



SUSAN ROTH: BLACK IS A COLOR

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Sam & Adele Golden Gallery, New Berlin, NY

theSAGG.org

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BLACK IS A COLOR

I wanted dense velvet pigment—loaded black paint, black as gesso is white.

Once again: Sam (Golden) sitting on paint buckets; I'm on the floor with my picture, as was my grandfather, a cutter, on his stool with those big shears, now mine. I felt a homecoming.

Sam listened, told stories, unveiling a process of tinkering and translation, with which we made the viable visible.

With those buckets of black, Sam continued to develop and deliver, reassured I was not making a mistake in understanding my best interests. The fabrics of my childhood, like my beloved portrait of Vincezo Anastagi by El Greco (ca.1575), became the influences that resurfaced down generations.

BLACK IS A COLOR, this show's title, is borrowed from the 1946 Galerie Maeght exhibit of the same name that announced black as the color of Modernism. Black is the color of warmth, comforting and alluring, inviting inward reflection. It is out of black I dream.

Like Johnny Cash, I'm comfortable in black.

Susan Roth, 2019

SUSAN ROTH

FADE TO BLACK

Black paint, black pigment, the 'drawingness' of black – since the 1980's Susan Roth's periodic return to an immersive use of black paint is the through-line for the paintings selected for the exhibition: **BLACK IS A COLOR**.

Be advised. Roth regularly paints with all of the various colors and the aspects of hue, tint, tone and shade that paint technology and the spectrum allows, but has returned again and again to a defining investigation of black as a source/touchstone. This recurrence of emphasis on black paint serves as a cleansing of the 'palette', a reduction to essentials. Invoking the functionality of black as paint renders a toughness, an assertiveness, imperviousness, a mirror of the void of the night sky. Susan Roth uses the depth and richness of black to clarify.

The origin story for black as pigment is clear: charcoal or soot for marking and line drawings in cave painting – this heritage preserved for tens of thousands of years. (Black, possibly the first color, forcefully serves this function best – white chalk, red chalk, not so much).

The cultural associations and artistic uses of black pigments and dyes have varied widely. In ancient Egypt black symbolized fertility, thousands of years later black becomes austerity, seriousness. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, black frock coats crowded the streets of Paris in a bourgeoisie and boulevardier's unanimity.

And away from black pigment, particularly with the Egyptians, the black onyx, obsidian, basalt, diorite, steatite used for stone sculptures and objects were highly prized. Consider the amazing black diorite monumental scarab beetle in the British Museum in London – would that Gregor Samsa had awoken in that regal state, unlike his lamentable condition.

AS TO SHAPE

The human-made world abounds in squares and rectangles. Architecture has seen to that. The geometry of our living spaces, public areas, museums and art galleries reinforce the superabundance of rectilinear shapes.

Rectangles and squares dominate the past five hundred years of portable easel painting. Excursions into the 'shaping' of paintings sometimes have occurred: a corner amended here and there as accommodations to the roofline of a room, etc. Today prepared canvas supports are readily available in all manner of dimensions. Omnipresent pre-primed artifacts proliferate and support casual participation. Countless canvases and sheets of paper are painted every day, their conformation so easily taken for granted.

Shaped canvases became prominent by the 1960's: Frank Stella, Kenneth Noland, Barnett Newman, Ronald Davis, and Ellsworth Kelly were among the notable early explorers. Their works tended towards hard-edged shapes like parallelograms, chevrons, the outlines of platonic solids, etc. These painters worked through a wide range of possibilities while remaining fairly geometrical. Among the above-mentioned, Noland created the most eccentrically shaped canvases starting in the 1970's.

For nearly four decades Susan Roth has challenged the conventions of the painted rectangle by an individual approach to shaping the exterior profile of the picture. The final shape of a Roth painting is determined by the evolution of the painted surface as she works. Roth achieves surface contrast atop the painting with acrylic gels and mediums that swell and recede into low relief. Applied canvas is often fused to the surface ala 'collage', although I find the reference to collage in regard to her work doesn't say enough – the aggressiveness of Roth's 'collaging' makes the use of term seem somewhat antiquated.

A Roth painting can have a cursory resemblance to the state boundaries of Idaho or Nebraska, or it can be recognizably a

rectangle. The exterior shape can be anything it needs to be. The drawing within the painting is the generator. Her shaping can be radical as in *St. Jerome's Library*, or, as in *Amethyst Necklace (V)*, only subtly tensioned away from the equiangular devices that surround us.

WORKS

The evident physicality in a painting like *Figure of Speech* from 1987, with its covering of saturated matte-black folded canvas, dares to go on overload. The 'drawing' of the interior of *Figure of Speech* extends into our space. This painting has gone 3D and cracked or fractured the implication of the rectangle into a subtle and individual space/time. The outer margins of *Figure of Speech* don't become a template for subsequent paintings. They remain their own unique boundaries, hinged only to the making of that specific painting. The edge is the outcome of decisions made in a series of gestures and choices that are exclusive to the painting in question.

In *John of the Cross* of 2017, printmaking paper laminated across the canvas support remains taut. Here is deep black as a substrate for the vapor deposition pigments that sweep across the adhered blocks of the paper. The notched edge at the top left redistributes and reinforces, it re-scales the priorities implied by the rectangles. Canvas strips, stained with blue and red, gingerly take over. The low relief of these strips and the eccentricity of the outer shape, make broad invitations on what can be utilized for further exploration in painting.

Roth's paint application often implies carving and modeling. The resistance of traditional stone, wood or clay is transformed through the renewed tactility of the shear and drag of thickened paint or the wrinkly glory of bunched and adhered canvas. There can be a desirable and refreshing artlessness in much of her work due to this connection of paint to surface. Her hand is there, but of such sophistication that just how some of the paint got there remains a mystery.

PROXIMITY

Susan Roth and her husband artist Darryl Hughto elected to live outside of New York City and make their studios in rural central New York. Since the mid-1970s they have maintained a house and studio space in a series of barns, that, good fortune would have it, were roughly an hour's drive to the Golden Artist Colors factory. Both artists were instrumental in the early days of GOLDEN in providing a wish list of paints and mediums that they desired to have made. Sam Golden, in his welcoming attitude and willingness to try virtually anything in the production of artist's paints, (anti-gravity paint notwithstanding) found in Susan and Darryl perceptive and keenly aware 'collaborators'.

When they began to visit the fledgling paintmakers in 1980, the GOLDEN 'factory' was an old (small) barn that had a hole cut in the upper loft to accommodate the height of the paint-mixing machine. Nearby, woodchucks went about their business and at night bats flapped around savoring the sweet smell of acrylic resins. Artist paint manufacturing had nearly always been an urban endeavor. How did anyone imagine that from those modest origins, such an enterprise would flourish there, especially since it was just east of the middle of nowhere?

As time would have it, and several physical building expansions later, the commitment to custom paints generated by the needs of artists persists. Witness the works included from the series entitled **Black Dresses:** *John of the Cross*, *The Thin Time* and *39 Steps* – these three recent paintings include printmaking paper (unlike the rest of the exhibition which are mostly painted canvas) laminated onto the canvas substrate. Great pains were taken at the GOLDEN Custom Lab to create a new Mineral Acrylic Varnish formulation to balance lightfastness with the thickness of the applied film to use on the paper in these new works.

DARK MATTER

Physicists can rejoice. After searching for dark matter for years, we've found it! Dark matter is here in **BLACK IS A COLOR**. Dark matter is said to occupy nearly a third of the universe but is unseen, the matter we observe is thought to be five percent.

The paintings of Susan Roth deserve a wider audience. Art, vulnerable to the foibles of the market, a market so often an echo chamber of repetition, tacks on, despite the headwinds of a stormy sea.

Like dark matter, much is submerged awaiting discovery.

SUMMA

Roth paintings make vibrant the fundamental aspects of a forward-looking art; her paintings are declarative, having assimilated the arc of modernism. Her paintings are interrogative, asking questions about the perceived limits of what a painting can be and proposing visual answers and expanding boundaries.

Painting of the 21st century is building on the 'push-pull' of Hans Hofmann's planar plasticity by updating to a practice of amplification and compression; color, surface, shape, are all under advisory warnings to prepare to go to the outer reaches.

Susan Roth has created a trenchant body of work capable of standing up to all comers. She has retuned the sensibility and the expectation of what a painting can be.

In consideration of the age-old question for painting: 'Now what?' – Roth has the firmness of purpose to continue to expand the boundaries of painting.

Now is the time.

Jim Walsh – August 2019

NOTES

– **BLACK IS A COLOR** has been inspired by the exhibition 'le NOIR est une couleur' held at Galerie Maeght in Paris in 1946. Gallerist Aime Maeght had opened his gallery at 13 rue de Teheran in 1945. Maeght had selected a group of artists including Bonnard, Matisse, Braque and Roualt among others, for a show that opened on December 6, 1946, a week before President Truman's official proclamation of cessation of hostilities with Germany. The horrors of war just passed, the monumental job of rebuilding ahead, an exhibition coalescing around black as a re-activator for a return to culture.

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– Of course, black is not within the spectrum as produced by white light passing through a prism. Black is too busy being most of the visible universe – its endless task lasting from the inception of the Big Bang ... to whenever

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– Did I mention that the paintings in **BLACK IS A COLOR** are abstract? Or more appropriately according to Roth: non-objective. Talk of art at the well-appointed dinner table at Chez Roth/Hughto can drift to a discussion about the use of the terms non-objective and abstract and their respective proper usage. Though outside of our allotted word count to unpack this distinction, safe to say, this, like all other elements going into her paintings, is duly considered by the artist. So if discussants are overheard calling these works abstract, a gentle correction is allowable.



Figure of Speech, 1987
Acrylic on Canvas, 73" x 40"
(Collection of Dashiell Panagopoulos Hughto)



St. Jerome's Library, 1987
Acrylic on Canvas, 70½" x 96"
(Collection of JR Hughto)



39 Steps, 2019
Acrylic & Black Printmaking Paper on Canvas,
72" x 47"



John of the Cross, 2017
Acrylic & Printmaking Paper on Canvas, 48" x 58"



The Thin Time, 2018
Acrylic & Black Printmaking Paper on Canvas,
59" x 46"



Amethyst Necklace (V), 1990
Acrylic on Canvas, 70" x 28"



Temptations of the Heart, 1987
Acrylic & Canvas on Canvas, 72" x 39"



Mysteries, 1985
Acrylic on Canvas, 88" x 88"



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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– Susan Roth

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