

June/July 2010



Charles Seliger:
Ways of Nature: 17,
2008, acrylic, pen
and mixed mediums
on Masonite, 16 by
20 inches; at Michael
Rosenfeld.

CHARLES SELIGER

MICHAEL ROSENFELD

The late Charles Seliger (1926-2009) is one of those prescient-seeming figures whose work resonates today in the diverse output of many younger artists, like Matthew Ritchie, Julie Mehretu and Daniel Zeller, who create abstract worlds through combinations of line and formlessness.

Though not formally trained as an artist, Seliger had early and extensive exposure to modernists and Abstract Expressionists—Breton, Duchamp, Max and Jimmy Ernst, Gottlieb, Motherwell and Pollock—which provided him with enviable real-world experience. He had his first solo show in 1945 at age 19 at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery. Yet despite his friendships with Ab-Ex artists, with whom he was often grouped in exhibitions, Seliger maintained his own path, one of organic or metaphysical abstraction. The physicality of his works inheres not in the trace of the artist's hand but in his exploration of the essence of the physical world itself, in which the cosmic and microscopic seem one and the same.

Eschewing aggressive paint handling and large-scale canvases, Seliger was

controlled and meditative in his approach. A close look at his works yields increasingly fine details, as if turning up the power on a microscope. He created gestureless, jewel-like compositions that he methodically built up, removing through sanding and scraping as much material as he added. He would take months to develop his grounds before inscribing the surfaces with short, crisp lines, not exactly imposing order but somehow organizing the chaos. Despite the layers of paint and flurry of lines, there is no overt illusion of depth in his work. The focus remains on the surface and the medium, an effect that puts him squarely back in the company of his Ab-Ex peers.

One of the largest and earliest paintings in this memorial exhibition—which featured 29 works produced from 1943 to 2008—was also the most textural, the oil-on-canvas *Orator* (1945, 40 by 30 inches). On a mossy greenish-brown background, a vaguely snowmanlike form is filled in with colorful biomorphic shapes for which the paint was variously applied—stippled peaks, brushy strokes, buttery dabs. A solid brown area in the middle of the upper orb could be the subject's gaping maw.

The intimately scaled *Dead Locust*

(1949), in cool shades of blue and green, is atypical in its clear representation of its titular subject, which takes up nearly the entire surface. Abstract elements comprise the insect's iridescent wings, stiff akimbo legs and segmented body. In the late 1940s, Seliger would find his signature style, object-ground arrangements giving way to small-scale, tightly composed all-over compositions. His choice of materials would evolve with the times, gradually moving from oil on canvas or paperboard to acrylic and superfine Micron and gel pens on Masonite panels, always with permutations of tempera, ink, colored pencil and, sometimes, beeswax.

Works like *Peninsula* (1971) and *Woodland* (1998), with their earthy greens, blues and yellows, read as aerial maps, while the mostly white *Lunar Web* (1977) and blue *Apparition* (1985) have otherworldly connotations. *Ways of Nature: 17* (2008), a Monet-esque miasma of purple and pink touched with aqua and orange, is almost cartoonish in its effusive swirls of color and thicket of lines. Painted the year before Seliger's death, and on the larger side at 16 by 20 inches, it conveys an irrepressible joy.

—Stephanie Cash