2008

Sea Change: *Characterizing his Community's Disparate Temperament*

Sunlight's Daily Dance

There must be a dozen ways to analyze the progress of Stewart Goldman's oeuvre since his 1981 series *Chamber I-VI.* I would like to see how far I can go by discussing his paintings as heat-sensitive fields that measure a particular era's mood, registered over the duration he spent working on each piece, rather than recorded over brief time spans as photographs, portraits, and landscapes do. Like John Marin, the painter he most admires, Goldman's vision remains trained on his immediate environment, intent to transform subtle movements into enduring marks. Not surprisingly, he considers Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning his two favorite Modernist painters. Remarkably passionate painters, the former cast an introspective glance, while the latter directed his sight outwards. More likely to gaze both ways, Goldman's painting style and palette run even hotter than theirs. Prone to employ reds, golds, pinks, oranges, plums, limes and forest greens, the most recent paintings actually evoke fanning flames, radiation, the birth of stars, explosions, combustion, and infrared satellite maps. Paintings like *Greenseas* (2003-4), *Blue Heat* (2007), *Pulse* (2007), *Lava* (2007), or *Fog* (2005) sport weather-related titles, while *Greenland* (2007), *The Divide* (2006), *Red Sea* (2003-2004), *Sinai* (2003-2005), propose disputed territories and political hotspots. Like the animated satellite maps that forecast air currents pushing west, east, north or south, most Goldman paintings provoke a sense of movement, as patches drift downward, get caught in crevices, and/or rebound upwards. What I view as indicative of changing weather patterns (humidity, frost, fog, haze, visibility, mist), Goldman insists is sunlight's daily dance as the sun shifts from east to west, getting stuck behind clouds, pollution, and built/natural obstacles. Whether weather or light, a Goldman painting is an inquiry concerning atmospheric conditions over time.

With the dark and musty *Chamber I*, one glimpses clouds floating outside the window, while a golden sunlight blankets the ceiling, whose red-orange glow echoes the electrified ceiling fixture affixed to the floor, like Marcel Duchamp's *Trebuchet*. Stranger still, daylight emerges from the basement. The tree shadows dancing atop the floor and gate-leg table in *Chamber II* evoke the midday sun. Although a tree is visible through the left hand-window, the trees casting shadows must actually be situated in front of a high-placed window stretching along the unpictured wall, which explains each I-beam's yellowy edge and the patches glowing on the ceiling. The distant view of a smoky factory is balanced by a toxic red edge, which seeps along the floor molding, eventually aligning with the shadow on the table, and the candle's flame in the window sill on the right.

The overall darkness of *Chamber III* coupled with its fiery pinky-yellowy reflections from the open oven door recalls the intense burst of light spread across the darkness during sunrise. A sizzling cauldron of wispy vapors and fiery particles, rising upwards through a rectangular shaft toward heaven, occupies the center of a dingy ceramic tile floor in *Chamber IV*. Similarly edged in red, these sweaty walls, dusted with soot support the ceiling rigged with noxious showers, while a lone white towel basks in the smolder, as dusk reclaims the nightsky. Fully bathed in artificial light, a dissecting table takes center court in *Chamber V*. The overseers are complicit, since their room above doubly illuminates this sinister scene. In *Chamber VI*, daybreak has come, but so have harmful emerald fumes. Despite visions of a better world (à la Dürer), the furnace's walls close in, further provoking restriction, suffocation, and hopelessness. A highlighted escape ladder hangs just outside the gas chamber's exit, while a running water hose floods the floor. Those trapped inside could never know how close they were to getting out. In cycling through these six existential scenes, where promise and despair commingle, light becomes the actor, who steps out to arouse and direct viewer sentiment.

These six paintings reference the holocaust, both metaphorically and literally. Fifteen years later, he produced a boxed set of thirteen etchings, *Tales of Slavery and Deliverance* (1997), in direct response to holocaust survivor Dr. Anna Ornstein's girlhood stories of living at Auschwitz with her mother. Two of these plates contain elements from the *Chambers* series, such as *III*'s flung-open oven door and *VI*'s image in reverse. Rendered in black and white, these images evoke ascendance, whereby, their top halves seem to float away from their more grounded bottoms. One imagines that the concentration-camp victims' ghosts and spirits have infiltrated these killing fields, where overwork and starvation were just as likely causes of death as extermination. The words "Arbeit Macht Frei" run across the top of *Rock,* reminding one of the impossibilities of a life of hard labor sustained on only 180 calories a day. Despite being two-tone, several of these etchings convey light sources, such as the coal-fired black smoke billowing out of a determined train's smokestack, lamps posted on security fences, the crematoriums' eerie flames, or light poking behind clouds. As *Chamber V* portends, evil lurks in darkness, so vigilance is man's first line of defense. My favorite etching is *World*, whereby an earthly globe, whose latitudes and longitudes are demarcated by barbed wire, is being set free by three plant roots which aim to split the man-made limits asunder. Once again, the man-made is merely artifice, and wickedness is more exemplary nurture than nature.

Those who view Goldman's tape drawings as a blip, or "just a phase," overlook the fact they hold his interest, precisely because they don't hold. They come unstuck, sag, flop, and reposition themselves, a process that Julian Opie has occasionally explored. The "tape" drawings visualize time, thus "un"memorializing otherwise public monuments such as bridges, concentration camps, and towers. More recently, he's placed taped maps of controversial river

cities such as Washington D.C., New Orleans, Baghdad on the wall, only to watch these great cities' streets fall away, as if some conquering army or natural disaster had visited instead.

His most enigmatic works, the *Rubens* series, are strangely his most conceptual, which seems like a contradiction in terms, since conceptual works whose rules are transparent are most often straightforward. Trapped, as all painters were in the late 1980s, by a desire to rekindle visual pleasure, but an equally strong fear of reprisal from the theorists whose politically-charged critiques of beauty had rendered creating compelling objects a crime, Goldman found a way to make colorful paintings that eschewed the retinal. In fact, one could argue that they're difficult to look at for too long. Rather than seduce spectators, they push them away, though they're still remarkably charged, perhaps because one assumes that there's an identifiable pattern, not unlike a Sol LeWitt wall drawing. Hoping to grasp each painting's structure, one stares as long as possible, only to realize that there is no unifying system, save that each square is rendered in a different color. *Variation on Rubens #10* is perhaps the most unified, since one can extend the square patches vertically or horizontally to find squares that combine elements of the four colors meeting on one square, though it's hardly flawless, since the square where yellow, brown, brick, and light blue join up is predominately red. Nearly a decade later, Sherrie Levine presented classic pictures as pixilated grids, which may be what Goldman had had in mind. However different the net effects, his painterly paintings from that era stand as the test cases for the floating, moving, and dancing patches of color that have held his interest since the millennium. In most instances, the color-blocked edges were added later, making the works seem more rule-driven than they actually were.

In examining these *Rubens* paintings, he somehow realized that marks interested him more than figures, since he soon dropped imagery all together, moving into an abstract realm whose focus is abstraction in the Ellsworth Kelly sense, that is, worldly details that are not identifiable. While the *Rubens* works are hot and fiery, full of the passion required to storm the ban on visual pleasure, the next body of work was remarkably cool, almost distant, though no less colorful. Unlike the prior flame-like patches, his new tool was the mostly vertical patch or mark. Rather than subdivide a giant canvas into colored squares, he opted to build large-scale works from grids of small squares (easier to transport back from a residency in Germany). Rather than move from the border to the center, as the *Rubens* paintings direct the eyes, one's eyes glide all around, absent a particular focal point. Moving much slower through *Feldafing II* (1997), from one panel to the next, either down or right, one senses slight variations from one panel to the next, as if the grid paintings double as story boards. In some cases, he left a lot of white ground, similar in effect to De Kooning's '80s paintings, while in other cases, such as *Feldafing Scape* (1997) and *Mellow Yellow* (2001), Goldman completely covered the canvas.

His real breakthrough came with *Hericlitus Mind* (2001), a painting comprised of sixteen one-foot square panels. Each of these little paintings is like a movie unto itself, whereas the 1997 grid required the eye to move to produce the storyboard effect. All of sudden, the colored patches are buoyant. They fly and dive, abut against one another, hover, push, and even disappear, as the white space transitions from ground to figure. In those days, I didn't consider satellite maps, per se, though weather crossed my mind, since some images seem crisp and frosty, while others are sunny and clear, though none are particularly gloomy. Some evoke crashing waves or snow-capped peaks, so they still feel linked to landscape. At first glance, *Elysian* (2001-2004), which took several years to resolve, resembles *Feldafing II.* On further inspection, it seems like a singular work that's been chopped up, since many marks extend onto their neighboring squares.

After moving to Cincinnati in 1999, I visited Goldman's studio at least once a year, so I kept abreast of his studio progress. Lacking the perspective I've since gained, I used to ask why cool, smooth, monochrome patches adjoined fuzzy edges, scumbled strips, or hot chunks. I now see that each surface's virtual moves come from this incongruous painterly device. If I once felt like he couldn't decide between hard and soft edge, I now realize that the unlikely simultaneity of such marks perpetuate events. Consider *Slope*, whereby the top white patch instigates an avalanche, *Trey,* whose reversing figure (aqua/plum) /ground (white) bits beckon back and forth, or *Fog*, whose grayish shards float everything northeast. *Blue Heat* simulates the turmoil caused by arctic air masses blasting into hot Santa Anna winds, alternatively viewed as diametrically-opposed political positions. *Flit, Greenseas*, *Sinai* (all painted between 2003 and 2005), *The Anatomy Lesson, Incursion, Pulse* and *Virginia* (all four from 2007) elicit spontaneous explosions, randomly spewing fragments and embers in all directions. These seven are equally reminiscent of distant galaxies' otherworldly events, such as exploding asteroids and the birth of stars. Goldman recalls painting *Virginia* in response to 2007's Virginia Tech shootings: one can thus infer that other paintings reflect real-world events. The super calm *Greenland* (2007) is primarily red, with an upward patch of white melting into blue, a clear reference to rising temperatures causing its glaciers to recede. *The Divide* (2006) suggests an imaginary map of the Mediterranean Sea, the Jordan River and the precious aquifers dividing Israel and Palestine.

Topsy-Turvy

In addition to light's changing impact and people's varying temperaments, Goldman doesn't hesitate to rotate the spectator's perspective. If you've ever seen a video of Helen Frankenthaler making a painting, then you might know what I mean, though I don't believe that Goldman actually swivels the canvas around on the floor, as she does. I believe he keeps the painting upright, even when painting scenes upside down. The six *Chamber* paintings demonstrate his paintings's twirling perspective. *Chamber I* is actually a room, the foyer of the

old Art Academy, turned upside down with several added features (climbing bars on the walls and a ladder placed on cabinets, tilted toward the ceiling) (I recommend holding the catalog upside down to see this for yourself). Similarly, the staircases hanging from the ceilings in *Chamber III* and *Chamber V* make more sense as bleachers or staircases positioned on the floor. This effect is especially prevalent with the most recent works. With *Orange Stripe,* the orange-red and blue edges waffle between being flat borders and becoming cliff's edges, as seen from above. This same painting's orange portions, especially the pointy parts, shift from being flat peninsulas, as seen from above, to being craggy edges that restrict one's view of the sky, as if one were trapped below. Rather than wrap up this essay with a summary of the "Goldman Report," I leave it to engaged spectators to look at these paintings with fresh eyes and try to assess what's moving and shaking in Goldman's world, a place where we all play an integral role.

Curator at the Abington Art Center, Sue Spaid writes regularly about experiential art for artUS. The author of Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies, she's currently preparing that exhibition's follow-up, "Green Acres: Artists Farming Fields, Greenhouses and Abandoned Lots," an exhibition concerning twenty-two artist-farmers.