

INNER TERRAINS

VIVIAN PRATT EXPLORES NATURE'S HIDDEN FRONTIER

It's well documented in travelers' diaries that before the Romantic era, the more awe-inspiring aspects of nature provoked shudders; tourists would scurry through the Alps on well-marked trails, looking neither left nor right. But that was then.

Today, we include ourselves in the most and the least of nature and are forging a new sensibility, with new outlooks, to explore. Inevitably, this new frontier attracts the bold and the ready which, I would argue, is the case with the Bromfield Gallery's upcoming exhibition, "Inner Terrains," by artist Vivian Pratt.

In the Romantic West, our last frontier, now much faded, explorers came with ropes and traps slung from broad, buckskin-clad shoulders. Completing their equipage was an uncanny knowledge of the terrain, and a mount that could preternaturally intuit their commands and, in some dangerous moments, correct them.

Our new "inner terrains" demand just as much knowledge of means and methods, less the horse, to record what we are observing, and to bring it back to form the new sensibility toward which we are groping.

Think of Bierstadt in Yosemite as well as painter and sculptor Frederic Remington on the Great Plains with buffalo hunters and cattle drivers; now zoom in as the pendulum of our sensibility swings from the massive to the micro.

Pratt served an eventful apprenticeship with the hardware and software that guides the communication – and the branding strategies – of our international corporations. Over fruitful decades, she became comfortable enough with the technology of computers, cameras, printers and the intersections between

them that she could think and feel on the instant. No less was demanded in this brave new world where the first commandment is ASAP – with perfection a desideratum. And so Pratt farmed her small plot arduously, and meticulously.

Then she went to Paris – where even walls of faded posters are palimpsests of beauty. Back in her homey kitchen, Paris still percolating, the mold on a slice of cucumber becomes interesting. Then, outside in her garden, she snips a handful of dead roots and pauses midway to discarding them on the clean-up pile.

As a gardener, she can sense the will that pushed these roots forward just as vitally as the business wills that restlessly explore new territories. Could the same business tools, now such an intimate part of her sensibility, adumbrate, if not "map," these compelling new imperatives?

I'm looking at the cover photo of "When Roots Resonate," the catalog of the artist's previous exhibit at the Bromfield Gallery, a small, self-produced book, perfect enough, thanks to its text and graphics, to be a mini corporate report. Throwing shadows on a sky lit orange with the ordinary flamboyance of a western sunset, roots, real, not metaphorical, cast sinuous shadows, a twisting energy that could have ferreted its way through loamy garden soil, or just as well through the granite foundations of mountains. The background is ambiguous of scale and content, subtracting from our certainties as it piques our need to explore.

And that background has, itself, a background.

I'm in Pratt's Dedham studio surrounded by the armamentarium of her craft: tripods, lights, cameras with probing lenses, computers, printers and,



not least, a dozen Petri dishes where bits of mold continue Nature's vital rhythm of decomposing and composing. Oh, and a plethora of tangled roots to be re-cycled on gallery walls.

The bodies and the thrusting hyphae of molds become stars on the frontier of our newest dramatic horizon; we go backstage to witness their emergence as faint traces of organic matter only a very sensitive camera lens can record and only a unique sensibility plot.

The resplendent colors of these microscopic actors, just emerging on stage,

Untitled 1501, 2015, pigment print with root, 32" x 23" x 6".

are “working colors”; one better than tints copied faithfully from nature by the much-heralded Impressionists, these colors – not merely lively – live. Ditto the living boundaries that circumscribe their thrusting wills.

The redoubtable Jackson Pollock swung from the hips to produce his groundbreaking “action paintings”; these “moldy” bundles of energy carve full-body paths.

It’s a humble and humbling enterprise to go this deep into a world

hidden from our sight and also largely from our present categories and controls. But, we’re being led there and, being human, we want to both follow and lead – with restraint.

Occasionally, Pratt will pick up that low-tech instrument, a painter’s brush, and, touching it with watercolor, dance alongside the inimitably subtle tints of a mold’s trail. Sometimes, after selecting one of the dozens of photographs with a composition that speaks to her, she’ll excise and replace with Photoshop one

corner of the action with another. Or, again, low-tech, massage moistened paper already bumpy with texture into a landscape riven with hills and canyons.

And so we enter a new territory, keeping unspoiled what we can’t ever match, adding just what we must of ourselves to pass through and, picking up stakes, quit honorably yet another brief home.

| James Foritano

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