

## Falling-away Spaces

By Barbara O'Brien

It is easy to like Jane Booth. She is vibrant and youthful with a head of long, loose curls and an air both athletic and confident. She is tall and takes long strides that hint at the many miles of walks she regularly logs on the resuscitated Kansas prairie where her home and studio are located. For our meeting she wears plaid pants and a chic knit sweater seemingly thrown over her shoulders in a casual manner. For the next hour-and-a-half she drives us through the rolling hills of northeastern Kansas and then angles south to Sedalia, Missouri. Our destination is the Daum Museum of Contemporary Art, where the exhibition *Jane Booth: Instinct* is on view. The title of the show, *Instinct*, was chosen by Booth: “The title seems perfect to me, as my focus is to work from instinct, from being tuned in to one’s depth. The closer to the bone I can work, from that timeless instinct, the better the work is. Not unconscious, but very alive and unencumbered.”<sup>1</sup>

The galleries of the Daum Museum are a stunning setting in which to view Booth’s large-scale, nearly monumental paintings. Gunn and Smith Architects of St. Louis designed the museum, which opened to the public in 2002. I’ve seldom seen paintings shown to better advantage. The Freed Gallery has extraordinary light with an expanse of windows in long, horizontal bands extending the drama of ceilings some twenty feet high—an incredible setting for paintings that revel in their scale and enchant with their exultation of nature. A near-euphoric mood infuses the space. As Booth shared during our road trip, “I can be insanely ecstatic—sort of like having ten pounds of feeling stuffed into an eight-pound bag.”<sup>2</sup> The artist attempts and succeeds at capturing this intensity of feeling.

In a space of paint on canvas, she dares to recall the most fleeting—and therefore melancholy—of lived and remembered experiences: hearing the last notes of birdsong at dusk; inhaling the rush of excitement as one walks the prairie; keeping pace with the wind as it pushes clouds across the sky; discovering that winter has given way to spring in the smallest of tufts of new grass; looking as far as the eye can see over the rolling hills of eastern Kansas where the lights of a far-off city cannot diminish the experience of a star-filled sky.

The exhibition of a dozen recent paintings was smartly curated by Daum Museum Director and Curator Thomas Piché Jr., who is there to meet us. Piché walks the galleries with Booth and me, discussing the ideas he shared with the museum docents. He makes particular note of the eponymous *Instinct* (2019) composed on some twenty-five feet of unstretched canvas surprisingly, but effectively, laid flat down the center of the main gallery. Piché is enamored of the motifs—a kaleidoscope of references to trees, animals, birds, and hills—that recall the decorative imagery found in woven Eastern tapestries. Placing *Instinct* flat in the center of the gallery creates an organizing principle, a ballast for the paintings installed on the surrounding walls. The large scale of each of the paintings on view fills our peripheral vision, demanding that in order to richly experience the painting, we must leave a bit of the reality of the gallery behind and enter the world of the artist.

Jane Booth's paintings are atmospheric wonders, built on a base of dusky browns, twilight grays, opaque whites, or charcoal blacks that are never quite what they seem; the composition never sits quite still nor allows us to be truly quiet in its presence. The stillness of *After Dark – In Body*

(2017), for example, is a theatrical illusion of calm. The visitor is amply rewarded by giving this—and each—painting time for the eyes to adjust, to explore the visual depth of the expressive abstraction that Booth so masterfully employs. It takes time to see that the graphite grays of both this painting and its partner *After Dark – In Spirit* (2017) are animated by passages of vibrant color that seem to pop up unbidden. These paintings are composed primarily of muscular passages of near-black that seem to emerge and fall away like storm clouds rushing across the sky. What is in front and what is behind is uncertain, holding the power of theater and nature and memory. The artist infuses the composition with lively energy by applying counterpoints of color and mark, using whatever tool she had at hand. A spattered arc of staccato red seems flung from the bristles of a paint brush; a horizontal scumble of lavender-tinged pink could have been applied with a wide tooth, wooden comb; a blue that seems to celebrate a summer sky is scratched on the surface in a rough calligraphy.

The rich art-historical vocabulary that Booth has developed pays homage both to the Color-field paintings of Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011) and the calligraphic painting style of Cy Twombly (1928–2011). But Booth brings her own emotional heat to artistic practice. There is no in-between here. One senses the emphatic, the declarative in the nearly monumental scale, in looping curlicues applied using metallic spray paint intended for snow shovels and bulldozers, in large passages of paint that recall the dance of the studio—the action of the artist energetically pouring it across the wide expanse of the canvas, in tendrils of paint streaming and stopped only by the edge of the canvas. The physical engagement of the artist with the canvas becomes the viewers’ experiential bridge into these paintings that so beautifully meld the natural, the personal, and the art historical.

As a student of Eastern meditation and poetry in addition to Western art history, Booth understands that external influences are only part of her complex motivations as an artist. To create paintings that matter—to her and to the viewer—Booth employs a vocabulary of mark making and repeated motifs to build a stylistic and imagistic bridge to her personal story: the land upon which she lives; the inspiration of Nature; her daily artistic practice in the studio; the teachings of Eastern mystics; her life and passions.

The land is my first love. ... Our home and studio [are] at the top of a tall ridge. Great, good fortune is that the property overlooks hundreds of acres managed by the Corps of Engineers. It is a flood plain, rolling down to a lake three-quarters of a mile away that is a water source, so the land is protected. That means we have miles of unpopulated land to gaze across in this valley. Only tiny dots of light miles away can be seen to the southwest. The migratory pattern of birds draws up the valley from the lake so the sky can be full of gulls, snow geese, cranes, even cormorants and a family of eagles. Some days all could be on the move at once. These things fill me with goodness and gratitude, and [are] probably the first tier of source.<sup>3</sup>

Booth's artistic process takes full advantage of the siting of her studio:

I'm painting the experience of light; not representational, but evocative of the light.

We are on a hill on a rock ridge and the land falls and evens out in about a half mile.

Sometimes, endless, puffy clouds race across a brilliant blue sky. Light is flickering

and coming and going and racing. When you have clouds and sun, the space is more palpable.<sup>4</sup>

She describes her process as energetic and intensely physical:

The very best situation is when I can take a thirty-yard roll [of] canvas outside to the concrete pad. Rolling the canvas out the length of the patio, I use a garden hose with a sprayer to size the canvas. I am looking at these great falling-away spaces [outside the studio]. Everything is on a grand scale. I tear off large sections and pour buckets of thinned paint onto the canvas, creating the atmosphere in which the painting lives. When they dry, I drag them into the studio and pin them to the wall, where they become more narrative; a sort of call and response.<sup>5</sup>

Booth's "deep devotion to a spiritual path" is another driving force, with a practice she describes as meditation "in the form of a receptive listening to an inner stillness, the ground of one's true nature. That is also how I need to work for the work [painting] to be good and true."<sup>6</sup>

These influences are all powerfully present in *Music of the Inner Universe – Diptych* (2018). This compelling work in two parts is installed on perpendicular walls of the Scott Gallery. The title suggests a key to a private world to be understood not by sight alone, but by engaging other senses as well. We are absorbed in a motif that suggests the four seasons, a theme famously taken on by Twombly in his *Quattro Stagioni (A Painting in Four Parts)* (1993–95). Twombly's series of paintings is profoundly complex, both hiding and revealing imagery and text amidst

explosive passages of color. Like Twombly, Booth combines painting and drawing, and a palette that sometimes jarringly joins the natural world with a deep emotional language, alongside tight calligraphic and loose, nearly decorative gesture. This dynamic creates a dialogue between the emotional content of color and form, and the suggestion of both meaning and message implied by the loose text-like gestures.

Reading the painting from left to right, summer's heat is followed by the harvest of autumn, suggested by a cluster of ovoid forms draped luxuriously across an open sphere, edges loosely scrawled. A thin curling tendril of summer-sky blue creates a tenuous bond between these two forms. While nearly equal in scale, the yellow passage is held by a sense of mass and gravity, while the open form on the right suggests it might lose its moorings and float aloft. The right-hand canvas (which we experience only after our gaze jumps the space of the corner of the gallery) presents two energies that cannot find such an understanding. While the intense solidity of summer and the open weightlessness of autumn nearly touch edges and find a truce, winter and spring are at odds, with winter always seeming more powerful until spring—with unexpected resilience—holds sway once more. The central black form of winter is softly rounded, an ancient and immovable weight filled with the white-tinged blues of winter shadow, its surface etched by powdery white graffiti; surrounded by the hints of spring intruding along the edges of the canvas.

A second, important art historic precedent and personal touchstone for Booth can also be understood through *Music of the Inner Universe*. In the upper left corner of the left-hand canvas, a glowing red-tinged pool of yellow poured paint—more energy than object—calls to mind the

Abstract Expressionist works of Helen Frankenthaler. In historical hindsight, Frankenthaler's time in the studio might be understood as a political statement; with confident ambition, she created a disciplined place of invention, experimentation, and independence.

Booth's career arc in the studio is a tale of risk and reward. At the age of thirty-six, she took a sabbatical from the dot-com industry, thinking she would paint for a year. Two decades later, she has never looked back:

I started staining canvases without so much an interest in Frankenthaler, but more from an urgency to get to work one day, when I didn't have canvas stretched or gessoed. Pouring paint onto the raw canvas on the floor was intensely pleasing, and from that day forward I rarely went back to prepared canvases. Then my appreciation of Frankenthaler's work arose. I studied her paintings closely, especially *Warming Trend* [2002] and *Coral Wedge* [1972] at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art [in Kansas City, Missouri], since the experience of viewing her grand canvases in person is much different than seeing them in print.<sup>7</sup>

Booth's canvases are filled with a mix of painted and drawn passages with moods that range from playful to soul shattering, sometimes within the same painting. In *Palimpsest: Little Violet* (2019) a scrolling, black line—ornamental in its evocations—recalls hand-wrought iron enclosing a garden while allowing a vine to trellis upward toward the warmth of the summer sun. The forms expand and generate energetic rhythm: a comb; a crown; a blossom in fuchsia moving along the continuum from purple to red. As our eyes adjust, it is clear that the deep fuchsia is

only a first blush of infatuation. The extended gaze reveals layers of tonalities (the artist painted over “student canvases” to create the *Palimpsest* works) suggesting that the underpainting never quite gave up; the pink would not give way to the quiet washes of white, applied with a smeared gesture that pushes up against citron lime on the right and lemon yellow on the left. A smattering of black dots suggests seeds floating on the wind, while remaining assertively dots and pattern.

*Bird Songs at Dusk* (2018), meanwhile, is a tougher painting, more melancholy in nature. There is so much in the composition that can be only barely seen, provisionally known. One is not quite sure what one sees at dusk, but the clear sound of a bird’s song is unmistakably present. The closing of the aperture as day gives way to dusk and then to night; last steps toward the house; flashes of brilliant cranberry and turquoise, marigold orange and moss green stutter across the expanse of the painting using the final moments of daylight. The day no longer has a shape or form; no rolling hill or rising tree in profile is visible. But, still, the song of the bird ... still. These paintings are earnest, without irony. They are poetic with a nature not taken to the descriptive or representational. Abstraction is at their heart. They are deeply felt—by the artist and by the viewer.

I found the experience of *Jane Booth: Instinct* unexpectedly moving. Sitting in the Scott gallery, I lost track of time and place while absorbing the imagery and poetics of *Swan Series – Kabir* (2018), a nine-panel painting (each canvas sixteen by twenty-five inches) placed in a three-by-three grid. “Kabir’s whole thing,” says Booth, “is ‘Right Now!’, ‘Wake Up!’, ‘Don’t Wait!’, ‘Look Around!’”<sup>8</sup> The intensity of the declarative is suggested by calligraphic scrawls in deepest charcoal—the word “swan” in the upper left corner in the artist’s signature cursive—atop washes

of pearlescent, purple-tinged white. Pulsating passages of a wide range of blues, from storm-laden to whisper light, coexist with bundles of bumpy sided white that catch hold of nearby ochres and grays in mid-tumble across the surface of the canvas.

Of her process, Booth shared, “With the first mark, emptiness comes into form, into the manifest. One mark calls for the next, and the next, as with lived experience. That mode becomes more grounded. It is form instead of the vastness.”<sup>9</sup> Booth honors the inspirations of nature, the journey of the spirit, and the longings of the soul in her studio practice. With the exhibition *Jane Booth: Instinct*, the Daum Museum has built a powerful bridge from the mysterious, wondrous world of the painter’s studio and practice to the viewers longing for beauty and the desire to find meaning and solace in works of art.

## Notes

1. Jane Booth, email to the author, March 16, 2020.
2. Booth, conversation with the author, March 4, 2020.
3. Booth, email to the author, March 16, 2020.
4. Booth, conversation with the author, March 4, 2020.
5. Booth, *ibid.*
6. Booth, *ibid.*
7. Booth, email to the author, March 25, 2020.
8. Booth, email to the author, March 16, 2020.
9. Booth, conversation with the author, March 4, 2020.

Barbara O'Brien, an independent curator and critic based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, was Executive Director of the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Missouri from 2012 to 2017, after serving as chief curator and director of exhibitions since 2009. O'Brien is an elected member of AICA-USA, International Association of Art Critics. Her three decades of curatorial practice and criticism have focused on the art and artists of our time.