

Claudia Ryan - Drawings

Claudia Ryan works in a series of small rooms on the second floor of an old wooden building on Central Avenue in Sarasota. The steep and worn stairs lead to an artwork packed studio that upon entry engulfs you in color and layers of intensity. On a visit last summer Claudia showed me into a room lined with drawings and left me there. I remained in the room for a long time transfixed by large sheets of transformed paper. Their scale of at least six feet in height with a complex and densely layered program of lines and ideas demanded my attention. My immersion was satisfying and challenging. I was visually intoxicated. Seeing these same five drawings now hanging on a sixty-five foot long wall in the Stulberg Gallery, it is incomprehensible to me that they came from those cozy spaces of Ryan's elevated workspace.

Mesmerizing is one of many words one could choose to describe the large sheets dense with lines of charcoal, paint and graphite that are woven, threaded, and layered together by Ryan. Observed close-up or from a distance Ryan's compositions confront the viewer to create a non-linear narrative. Ryan has stated that she drew for a long time before considering painting and that she is more possessive of her drawings. Unfortunately for her and for us many of her early drawings no longer exist because she neither could afford to move them nor store them.

Ryan's palette appears sourced from our common culture. It includes graffiti spray painted black, granny smith apple green, lemon yellow, Home Depot and traffic cone orange and action hero purple. The artist is adept at mixing materials to create her own synthesis of marks. Her language is entirely her invention. And as is the case with all languages, our understanding of hers is best through our total immersion. To give oneself over to the journey she details on the paper provides us an opportunity for contemplation and self-discovery. Her view seems to channel the ideas of hundreds of civilizations present and forgotten who tried to map their world visually.

Ryan's process involves a version of mapping as she builds a composition with different ideas that might be in her head simultaneously. In the viewer's studying of her drawings there can be a shifting micro and macro view. Ryan is of the generation who followed the Gemini space program in the nineteen sixties watching men walking on the moon after they sent back photographs of the earth from space. Having that perspective changed our collective cultural understanding of what is an aerial view. Ryan's perspective in her drawings seems to appreciate that.

Rarely is Ryan's work purely abstract. There is always a gesture suggesting a reference. Her works in this exhibition are part of the continuum of the history of

artist's mark making that includes: Arshile Gorky and his interest in automatic drawing, Jackson Pollock and his gestural painting that continued off the edge of his compositions, Cy Twombly whose language of painted gestural lines that appear completely spontaneous and poetic and Brice Marden whose Zen approach to mark making and patterns appears uncalculated although it is indeed studied and often corrected. Looking at the works in this exhibition one can see parallels Ryan shares with these artists with respect to her inner vision, gesture, and openness to chance.

In addition to work from the past two years, Ryan has created five new drawings working in the Stulberg Gallery for two weeks before the June 9 opening. Two of these new drawings are monumental: **Green River**, a vertical drawing nearly eight feet high and **Purple Twilight**, a horizontal work more than ten feet wide that is densely layered with collaged elements. These two new drawings have less darkness and adopt a more open but no less layered approach to mark making. Ryan shared that she was particularly comfortable being back on the Ringling campus working in the gallery. She was able to harness all of her nervous energy and focus on large compositions.

This exhibition also includes three paintings and five engravings. These works in other media help the viewer contextualize the experience of the drawings and to better understand the significance of Ryan's drawing process. The paintings have solidity and a gravitas that anchors them. There is a different fluidity to her oil painted lines. Seeing the juxtaposition of marked paper and painted canvas offers an informative comparison. The etchings that Ryan made in Tampa at Bleu Acier demonstrate a controlled line that is fascinating to follow wandering across the handmade paper.

To be inclusive in the contemporary art world is to accept the infinite possibilities of what an artist may create. To appreciate Ryan's work one needs to be not only curious about the new but also accepting of the artist's unique view of everything. One of the powerful elements of Ryan's work is her raw sensibility that she shares. Her vulnerability is apparent in her revelatory process. She has chosen a lifelong relationship with her art. And through our experience of her work we benefit with a better understanding of what it is to be human.

(This essay includes ideas and issues from informal conversations with Claudia Ryan in her studio over the past several months and in the Stulberg Gallery in the weeks leading up to the opening of her exhibition.)

Mark Ormond
Curator of Exhibitions
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This exhibition is on view from June 12 through August 11, 2017 in the Lois and David Stulberg Gallery in the Richard and Barbara Basch Visual Arts Center at Ringling College of Art and Design, 1188 Martin Luther King Way, Sarasota, Florida, 34234