

bama bound

Annie Butrus believes in painting. This may be an unusual place to begin, but I start here because it seems appropriate. From the outset, her works are not concerned with postmodern irony – they are not, in and of themselves, *about* painting. Instead, Butrus' paintings are, as she states, "meditations on change in the contemporary Alabama landscape." One could argue that the *truth* in landscape painting depends, in part, on the painter. By this I mean that there are complex questions of one's relationship to place, and here Butrus is quite forthright. "My interest in the Alabama landscape," she writes, "not being from Alabama, is to capture the experience and point-of-view of the farmer by documenting their landscape and the encroaching development before their way of life, method of farming and habitation of the land disappears entirely." In this regard, Butrus might be something of a social documentarian. She is largely concerned both with the presentation of subject matter, and with its deeper implications.

"Every painting has to answer for itself." At least this is what Butrus tells me as I am standing in her studio looking down into a maquette of the gallery space, a drawn-to-scale sketch of her proposed work on the table for me to see. What seems most important to Butrus is the opportunity to manipulate paint in a significant fashion, to transform what Duchamp would call a readymade – the tube of paint – into something transcendent. At times, it is difficult to reconcile Butrus' belief in painting as a process with her knowledge of contemporary practices. This is most evident in the round work she has created, a *rontonde*, which is far more closely linked to Duchamp's *rotoreliefs* than it is to Ingres' bathers.

To better understand her project for bama, I have looked at the works on her website at length. The difficulty is they are sketches, but this is their simplicity as well. Too often, the compositional immediacy and subject matter specificity of a sketch is overlooked. With this in mind, *Seasons: Study Black* and *Seasons: Study Sepia* both stand as significant works in and of themselves. In the former, graphic images of the passage of time stretch across the paper. The actualities of excess and decay are recorded, sympathetically but almost with detachment. In the latter, both the images and ideas become softer, subtler, but even more romanticized. One might say that we shift here from reportage to romance, which, given the factuality of the images, may not be such a bad idea.

Butrus describes *Four Seasons* partly in technical terms. "It's like a huge drypoint," she explains, "a suite of works made with crosshatching, that still have to be produced one by one." At times, I wonder if the transformation from the intimate to the monumental, the shift in scale, will impact on her working methods. At the same time, I constantly remind myself that the history of painting almost demands large scale works, particularly works that address the conditions of a specific place. What Butrus has done is taken the colossal work of art from the wall and wrapped it around the viewer as a sort of uncomfortable

coat. It is almost as if her installation becomes a slow motion recording of changes in both expectation and location, like the rotoreliefs mentioned above.

For bama, Butrus has created a large-scale painterly installation in which the four seasons envelop the viewer. Beginning with *Spring*, on the ceiling, they blend into each other, with the differentiations between them being difficult to determine. This notion, of the slippages between seasons, seems more true to life than a series in which one season abruptly merges into another. Summer. Fall. Winter. What is evident is the relentless passage of time, each season being identical to its namesake predecessor but always already entirely different merely by the passage of time. I want to think here of the notion of being enveloped in the changing seasons, of the perceptual conditions that Butrus is trying to create. We might be reminded here of the reception of Duchamp's rotoreliefs, the likely predecessor, at a much higher rate of rotation, to the rontonde painting of Butrus' that moves slowly throughout the show.

If one were to look for a lineage of painters that have allowed Butrus to arrive at this point, it would certainly include Caspar David Friedrich and J. M. W. Turner. Each suggests an approach that is concerned as much with allegory as it is with atmosphere, and I would suggest that this is much the same as Butrus'. One must accept the expressive qualities of paint to accept the expressiveness of a painting, and, particularly on this scale, this is obvious in her works.

"Inner necessity is the basis of both small and great problems in painting." Or so says Wassily Kandinsky in his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. I want to suggest that as a painter who believes in painting, as Butrus does, the problematics of content and context derive not from the validity or viability of the medium, but from her ability and veracity with it. I believe she accomplishes both veracity and innovation in this suite of works. Her ability to assimilate and sublimate a variety of references, from One Hundred Views of Edo to the landscapes of Turner results in an experience that is both anchored to place and tending towards the universal.

Butrus has arrived at *Four Seasons* via both *Fallen Fruit*, a more detailed, more microscopic analysis of the changing conditions of the Alabama landscape, and her *Urban Density Series*, which dealt with urban sprawl and relentless expansion. Now, in many senses, she has distilled these larger questions of site specificity and location down to a more immediate subject, that of the passage of time.

"Four Seasons," she writes, "will reflect the changing twenty-first century Alabama landscape – a place trapped between its illustrious landscape heritage, expressed in the moniker 'Alabama the Beautiful', and the inevitable vicissitudes of forced progress." And trapped we remain, I would say.

– Brett Levine, 2005