

## Sandi Slone: Maybe A Moon

Sandi Slone's paintings are sumptuous, sensuous things, but not all luxe, calme et volupté. What has been most striking about her work, ever since she began exhibiting in the late 1970's, is the breadth and depth of her exploration of image-making. She has moved from abstraction to figuration and back. She has expanded the physical and conceptual reach of her painting with excursions into installation, performance, photography and video. She has incorporated sculpture and text. But in her work of the last several years, Slone has set aside the literal and literary means that have sometimes engaged her and returned to abstraction's reliance on density of spatial references and primacy of touch for meaning. Although she hews to the legacy of Post-War American Abstraction—and despite the sheer proficiency evident in the result—she does not lull the viewer, but keeps us on edge. Notwithstanding her emphasis on space, surface, and color, she still gives us a jolt.

Sometimes the world gets ugly. Slone invested four years working through her response to **9/11** (she lived six blocks from the site of the World Trade Center) in her "Permutation City" collage paintings, allegories of global destruction in which a vast futuristic metropolis seems to collapse in on itself or be swept away. She emerged from this project with a revitalized approach to abstraction, and with a new context for some of her questions: while formally focused painting responds to its own values and criteria, what is its responsibility to the wider world? How does it relate to our dismal state of affairs and maintain its integrity? Can abstraction situate itself within this dynamic?

The dreamy sense of a liquid landscape underlies this new work, manifesting not in the standard devices of vertical perspective or naturalistic color but in the strong feeling of expansive, elastic space. It is intriguingly difficult to find visual footing in a space where nothing is as it seems, where a familiar color or resolute stroke of the brush is qualified by

what came before, and what came after. Even when the insistently panoramic treatment of the seven foot long painting Vostock (**2006**) suggests vast space over a glacial lake, the visual field is interrupted and complicated by the transparent acid yellow of the upper two-thirds of the surface, which threatens to wash over the rest.

This disembodied quality is all the more surprising because the material reality of these paintings is concrete. Slone's experimentation in painterly touch is legendary. In her celebrated "broom paintings" of the **1970's**, she manipulated pools of pigment using a long-handled janitor's push broom in lieu of a brush. She has poured buckets of paint onto her canvases, and embedded objects into them. That awareness of the nature and scale of the mark relative to the surface and to other marks is evident in works like Roulette (**2010**) and Eclipse (**2008**), in which swathes of color laid on with house painting brushes vie for dominance with wiry, calligraphically fine linear elements. In

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other works, the range of tactility is even greater, with areas that are smoothed, stroked, glazed, blended, layered, and occasionally encrusted. Though their facture is upfront and intimate, the spaces these paintings describe are indeterminate, sweeping and devilishly distanced from the viewer's will to get a handle on them.

Slone's iconoclastic palette has mellowed, but not too much. It is luscious, maybe more than ever, and the artist still finds a place for metallic pigments, such as the silver-gray band in The Buxom Eye (**2008**), which has a mysterious black shape precariously balanced in a horizontal field of orangegold and vibrant fuchsia. A daring and adept colorist, Slone achieves a beguiling luminosity through a contrast of dark and light layering until the paintings emit a strange, enticing glow.

Her studied disconnect of color and drawing disrupts the viewer's expectations of pictorial organization. In paintings such as Checkpoint (**2010**), a series of dark abstract shapes moves across and interrupts the flow of a central mass of intense flesh-pink. The color shift both suggests and thwarts a figure/ground reading. It feels as if the laws of gravity have been temporarily loosened and our perceptual moorings compromised.

While drawn to some of the rudiments of Abstract Expressionism, particularly freedom and experimentation, Slone resists its bombast and melodrama. She shares some concerns with Color Field painters and practitioners of Process Art and Surface/Support. Equipped with a restless intelligence and a hard-earned knowledge of her craft, in this body of work this accomplished artist consolidates her explorations of avant-garde practice in terms of painting, and of painting's history. Therein lies the broader significance of Slone's mastery of technique.

The new works radiate desire. Slone pays homage to her guiding lights: the warm hues and tenderly overlapping contours of Giotto (**2007**) retool the fundamentals of illusionistic space; rough and ready, Pontormo (**2007**) channels the great Mannerist's flamboyant chroma and affection for bizarre bodily gesture; the pale rose, peach and blue of Botticelli (**2008**) recall a blushing, dewy Venus on a saline half-shell. And then there's Where You Want Me (**2009**), a grayish mauve field streaked with gravity-pulled pours and upward-seeping drips in olive-green interrupted by bubbling, lumbering lines in reddish black. The title sounds like the will of a particularly compliant brush stroke, and any painter knows that their kind is scarce indeed.

Twenty years ago, Slone began working in the tondo format, to which she returns frequently. "I love getting rid of the corners," she told me. "It puts a different kind of pressure on the surface. It pushes the volume forward." An example is Sky, Field, Lips (**2008**), in which a tumescent band of ruby red, occupying the middle third, looms out from among the undulating blues above and greens below. The circular support becomes a sculptural object, essentially different from a rectangle, which will always read as a pictorial window to a realm beyond the wall. The tondo sits on the wall, asserting another order of otherworldliness, disembodiment: sculpture as picture, form as shape. No solipsist, Slone is profoundly concerned with social and environmental issues, as any thinking person in our time must be. Personal and political, each tondo is a world unto itself, fraught with rifts, ruptures, and toxic turbulence. Or maybe a moon, reflecting the blazing shine of this artist's vivid, quirky, restless visual imagination.

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