



DEBORAH ROSENTHAL
PAINTINGS: LOVERS/ORION

BOWERY GALLERY

SEPTEMBER 30 – OCTOBER 25, 2008

OPENING RECEPTION THURSDAY, OCTOBER 2 FROM 5–8 PM

An Art of Deep Time

Douglas Crase

TIME IS THE GREAT secret pleasure of poetry—not time recaptured but opened and free of constraint, time the pervasive vista—and a proposition to be discovered in the abstractionist works of Deborah Rosenthal is that time, so perceived, is the secret pleasure of painting as well. The art historian E. H. Gombrich, who once judged abstract art a failure, would not have agreed. Painting, he explained, lacks the dimension of time—a dictum that serves largely to remind us that abstraction as a continuous tradition had then barely begun, and is today still in its youth. Klee, having noted that a distinction between temporal and spatial art was “an academic delusion,” located time in the line; Delaunay found vastness in color; and as heir to both insights Rosenthal has refined them in metaphoric solutions made wholly her own. Each of her paintings, by excluding perspective, foreshortening, or other recessional illusions, insists on the integrity of a line that evolves but can never vanish in the surface geometry. Each, then, is a vision of time not to be circumvented by mere entry or passage. Meanwhile, her always transitive color (the artist herself has called it “hyperbolic”) is likewise released from representation. Allowed by Rosenthal to extend its own dialectics, color responds in a plenary membrane of forces, a bold analogy to the fabric of this universe where the farther we look the more time we see.

The analytical cosmology implicit in Rosenthal's work was confirmed by her painting *Landscape with Lovers*, first seen by many when it was reproduced in *Modern Painters* in 2004. Yet no one, even seeing that painting, could have predicted the sustained creativity that would produce a series of such lovers and continue by adding, with uninterrupted energy, an astonishing second series that calls to mind the asterisms long seen in the constellation Orion. The viewer will not have to wonder what combination of personal circumstance and motive demanded these paintings in order to appreciate

that they are metaphors driven by an artist's creative fate. They constitute two *pendant* series, whose meaning intensifies logarithmically when seen together in one room. The body-like figurations of the great *Landscape with Buried Lovers* are daringly frontal, not only contained in their Prussian blue medium but sustaining it: quantum persons raised from the well of probabilities and about to collapse back into it. They must be Paolo and Francesca, come, as Dante described them, "summoned by desire, with wings poised and motionless," and bound by the passionately torn blaze that links their erased—or are they white-hot?—heads. Perhaps their still buzzing thoughts radiate from beyond the normal spectrum, can't be revealed, and these are really our template parents, Adam and Eve, about to discover free will and where to choose. Or maybe it's better to regard them as pure emblems of binary balance—desire and repose; the equals sign; chromosomes—borne by a medium that might be the web of gravity, tradition, genetics, or the inescapable history of art. They are binaries of mutual support, protection, and (one has to conclude this from the Orions that follow) they may mutually engender, too. How satisfactory, then, that Rosenthal's striding, youthful Orions not only comprise the space they approach but alter it as they go. Her allusive image could be blind Orion, the mythical giant in search of light. But knowing that this constellation is the site of an immense star-forming nebula—the nearest such nebula to earth—means *our* Orion is itself a source of light; and the figure in Rosenthal's spectacular *Orion Sharp and Emphatic*, with its subtly Vitruvian proportions and shining nimbus, could as likely be the metaphor; as was Blake's *Albion Rose*, for an ambiguous, if undeniably beautiful, prescient grandeur.

Rosenthal has been called a metaphoric abstractionist. Labels are always mistaken; but this one has the virtue of bringing the artist's well-known

affinity for Byzantine mosaics, Romanesque sculpture, Gothic stained glass, and illuminated pages like those of the Morgan Library's tenth-century Beatus manuscript into a focus that makes perfect sense. "The wall and the page, the carved stone doorway and the glass mirage, all haunt me," she writes. "History, homage, have nothing to do with it!" Her interest is the metaphor. The shape of her paintings proves it: three of the Orions mimic the narrow dimensions of a predella, the lowest section of an altarpiece, while *Landscape with Buried Lovers* suggests a horizontal relief in the tympanum above a Romanesque doorway. In a previous show, certain of her paintings recalled pages in an illuminated manuscript. To this observer, however, her images of evolving line and hyperbolic color recall, just as vividly, those false-color composites that come back from the infrared or X-ray satellites whose sensors are trained on the remotest events of cosmic history. They are "false-color" not because infrared and X-ray wavelengths are unnatural but because the image must be enhanced to distinguish the signals our species can't otherwise see. You might say the color is false but there is nothing anti-naturalistic about it. In the same way, there is nothing antiquarian or nostalgic about Rosenthal's affection for pre-Renaissance art. She is no more transfixed by the remote past of predella and tympanum than the astronomer is transfixed by the remote past of quasars and exploding galaxies. This is another example of how the artist's mysterious intuition leads to the exact metaphor that will express for the rest of us a reality we can't afford to misapprehend. To be in the same room with her unexpected lovers and pendant Orions is to be alive in a perceptually expanding universe and sense how, with world enough and time, we might inhabit it.

Douglas Crase is a poet and former MacArthur fellow.



BOWERY GALLERY

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Gallery hours Tuesday–Saturday 11–6 PM

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FRONT: *Landscape with Buried Lovers*, 2004. Oil on linen, 20 x 40 inches

BACK: *Through the Landscape*, 2006. Oil on linen, 17 x 48 inches