no control over what it means to anyone else.”

Glass wings in the wind

2000, 46 x 78 inches, acrylic on wood

Leaving no stone unturned, I asked Roberts to summarize her work. She said:

“Rain on the gunwales of a slow-gliding wooden canoe.”

This instantly made me think of Peter Doig’s paintings (he paints, among other things, landscapes with canoes). This introduced an interesting if tangential point because specific iconography (a man in a canoe) has less ambiguity and fewer possible meanings than an abstract painting by Wendy Roberts. Her enigmatic veils and stains illustrate the allusive nature of her work.

Still summarizing, Roberts added:

“Rain against the window of a fast-moving train.”

This made me shift and think of Alfred Hitchcock, introducing the idea of a cinematic reading of her work. Film is a dynamic medium and when Roberts talks about a “slow-gliding canoe” or a “fast-moving train” it is indicative of her work

incorporating the idea of movement as well as the passing of time, slow or fast. The fluidity of film encompasses time, motion, depth and image, all of which reverberate in the subtle complexities of the surfaces of Wendy Roberts’s paintings.

** The Delmarva Peninsula (Delaware, Maryland, Virginia) is affected by the ebb and flow of the Chesapeake and its network of tributary rivers. There are other tidewater regions in the world, low coastal lands affected by tidal streams, but not many cover such a large area where fresh and saltwater mix.*

TITLES FOR THESE PAINTINGS ARE LINES FROM THE POETRY OF W.S. MERWIN:

Nothing is native of fire – from “Shaving Without a Mirror”

Passing the distant island – from “Warm Pastures”

Forgetting that we are water – from “The Current”

Shadows that once were ours – from “Trail into Kansas”

Between us and tomorrow – from “Night Surf”

Glass wings in the wind – from “A Door”

The rain we do not hear – from “June Rain”



The rain we do not hear

2003, 30 x 60 inches, acrylic on wood

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Meadow Brook Art Gallery apologizes for any inaccuracies or omissions.

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Cover: *Between us and tomorrow*, 2004, 48 x 82 inches, acrylic on wood

Wendy Roberts

October 16 – November 14, 2004

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