

Janise Yntema: paintings, drawings and installation work

—Mark Ferguson

With her affinity for the land and attraction towards the spiritual, Janise Yntema's paintings, installations and mixed media work fall squarely within a romantic tradition that goes back to the eighteenth century. Emerging as a rejection of the rationalist ideologies of the Enlightenment, the romantic artist instead embraces the primal and uncontrollable forces found both in the world that surrounds them and within themselves. Ms. Yntema's work continues the aesthetic exploration begun by nineteenth century landscape painters such as Turner and Friedrich, expanded into deeper psychological regions with German Expressionism and Abstract Expressionism and manifested most recently in Neo-Expressionism. She shares with them a deep commitment towards reconciling fundamental dichotomies between life and death, chaos and order; the immediacy of experience and the continual passage of time, bringing her work within the realm of the sublime.

Perhaps closest in spirit is the work of Anselm Kiefer, whose dark, dense wall pieces bring the landscape directly into the work, incorporating sand, straw and charred wood into massive mixed media paintings. Yntema arrived at a similar strategy independently through her own experiments in abstract painting, infusing the work with marble dust, aluminum shavings, iron powder and industrial debris, as well as old photographs, dried flowers and other relics of modern society. "The intrinsic qualities of the materials," Yntema says, "when used in a painterly fashion, enlarged my theory of the color field, as in Joseph Beuys' concept of the importance of material as substance." In works such as her *Untitled (Triptych)* (1993) and *Untitled #9* (1991) real objects become aestheticised, integrated into these paintings as line, shape, texture and color while the aesthetic dimension of the work reaches a critical mass, fused as it is to authentic physicality. Yntema, like Kiefer, takes another step in breaking down barriers between art and life—always the romantic artist's passion. The aesthetic realm both shrinks and intensifies as she confronts the natural world more directly, expressing herself through physical substance, which in turn allows the spiritual forces of nature to be expressed through her work.

There are, of course, fundamental differences between the art of Kiefer and Yntema, and it is here that the individual character of her work is most clearly seen. Endemic in Kiefer's art is an engagement with his own German heritage that goes back centuries. Yntema's sense of heritage, like most artists of her generation, is postmodern, limited to the formation of America's post-industrial age, with Abstract Expressionism (on which her work is grounded) as its first historic art. But Yntema's work is compensated by a greater immediacy of experience; her engagement with the past is based on the direct encounter with the deterioration and decay of her own environment.

One can see this engagement in the materials that have entered into her work. In the *Valve* series, anonymous figures from old photos appear like colorless ghosts from a previous age, placed on the surface of corroded industrial signs whose messages are barely decipherable through years of rust. The speed of our technological advancement and rate of its deterioration accelerates the aging

process, making relics out of objects that date back barely half a century. In an installation entitled *The Josephine Table*, Yntema memorializes an old woman and friend whose life was remarkable only in the number of years it encompassed and the number of artifacts it left behind. A hanging display of photographs, tools and obsolete household items document the nearly anonymous existence of her later years which would have otherwise been almost instantaneously forgotten. Yntema's romanticism is clearly revealed in these works as she explores the cycles of growth and decay within the cultural limits of her own postmodern world.

A second distinction to be considered in Yntema's work is that it is an art formed from a woman's involvement in the world and so adds a feminine voice to what has been a primarily male-dominated tradition. One particularly provocative and often repeated image is that of a rose suspended from its stem, whose petals fall with the withering of the flower (seen most strikingly in her 1993 *Landscape with Roses* installation). This mixed metaphor of blood, feminine sexuality and sacrifice is evocative, among other things, of the monthly cycles of birth, death, and rebirth experienced within the artist's body itself. As such, it reflects Yntema's own instinctive understanding of the natural realm that determines a balance between chaos and order, life and death. Grounded in the immediacy of her own experience, Yntema's art opens up alternate pathways to a spiritual awareness, creating the possibilities of a unique contribution to the romantic tradition.

Recent Work

Ms. Yntema's recent pieces are decidedly more austere and abstract, presented in a series format that creates the feel of installations. The industrial artifacts remain, but have been, to a large degree, ground into fragments, returning to a more natural state and losing much of their cultural identity. By abandoning these materials, Ms. Yntema's focus has shifted from the cultural to the purely aesthetic, allowing her to escape from the confines of her postmodern condition. But there is a cost: the work now takes on an existential quality as the artist must now enter into the creative process alone, without the support of a cultural framework to guide her.

We see this first in a group of untitled drawings from her show *Physical Morphology: Nature/Landscape*. "These new works come from nature, not industry," says Yntema, "tied together by the use of graphite." Using the artist's most basic material, which comes from the earth itself, these abstract landscapes focus on a creative process in motion, the work of art at its inception. Mysterious and timeless, the drawings are presented to the viewer in his own space, unprotected by frames and glass, and suspended off the wall. Agitated by the slightest disturbance, they betray the inherent fragility of the purely aesthetic object which holds on to authentic physicality while trying to transcend the inherent limitations of its own condition.

Yntema continues this engagement in her most recent exhibition at A.I.R. Gallery, which consists

of three series of works. Her *Opus* series is made up of sixteen small, square paintings each containing pairs of brass dowels that run from the top to the bottom of the work. The scratched and pitted surfaces consist of rough fields of earth colors that have achieved an almost sculptural quality. The brass dowels contrast strikingly with the surface and mark a return of cultural artifacts into Yntema's work, though no longer identifiable strictly to our industrial age. Rather, the use of brass goes back to the early history of the smelting process itself, reflecting the beginnings of culture and man's attempted assent over nature. The pairs of slender beams create primitive harmonies in relation to each other and attempt to break up the picture space into organized triads, although the painted surfaces refuse to recognize such borders. The series illustrates the inherent tension between the natural and the cultural and Yntema's own engagement in reconciling this dichotomy in her work.

The second series, entitled *Variations*, consists of seven large square paintings whose dimensions purposely deny the rectangular window frame format traditionally used in illusionistic work. These paintings are presentations, not representations, and the dense handling of paint mixed with debris continues to evoke the physicality so important to Yntema's work. Despite this, there appears to be a kind of delicacy to the painting surface itself, not unlike that found in her untitled drawing series or even certain atmospheric landscapes by Turner and Whistler. This apparent contradiction between the massive body and ethereal surface is resolved upon closer examination, revealing the tremendous layering of paint that occurs in the work. The paintings take on an almost geological dimension, with endless strata gradually building up to the outer layer. The insubstantial aesthetic object seen in the earlier drawing series is now grounded in its own romantic history of continual re-creation. The entire series could indeed be seen as presenting different stratum of the same painting as Yntema builds her work upon the archaeology of her own aesthetic tradition.

Yntema's third series is made up of tall, totem-like, metal scaffolding, each containing abstract rectangular paintings created in wax. The rusticated structures take on the appearance of ancient signposts, or fantastic stilts for a world populated by Giacometti's humanoids. The introduction of wax provides Yntema with a working material that is both natural and cultural, reflecting her continued attempt to bridge the two realms. The series further reveals two components endemic throughout the body of the artist's work. The first is Yntema's sculptural sensibility, reflected in the emphatic physicality of her paintings; she is involved in the creation of aesthetic objects not imagery. The second is an underlying primitivism that has manifested itself in earlier ritualistic installations (her *Landscape with Roses* installation, for example) and now takes on sculptural form. The artist's primitivist sensibility comes from her desire to connect with the spiritual through direct experience, unmediated by cultural tradition. Yntema's work acts as markers in her search for the spiritual and provides us the opportunity to share in the exploration.

Mark Ferguson, a graduate of SUNY Stony Brook with an M.A. in art criticism, is a freelance writer and the assistant editor for Art Index.