

Judith Geichman: A Matter of Art, Nature and Paint

This exhibition of Judith Geichman's paintings at Alfedena Gallery marks the first time in six years that the artist's work has been shown in Chicago. It brings together several paintings completed since 2004, creating an enveloping world of swirling veils of paint. Like Kandinsky, Geichman makes abstract paintings that are a spirited exploration of painting's deep roots in nature. Geichman's art expresses the enduring connection between abstraction and the natural world—something almost entirely neglected in today's highly artificial art world.

Geichman moved to Chicago from her hometown of Columbus, Ohio, in the mid-seventies, shortly after graduating from Ohio State. That this artist should find in Chicago the perfect city in which to develop her paintings is, at first glance, surprising. She follows neither the tradition of Chicago Imagists nor the Chicago lyrical abstractionists (painters such as Roland Ginzel or the early Vera Klement). But the power grid for the crackling energy charging all of Geichman's work is Chicago. In describing Geichman's paintings, words like "bold," "gritty," and "ambitious" come to mind—words that would work equally well in describing the city itself.

I first met Judith Geichman in the late 1970s at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where we were both graduate students in painting. We worked next to one another in the north-light studio spaces assigned to us in the Columbus Avenue building, where the school used to house graduate painting. After earning our MFAs, we stayed in touch and remained close friends. Since moving away from Chicago in 1978, I've spent a good part of my time pondering the "how" and "why" of abstract painting. Geichman has always been my touchstone for understanding an increasingly rare but beautifully intoxicating kind of art—the opposite of theory-driven art—where the artist consciously mixes together the moiling qualities of both nature and abstraction.

My earliest memories of Geichman are of her working in her Art Institute space. I see her in her paint-splattered clothes, her back to me. Her head is tilted to one side as she contemplates her art. She's holding a bucket of paint in one hand and a stick loaded with some kind of gucky substance in the other. We were in graduate school at precisely the moment when art tumbled outside its confining categories (such as "painting"), and Geichman was a bold experimenter. She made art that verged on the formless. Her early graduate-school work consisted of chairs with cotton wadding stuffed around them to the point of almost losing their chair-ness. The wadding was then covered with dabs of paint, and the results were both goofy and dignified. Geichman's final MFA project at the Art Institute—a huge unstretched tarpaulin composed of thousands of patterned marks (entitled *Noa Noa Noa*) took her back onto the wall—i.e., brought her back to painting—where she's remained ever since.

Since graduate school, Geichman's paintings have all been part of her ongoing quest to capture the rhythms inherent in repeating patterns and the lyricism found in paintings by such artists as Helen Frankenthaler (whom Geichman first discovered when she was an undergraduate). Geichman's paintings lean toward a grander, more symphonic spectacle, however, than either pattern painting or lyrical painting can ever offer. Geichman always pushes beyond sensual pleasure and decoration into the tumultuous territory where paint's natural, inherent qualities are allowed to approach the inchoate. Paint—a substance simultaneously resistant and plastic—poses particular dangers when used the way Geichman uses it; in one careless instant, it can be reduced to mere mud.

Since finishing graduate school, Geichman has been painting (with a few notable exceptions) on stretched canvases rather than soft surfaces, although she often paints her pictures by laying them on the floor and then lifting up a side in order to control a flow of poured paint. Most of her paintings have been big—a six-by-eight-foot picture is a run-of-the-mill size for her—and she has painted diptychs that make even this seem small by comparison. Over the years, Geichman's surfaces have ranged from thick and waxy, to crusty and peeling, to thinly poured paint stains. At times she's added alien substances to her pigments—such as flock, a powdery-felt material that she started using around

2003—or painted with cranberry juice or coffee. But from her early pattern paintings to her most recent sweeping veiled stains, the artist has paid constant and loving attention to the tactile surface, or skin, of her paintings.

Forever experimenting with new techniques, Geichman has at different times dabbed paint, poked it, peeled it, glued it, dropped it, or poured it. Her tools have ranged from sticks, brushes, rollers, trowels and wipers to sled-disks and ketchup squeeze bottles. She brings to her work the devotion of carpenters who treat wood as if it's a living thing. The *élan* of Geichman's pictures emerges out of the battle that goes on between paint asserting its freedom to do what it wants and Geichman cajoling it to follow her into an unknown place. "It's not enough to merely show the accident," she told me. Instead, Geichman "wants to have a hand in shepherding that randomness."

With eyes alert to the visual detritus of life in Chicago—a flattened, rusted piece of metal picked up from the middle of Milwaukee Avenue, a stained, wrinkled paper towel tossed into the corner of her studio, or even a memory of a decrepit and rickety El station viewed from the street—Geichman might be expected to make art with an abject, pathetic quality to it. But Geichman's sensibilities are more Whitmanesque than Raushchenbergian, and she exercises extreme restraint when it comes to using the leftovers of urban life. Her taste in art runs the gamut from the late Lee Godie's drawings (made on the steps of the Art Institute and then sold for a couple of bucks immediately afterwards) to Chinese Scholar's Rock paintings, from Boucher and Fragonard to Manet and Velázquez. The artist approaches all paintings as potentially joyful experiences, and she makes her own painted forms in the same way. As fraught with anxiety about her art as all genuine painters are, Geichman nevertheless holds the intense conviction that the search for beautiful painted form is the artistic equivalent of the alchemist's search for the philosopher's stone.

Geichman *lives* painting. Like Francis Bacon, she has a studio full (the word is an understatement) of lots of things—in her case, photos of Viking ships, piles of papers and pictures that have meaning only to her, plants, cups, dishes, plates, trowels, wipers,

sticks, brushes, rollers, spray bottles, cans (both large and small) and big kitty litter jugs. Geichman paints while her two cats loll about in her studio. She insists—only partly in jest—that she couldn’t paint without them. With Geichman, life is brought into art (the occasional cat hair sits in a finished painting) and art wanders back into life—bits of paint stray from her studio onto her hands, hair, clothes and furniture. Even her speech seems to have pigment in it—by which I mean her conversation is colorful and expressive, loaded with the kinds of words only painters use when trying to get at the ineffable in painting.

An admirer of Morris Louis, Geichman flew to Atlanta for the day at the end of last year with the sole purpose of seeing the huge Morris Louis painting exhibition at the High Museum. Even when her trips are vacations, they are always aimed at her art. Whether she goes to places where nature rules—such as the great canyons of the southwest, Monmouth Caves, or most recently, Iceland—or to the urban centers of Western culture, from New York to Paris and Barcelona—she is looking for ways to jump-start new paintings.

Paint stains moved to the fore of Geichman’s work at the end of the 1990s. They came out of the artist noticing, almost inadvertently, that the back of her studio floor tarpaulins had a particularly enchanting, quiet beauty to them. From this, she decided to “get lean with the paint and go with the stains.” Geichman’s exhibition at Fassbinder Gallery in Chicago in 2001 was an installation of two large, unstretched tarpaulin pieces— one on the wall and one at its feet, and a painting entitled *Peekaboo* (1997), on the opposite wall. The surface of the tarpaulin that hung on the wall came out of the delicate paint stains that had leaked through from the other side. Juxtaposed like this, the two tarpaulins and the stretched painting *Peekaboo* revealed Geichman’s deep interest in merging into one work of art qualities that reflect both intention and sheer accident. All of Geichman’s work since the Fassbinder exhibition has been made from various kinds of paint stains. The artist frequently restretches a canvas after it’s been started, turning its back into its front so that the accidental, leftover stains become major players in the finished paintings, and the aleatory and the purposeful are fused as one.

In the Fassbinder installation, the delicately stained *Peekaboo* and the actual studio tarpaulins each contained “random events,” but unlike the tarpaulins, *Peekaboo* was a constructed object—a painting made through pourings—and it had been deeply influenced not just by Geichman’s awareness that she could use the accidental beauty on the back of her studio floor tarpaulin, but also by her deliberate decision to include aspects of Chinese Scholar’s Rock paintings that she’d closely observed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Completing the Fassbinder exhibition, almost as a footnote, was a small photograph of Geichman’s studio that pointedly demonstrated the artist’s integration of accident and purposefulness.

Geichman’s 2004 exhibition at Mahan Gallery in Columbus, Ohio contained the largest paintings the artist had painted to date—diptychs that were as big as possible while still able to fit into her elevator. With her book on French toiles fabrics by her side in the studio, Geichman became interested in their monochromatic and romantic imagery. She invented a way to mix intensely colored flock particles with white acrylic paint so that when she squeezed it out of a ketchup squeeze bottle onto the surface of the canvas the paint swept in one movement from a high tint to a full chroma. The results recalled the aerial perspective in Chinese landscape paintings, or to my eye, the look of sand dunes pushed up high by the wind. Despite their enormous size, the paintings are very delicate. Their impact is simultaneously refined and raucous, and each painting carries multiple references.

In *Untitled Diptych #2* (2004), for example, Geichman imaginatively integrates a wide variety of painterly accidents along with ideas and memories that are important to her. A blue, white and black world floats like a magnificent kingdom inside another more ethereal world. In the artist’s mind, the painting’s swirling structure recalled the current events such as Hurricane Katrina and the Iraqi War, as well as Leonardo’s *Deluge* drawings. The misty blue atmospheric effects revealed once again the influence of Chinese Scholar’s Rock paintings on her work. And the composition derived from Boucher’s *The Four Seasons* at the Frick Collection in New York. *Untitled Diptych #2*

presents a complicated world within a world, where the one is self-contained and centered and the other is infinite and timeless.

As in Plato's cave, a life lived inside a protected world never knows what goes on beyond its borders. *Untitled Diptych #2* invites us to consider that the known world is merely a tiny part of an unknown and sublime outer universe. Our eyes move from the compressed and busy center, with its internal preoccupations, out into the misted color and raw cotton duck that bleed off into eternity. For punctuation and variety—and to remind us that the universe is not merely mechanistic—the lower left corner of the painting releases unexpected, small jolts of pink and red.

Jackson Pollock once said that every artist finds the technique that he needs. In 2005, Geichman completed a 5-week residency in Akureyri, Iceland (a town of 16,000, containing a surprisingly large number of working artists), that had been awarded her by the Gil Society. For Geichman, the experience of traveling to Iceland, encountering new people, working in a new studio, and delving into her own work without the distraction of teaching were unsettling, but the natural wonders of Iceland—the fjords and bubbling mud pits, the smell of sulphur, the sight of long walkways across the bogs, the vast landscapes and the awe-filled northern-lights sky—made the effect, as she describes it, “like a jolt of insulin.”

In Iceland, Geichman discovered firsthand that the phenomena to which she's devoted most of her artistic life—the world of organic, life-filled paint—exists in parallel form in the natural world. Pouring thinned ink onto the cement floor of her temporary Akureyri studio (whether in Iceland or Chicago, the artist pours paint), Geichman then soaked it up with the roll of Chinese paper she'd brought along with her as part of her art supplies—only to discover, ironically, that the very same paper was sold in the well-supplied Akureyri art store.

Geichman returned home to her Chicago studio reinvigorated by her five-week residency and in possession of a suite of stained, Max-Ernst-like drawings. It turns out that one of

the most artificial concoctions ever—abstract painting—is, in Judith Geichman’s case, as natural as the world itself.

Laurie Fendrich is a New York artist and writer who is also a professor of fine arts at Hofstra University.