

## Steven Seinberg - A Brief Repose

Essay by Karina Noel Hean

Inertia is an impossibility . . . in a life, in a river, in a painting. Steven Seinberg's paintings imply that motion is an incessant and loss inevitable. While the desire for rest propels and holds us, it is only a temporary possibility from which we proceed and to which we progress. Embracing vagueness, Seinberg paints translucent space in layers of colorful grays occupied by indefinable elements in brief states of buoyancy, suspension, and sometimes tumult. As a cycle of paintings, the work produced from 2004-2011 reflects a key feature of a river's ecosystem – the persistence of similar change.

Seinberg's somber paintings evolve from and update the work of mid-twentieth century American Abstract Expressionist painters, such as Cy Twombly, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still, from the perspective of a twenty-first century American. The action that occurs in the openness of his large canvases is witness to a heightened sensitivity, nostalgia, and humility grounded in a spirituality of natural phenomena. While the exploration of format and media clearly engage Seinberg, as they did his predecessors, they do so largely to serve his investigation of how life of a river flows and unfolds.

In much of the work, and particularly present in "Waiting" 2008, a personal entomology occurs as one repeated character, a black biological tangle, is restated and reformed in new circumstances. In "Morning" 2009 the possibility of stillness is presented in a definitive horizon line and vacuous depths dense, white layers. The script above the horizon and dark marks below remind us that peace, though desired, is however fleeting – the day must begin, water flows . . . change is pending. "Flows Through" 2010 pushes and buoys a living bundle past the state of inertia as water moves dirt; sometimes here and this way, sometimes there, and that way. Temporary resolution occurs in "Center of Rest" 2009 as a dangling lifeform remains suspended, just beneath the firm horizon line that separates a warm world above and a cool, dark world below. A soft release of earthy yellow forms resumes in "Emerge" 2010 and declares the constancy of change in organic systems. Seinberg maps a non-linear, kinetic narrative of a cycle that charts the stages of motion from inertia, release, and progress, back to rest, and again to emergence as the paintings consider how life is affected beneath the water's surface, underground, and out of view.

As they are intuitively developed, the paintings reveal the history of their process. The canvases seem witness to lengthy pondering and reflection, interrupted by momentarily decisive attacks; they capture a kind of time and volume. Indeed, the action of hoe marks and brushstrokes are made is the core of Seinberg's subject matter. The work displays an affinity for chance and embraces the materiality of his preferred media: graphite and thin washed of paint. Drips, smears, and translucency create a powerfully sparse space and offer quiet visual anchors in the nebulous fields of Seinberg's surfaces.

Balance between careful, subtle calligraphic lines and emphatic, swirling gestures evoke a latent emotional tension in much of the work and is starkly evident in "Night Opens" 2008. Indecipherable text emerges from layers of wash and paint like fleeting thoughts made momentarily important. In "Flows Forward" 2008 discernable forms or phrases are hushed by the painting's complex gray and earth tone palette. Seinberg clearly values mark making and handwriting a moment of personal attentiveness, which as in the painting "Lift" 2008, are vulnerably situated amongst vast and mysterious spaces.

His economical and yet passionate compositions reflect the language and meter of Octavio Paz's poems, whose lines often appear as Seinberg's canvases and serve as several of his titles. This echoing relationship is at times reciprocal. An excerpt from Paz's poem "Summit and Gravity" keenly captures the visual experience of these numinous paintings: "...Between firmness and vertigo/you are transparent balance..."

In Steven Seiberger's work, voices and natural forms are muffled; submerged beneath the surface, pushing towards the viewer as sounds against the air through water can be heard. The elusive organic imagery of Seiberger's paintings emerge from his attempt to find place in the world, to see the macroscopic in the microscopic- life in the river and the inevitable interconnection between coexistent systems in a large ecology.

-Karina Noel Hean  
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REST  
2011.  
Steven Seiberger  
Selected Works on Canvas  
2005-2010