

## Nothing to See from the Ground

Nena Tsouti-Schillinger, 2004

For 25 years, walking through the streets, I have felt through my feet the geological shape of the place. The aerial view proved to me my point. It is through our senses that form, color and meaning are given to everything we make and do.<sup>1</sup>

*Barbara Hepworth*

In Western art, Caspar David Friedrich and William Turner are perhaps the earliest known painters to create a pictorial world without matter, conveyed through a vision of land-, sea-, or skyscape. In Eastern art, however, this tradition is a long one and can be traced back to as early as the 10th-century Chinese visionary landscapes of Li Ch'eng and Fan K'uan. Encountering Vicky Colombet's paintings, one cannot avoid experiencing what the great Kyoto University professor of religion and Buddhism, as well as scholar of Zen and art, Shin'ichi Hisamatsu calls "nothingness." This nothingness does not mean nonexistence or negation, but rather stands for the "fundamental subject" that is "absolutely and actively nothing." And this is the *life* in which man, by returning to his roots (that is, the fundamental subject that is actively nothing), breaks through everything that is differentiated or has a form, and becomes himself the formless—the absolute one—fundamental subject that is totally free.<sup>2</sup>

For over two decades, Colombet has explored the movement of natural formations, her paintings focusing on landscape, "the minor genre," as she herself defines it. Her work reflects the formative influence of her mentor, the late Henri Dimier, a French abstract painter and quite

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As narrated to the author by the publisher George Braziller, New York, May 2004.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this subject, see Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, *Zen and The Fine Arts* (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1971).

legendary figure in the Paris art world. While perhaps differing in how they are configured and executed, Colombet's pictures also seem to parallel in feeling those done by several Minimalist painters: Agnes Martin's linear paintings with their careful hand-drawn lines; Brice Marden's canvases that are evocative of nature; Robert Ryman's atmospheric white compositions. Discussing her own works, Martin once said, "My paintings have neither object nor space nor line nor anything—no forms. They are light, lightness, about merging, about formlessness, breaking down form...it is to accept the necessity of the simple, direct going into a field of vision as you would cross an empty beach to look at the ocean." Certainly the above "description," though it is about her own work, might well apply to Colombet's paintings. Like Martin and Marden, Colombet is an abstract artist who seems to imbue paint with emotional resonance; at the same time, the rigorous reductiveness and repetitive aspects of her imagery might well cause her to be labeled a Minimalist.

Of course the idea of painterly repetition began with the French Impressionists' reworking the same motif. In Colombet's works, however, the subject of the work is not readily apparent, even though her landscapes seem closely bound up with the natural elements, water, wind, rain and snow, suggesting normal patterns of erosion. Their passage seems to be recorded directly on canvas—and yet her pictures are rather non-representational. The world of the painting does not represent the physical universe.

There is no indication of "life" in these scenes, which would suggest perhaps the usually adversarial relationship between mankind and the natural environment. However, a close examination of the composition reveals ambiguity. Are these lines and abstract forms in fact man-made objects seen at a distance from above, as in a bird's-eye view? Is what we see an aerial view of an "urban landscape," instead of rivers and desert sand formations? And when I talk about urban space, I do mean a space without objects. Nevertheless, there is no specific narrative. Certainly behind every work of art there is a theme, a story, which may be the point of

departure, but one needs neither to specify a content nor to find a “meaning” in these paintings—at least not in the conventional sense. One finds “image.” Her compositions offer color, line and movement. Colombet’s images are the distillations of years of looking at nature, expressed in the artist’s individual language.

Her palette is limited to a few select colors. The frequent combinations of browns and purples found in works such as Winds 10-77-03 (2003) and Wind 10-30-03 (2003) derive less from water than from land. As in a windswept desert, chaos and organization coexist in these paintings. There is a kind of sawing motion, back and forth, between a range of creamy purples interwoven with darker hues of magenta and variations of creamy browns interwoven with blue. The artist uses colors in such a way that the patterns and marks seem to advance and retreat, making the picture a living thing while simultaneously engaging the viewer in a certain feeling and mood. In addition, as Sarah King has noted in “Vicky Colombet at Evo” (*Art in America*, July 2003), some works of the Urban Landscapes series from 2002 “are curiously evocative of Alfred Stieglitz’s cloud abstractions, the *Equivalents*, as well as of the wiped patternings found in Gerhard Richter’s *Abstract Pictures*.”

In order for the conversation between the painting and the viewer to begin, we need to look carefully at a work and spend time with it. Then and only then might we glean some insight. Colombet’s pieces resist easy revelation. Viewed from a distance, for example, the surface of Wind and Snow (2004) seems to be textural and tactile. It is only on closer examination that we are able to see the extraordinary fluidity of the surface. Her manipulation of the materials to create an image that is simultaneously opaque and translucent, three-dimensional and flat, textural and fluid is indeed remarkable.

As the artist explains, her approach to painting—preparation of the canvas and pigments—is true to the method of the old masters. She uses a heat-blending process, however,

that works with mineral oil as a solvent for oil paint, alkyd (a sticky resin derived from dicarboxylic acids) and wax; it is a method that depends on a chemical reaction, which the artist is not able to fully control, thus leaving room for chance to intervene. She then carefully applies the pigment to canvas with a brush, continually adjusting line, color and formal design as she works. Perhaps no one better describes the process than the artist herself: "It is such a precise process that every step, every stroke of the brush, every gesture is decisive. There is a moment where it almost seems as if even my breath interferes in the process. A new landscape appears: a different geography. A geography that is more urban, more abstract, and more mysterious."

Colombet has stated that she is concerned with the viewer's response to her work. Most people feel at a loss in front of an abstract picture and thus the notion of communication in art becomes a problem. Questions like "what is it that we are looking at exactly" or "what is the meaning of this piece" might arise. It is difficult for a viewer to project meaning into an abstract work like Urban Landscape (2004), which seems simultaneously commanding and accessible, familiar and elusive, physical and abstract. One should also be cautioned against reading allegories and other literary fancies into non-objective paintings in general. For indeed, although we tend to report our subjective responses, we should avoid creating erroneously inflated rhetoric and excessive commentary and interpretation of the content. I realize that this has repeatedly been the case with the works of other abstract artists like Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Franz Kline, to mention only a few. Matters of subjectivity or objectivity are often irrelevant.

Usually we look *out* at a landscape. But in Colombet's works, it seems as if we look down. In fact some of the paintings marry form with topography, as if describing the surface features of land, or hydrography, as in charting the sea floor and coastlines. If we look down on the earth, it becomes a plane that lies at right angles to our field of vision. The horizontal becomes vertical. Major topographical lines are rendered nearly indistinguishable when viewed from the ground. One has to fly over them in order to realize their true perspective from the air.

We see lines of different widths, some forming parallelograms, others trapezoids, and lines making the surface look as if it is “carved,” creating concave and convex reliefs. The eye is led in and out from solid to space and back again, each segment existing in itself as a brief crystalline visual element. The further we look down the line, the greater its definition. Yet the greater the distance, the less definition of detail. The lines are both more general and more distinctly clearly revealed as lines in direct proportion to the focal distance from the eye. The gestalt becomes stronger as the detail becomes weaker.<sup>3</sup>

With Colombet’s paintings, one might have an experience that is perhaps similar to what Robert Morris felt when he visited the Nazca lines in Peru. In his influential essay “Aligned with Nazca,” which originally appeared in *Artforum* in 1975, Morris noted that “there is something intimate and unimposing, even offhand, about the work. The lines were constructed by a process of removal. They do not impress by indicating superhuman efforts or staggering feats of engineering. Rather it is the maker’s care and economy of insight into the nature of a particular landscape that impresses.”<sup>4</sup>

Certainly Colombet is not interested in reproducing specific objects such as the exact forms and patterns of the landscape. But the landscape exists, nevertheless, in the power of the movement of the elements, the traces and marks of wind, water, rain and the expanse of space. The picture draws us into it. The space invites us to participate actively in the journey and explore its “reality,” achieving our own experience as we wander through. How long might it take to walk and meander through the lines? While it is up to the individual viewer just how he “walks” the full extend of the depicted landscape, one might say that by revealing it to us gradually as we

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of gestalt, see Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, 171-72.

proceed, Vicky Colombet subtly combines the element of time with that of space, weaving a tapestry of Time and Space. Ultimately time becomes an infinity of surface.