

Susan Swartz
 Manetti Shrem
 Museum of Art at
 UC Davis, California

By **Melik Kaylan**

Trace an arc between the polarities of Romantic nature painting and Abstract Expressionism — consider the work of Caspar David Friedrich, the 19th century German landscapist, and the paintings of Gerhard Richter — and along that path you will find the work of American artist Susan Swartz. Not exclusively but crucially, Swartz acknowledges the two great masters of German painting, some 150 years apart, as a formative presence in her work.

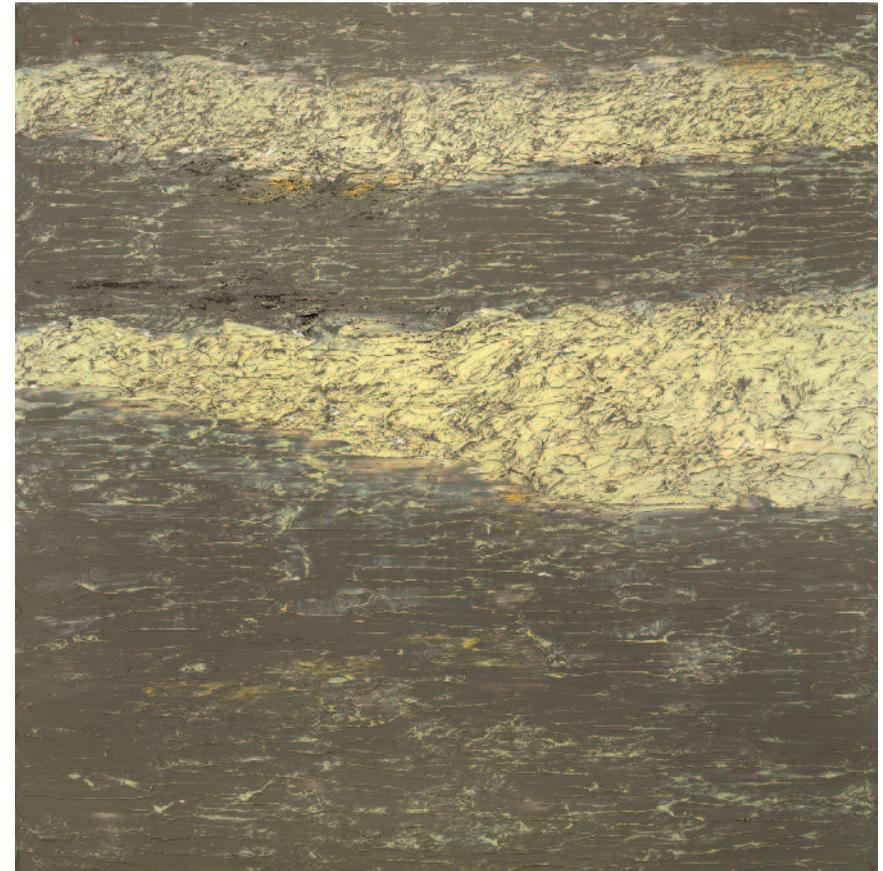
If this pedigree seems a bit presumptuous, consider that Germany's top curators today have acknowledged her

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stature, mounting a 2015 – 2017 European wide museum tour of her paintings. Swartz is, if anything, receiving the recognition that is her due.

This latest museum show of some 40 paintings, at the Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at UC Davis, *Breaking Away*, chronicles the evolution of Swartz's work from 2006 to the present.

There are three distinct narratives to the work: the aesthetic, the spiritual and the biographical. Her exploration of form evolves from representational to abstract. Swartz deconstructs the portrayal of nature; she goes behind nature, behind the act of painting and into the spiritual realm. That is where the lineage of Caspar David Friedrich's work comes in. His ghostly mystical landscapes were often deemed "metaphysical" for positing a figure as witness to nature's revelation. Such figures are often steeped in a kind of divine immanence, poised on the edge of something momentous, beholding the unearthly. This prevailing



Susan Swartz, *Breaking Away 9*, Acrylic on linen, 72 x 72 inches. Courtesy: CAFA Art Museum and Stiftung für Kunst und Kultur e.V. Bonn

urge to transcend the spiritual realm is palpable also in Swartz's earlier, more self-explanatory works in this show.

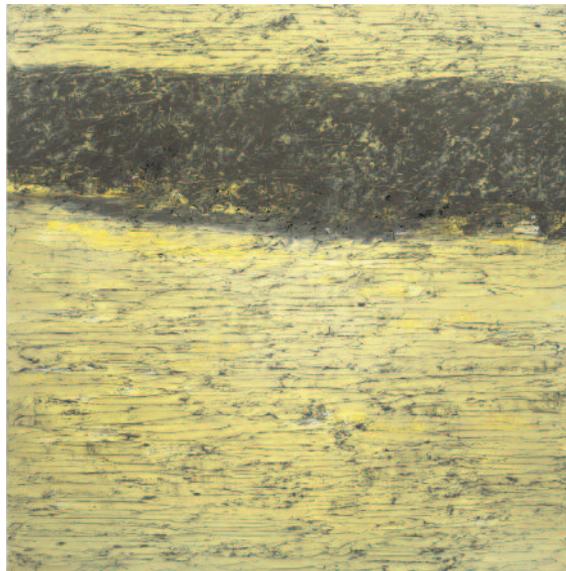
Her *Afternoon Shadows* from 2006 depicts a clearly discernible landscape, replete with luminescing pale yellow sky, gilding bosky bursts of trees and bushes. Yet she had already begun her mutation

of genres to explore "landscapes of the mind" in an Expressionist tradition.

To be sure, Expressionism does not automatically lead to Abstraction. In Chinese literati painting, for example, centuries pass from a period when faithful imitation of nature was the ideal, to when misty evocations of the artist's

inner state via floating islands and scarified forests would prevail. In Swartz's work, the process is likewise gradual and palpable.

By the time of her *Water Study 1* from 2012 she finds herself in Turner territory so to speak; with particular reference to his nautical storm studies where the elements of



Susan Swartz, *Breaking Away 7*, Acrylic on linen, 72 x 72 inches. Courtesy: CAFA Art Museum and Stiftung für Kunst und Kultur e.V. Bonn



Susan Swartz, *CloudBurst*, Acrylic on linen, 72 x 48 inches.
Courtesy: CAFA Art Museum and Stiftung für Kunst und Kultur e.V. Bonn



Susan Swartz, *Fractured*, Acrylic on linen, 72 x 48 inches.
Courtesy: CAFA Art Museum and Stiftung für Kunst und Kultur e.V. Bonn

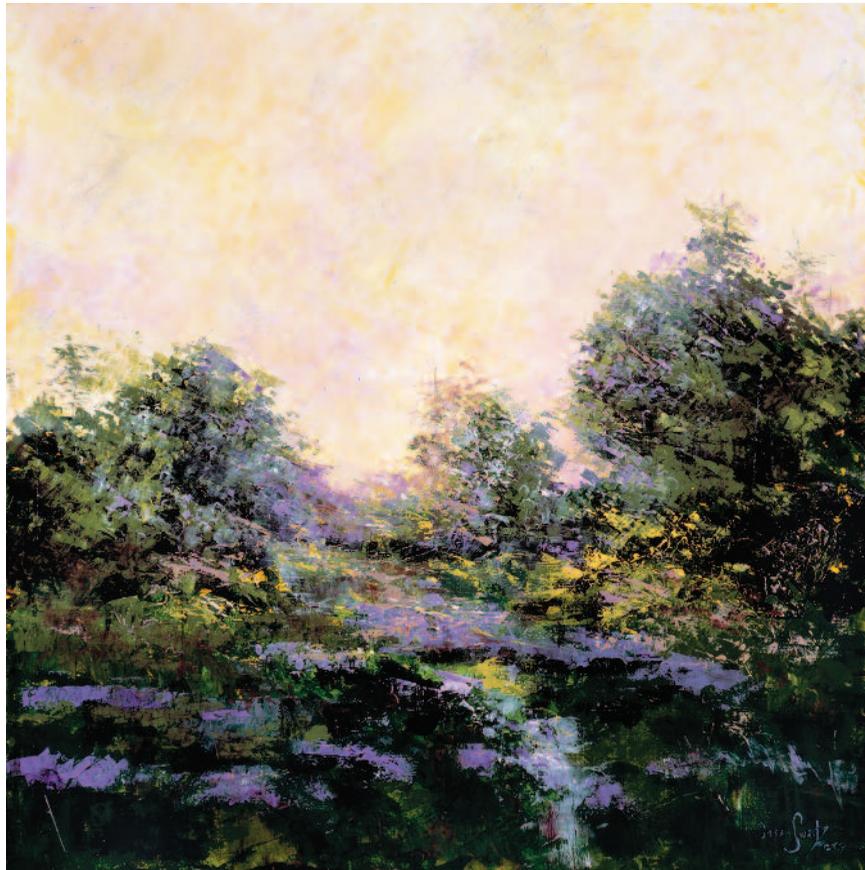
nature have seemingly dissolved all forms into chaos and light. In this 2012 work Swartz gives little clue to subject matter, save a half emergent orb, sun or moon, lost in a wash of dark purple and gold; possibly sunlight extinguishing tempests. What is happening before our eyes can be described as the freeing of color from form — what the Fauvists, notably

Andre Derain, first did in smaller steps without the complete dissolution of perceptible shapes — a process that culminated in Rothko's total abstractions.

Swartz's pivotal transformation can be seen in the series of paintings *Contemplation Sextet* in 2014 and the 2016 the pairing of *Fractured Mist* and *Cloud Burst*.

Here, nature is suggested not depicted — its majestic power conveyed in fluid flame-dance effulgencies, so reduced to their essential elements that observer and observed, the inner mind and outer world, all meld together.

In this regard, it is worth bearing in mind the show's eponymous title, *Breaking Away*, which refers to her latest



Susan Swartz, *Afternoon Shadows*, Acrylic on linen, 30 x 30 inches. Courtesy: CAFA Art Museum and Stiftung für Kunst und Kultur e.V. Bonn

The trick here, as in Richter, involves presenting the eye with seemingly familiar elements that act as a lure and then fade into the whole, drawing us closer to the enigma

series of near total abstract paintings from 2018.

Perhaps the most illustrative example of this act of "breaking away" is evinced in her 2007 *Serenade of Lilies*, the opening tour de force that announces the exhibition's overarching theme of continuous evolution. A wondrous study, this painting shows the moment when identifiable objects, such as the lilies, begin to disincarnate and transform into abstract integers of a mood composition. Recalling Monet's studies of his lily pond at Giverny, this work is at once a homage to past inspiration and a farewell that forges ahead, well beyond the artist's comfort zone.

This leitmotif of "breaking away" is embedded in all of the paintings in the show, at multiple levels. The works incrementally tell the story of Swartz's experience and output as a series of pivotal moments: The artist breaking away from attachment to decorative notions of "beauty" in art, breaking away from depicting outward nature to reflecting her inner nature, breaking away from the limits of representation and successive formalist stages, from the pause imposed by the duties of motherhood, family, career; and

from the debility of personal health issues and the imperatives of the market.

On an aesthetic level, Swartz's work probes visual forms and genres in her development from landscapist onward. Having gradually broken away from the mimetic and pictorial she is breaking towards "materiality" — an interest in the materials and process of painting itself. The subject of her work becomes painting itself. The viewer looks at the adobe-like textured surface of this work spanning time and embarks on a journey inward, with the artist, culminating in the self-referential post-modernist style: The luxuriant impasto of creams and browns, the bas-relief tactility of paint almost sculpted on the surface, the suggestion that the artist is most interested in what art does and how it does it, and herself doing it.

That being said, Swartz seems more driven in this work to seek transcendence than involution. One can discern the still enduring presence of nature's forces, however incorporeal, in the hurrying kinetic motions and in the earthy colors. *Breaking Away 9*, with its horizontal alignment, suggests wheat and mud serrying in the wind. *Breaking Away 7* evokes

riverine elements. But also in these paintings and others after 2012 we can see where Swartz has absorbed lessons from Gerhard Richter, whose polychrome compositions — with their jagged washes of rainbow colors — invite us to interpret, to look through rather than merely at the surface. If Abstract Expressionism can be beautiful or decorative, while still displaying profundity, Richter shows us how.

Which brings us to Swartz's defining series, *Nature Revisited*. The trick here, as in Richter, involves presenting the eye with seemingly familiar elements that act as a lure and then fade into the whole, drawing us closer to the enigma. *Nature Revisited* greets the viewer with pastels of avocado and pale cream on a surface that feels like enamel, almost metallic; yet is thickly layered and flowing. Incribed into this solid consistency, wisps of lines rise vertically, sometimes attended by little green flecks. They could be leaves. We could be viewing a misty snapshot of stems in a swamp; or a foggy window with thin trickles. Or a vision of nature's fecund stirrings, disordered aspirations: The raw materials of creation that become nature or, indeed, become a painting. **M**