

Charles Seliger: *Ways of Nature*

by John Yau / October 2008

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery September 6–October 25, 2008

Charles Seliger's place in history has yet to be fully secured. Born in 1926, he was the youngest and most precocious artist in the group that gathered around Peggy Guggenheim in New York in the 1940s (Piet Mondrian and Jackson Pollock were also part of this circle). He had his first of two solo shows at Guggenheim's gallery, Art of This Century, in 1945, while still a teenager. That he was there right at the beginning, and has continued to show regularly for more than six decades without ever gaining the accolades that he has long deserved is indicative of the myopia, laziness, fear, and conformism afflicting those devoted to canonical thinking. Is it any wonder there are still people haunting the halls of academe or sitting comfortably in museum offices gleefully announcing, "painting is dead." Like lots of Americans, they haven't got a clue.

Meanwhile, Seliger has quietly and unassumingly gone his own way, while staying true to his Surrealist roots and automatism without settling into a signature style—and this is one of the distinguishing features of his entire career. Within the constraints he has established for himself, he is unafraid of change. On the way to the exhibition, I thought that I would quibble with him about his use of titles, which I felt tended to put a constraint on our experience of his paintings, only to discover that he decided to forgo individually titling his recent paintings. At eighty-two, the artist shows no signs of slowing down or becoming comfortable with what he has done.

The other conspicuous characteristic of Seliger's work is the scale that he has hewn to for more than half a century: With very few exceptions, his largest paintings tend to be around eighteen inches, and most are around a foot, in height and width. Seliger's deliberate contracting of scale as others of his generation expanded theirs (I am thinking of Pollock, Motherwell, Kline, and Newman) was an audacious and even offensive rejoinder, and should be understood and celebrated as such. Additionally, but of no less importance, his rejection of large-scale formats anticipates the conceptual decisions made by Mark Greenwald, Bill Jensen, Thomas Nozkowski, and Helen Miranda Wilson in the 1970s regarding the size of their paintings, when the corporate scale of Frank Stella's paintings in his MoMA retrospective (1970) set the tone for what a serious artist should do. For the historians, curators, and critics who keep advancing the view that Abstract Expressionism was marked by a dialectical tension between abstraction and figuration, gesture and geometry, touch and the suppression of the hand, it is telling that almost none have addressed a similar conflict regarding scale. It seems they decided that aspect of painting didn't need to be taken into account, an oversight that weakens their arguments on all fronts. At the same time, even some of Seliger's ardent admirers have called him a miniaturist, which isolates his project from the larger situation. And this has been an ongoing problem—the tendency to equate largeness of scale with seriousness and purposeful ambition. Like Hollywood, the art world has yet to demonstrate much intelligence about this.

Collectively titled "Ways of Nature," and completed within the past two years, each of the eighteen paintings is numbered. The two largest works are twenty-four inches by twelve inches. All are done in acrylic, colored pencil, matte gel, and beeswax varnish on gessoed Masonite. In contrast to Newman's "Zips," where the panoramic scale and flat, nearly uninflected skin of paint compel the viewer to stand back and try to take it all in, Seliger's overlapping, transparent



Ways of Nature: 10, 2007, acrylic, colored pencil, matte gel, and beeswax varnish on gessoed Masonite, 16" × 20"

layers of luminous forms, along with a dense, carefully placed array of minute marks ranging from dots to curlicues, pull us closer, until we practically push our noses against their waxy surfaces. The scale Seliger employs is as necessary to his vision as Newman's need to occupy a wide physical girth. No matter how much we scrutinize Seliger's paintings, they never become a single, graspable image. And this is what I think is remarkable about them: the artist courts legibility but he never arrives at something fixed. His colors, which include jade green, pale violet, hushed yellow, and turquoise blue, struck me, paradoxically enough, as being both radiant and muted. And he further enhances this visual conundrum by the wide range of exact and elusive relationships he establishes between myriad little lines and overlapping shapes. Everything in a Seliger painting seems to be shifting and transforming, a connotative reminder that reality is never still.

Formally, the issue Seliger wrestles with, but never attempts to resolve simply, is the figure-ground relationship. Many of his recent works are dense, all-over paintings in which swarming figures and a highly articulated, translucent ground keep changing roles. It's as if we are looking at a teeming watery world through a microscope, a place where the opaque and the transparent are inextricable from each other. Intact forms seem to dissolve right before our eyes. Emanating from the painting's depths, the unearthly light both flickers and glows. The result is mesmerizing as well as disquieting. Often linked with Mark Tobey (1890-1976), who was a close friend, it is apparent to me that Seliger has surpassed the older, better-known artist in the variousness of his intricacies. Each of his paintings is distinct, demanding, and pleasurable. Despite their intimate scale, our eyes cannot take them in with one glance, which is also true of Pollock's drip paintings. Their density is inviting and rewarding; they define looking as an extremely heightened state of attentiveness, which is the opposite of Minimalism and the strain of Pop Art we associate with Warhol. Perhaps it is time we recognize that compactness was another part of the dialectical equation that has been conveniently overlooked for more than fifty years. Seliger's innovations of scale and density challenge all our conclusions about the meaning of that term.