

A Shared Topology: Paintings and Sculptures by Gayle Ruskin and Carol Oster

By Tom McGlynn

Every artist has to come up with a subject. This is, in fact, their main task in getting on with the business of relating that subject through their work. I don't mean the artist must take up a pedantic point that they then try to illustrate. The "subject" of the artist derives from their complete immersion in and traversing of topologies of experience and memory. Such a dedicated path *reveals works in it's way*, rather than being actually paved with ideal intentions. As such, artists are the ultimate realists, whether or not their way tracks abstract or representational. By making manifest, (specifically in painting and in sculpture) the aesthetic discoveries along their respective paths, Gayle Ruskin and Carol Oster meet at a figurative crossroads characterized by a range of shared associations. These include influences of architecture, imaginary communities and landscapes, and a certain inclination toward rhythm and harmony in proportional relations.

Ruskin is primarily an abstract painter, yet her works here, fields of tonal gestures circumscribed by linear boundaries, do allude to both landscapes and architectural drawing. The same formal strategy can be seen, for example, in Richard Diebenkorn's "Ocean Park" series (circa late 1970's) or even Brice Marden's "Card" drawings (circa early 1980's). Like these artists, Ruskin works her moody and gestural values against a more certain scaffolding of lines that hold these gestures in check. And also like them she maintains an ambiguous relation, a "suspension of locatability", between a deeply implied landscape space and the very flat yet richly-brushed surface of her paintings. We are therefore made acutely aware of both the illusory nature of spatial construction and the slippery immanence of painterly presence. In the paintings *Sonata* and *Overture* (2014) we see such subjective slippage with the added dimension of sound as implied by their titles. Considering music as an influence, Ruskin has stated "As an artist (a child artist) music was the highest realm of human artistry I experienced and I believed that it existed as a 'collaboration'". If one extrapolates from such a statement that Ruskin means that there exists a mutually permeable boundary between the experience of composing a musical score- and its hearing *as experiential composition itself* in time and memory- then one begins to understand the type of expanded fields from which any artist might draw their inspirational "subjects".

Oster's work similarly keeps a light foot in both real and imaginary territories yet in sculptural form. This emphasis on the potential open readings of abstract sculptural form is even alluded to in her choice of titles, such as in her naming of the *Vestiges* series (2018-2019). A vestige is an emblematic leftover and these diminutive assemblages retain powerful associative meanings despite their non-figural modality. Each individual sculpture seems as if it could have been constructed by human or animal intent, as provisional structures sometimes resembling the architecture of homeless encampments or the bricolage of a mouse's nest. Not quite as small (nor as directly representational) as Charles Simmonds's imaginary civilizations, in their varied

ensemble they do present as models for such. Of course one can also simply revel in their delicate construction from humble materials (two- by- four cut- offs, wood shavings) painted all over white to reinforce their subtle tonal variations. Oster's refined yet basic relations to color and material becomes even more evident in her *Oracle Figure* series (2017). Constructed of wood, wire and tobacco cloth, these elongated vertical "staves" hang on the wall like votive personages left in the vestibule at a convocation of initiated seers, or oracles. Such an invoking of the mythic contains the possibility of an artistic pitfall into pseudo religions of subjective transference into or sentimental apprehension of "primitive cultures". Such a critique could be leveled at certain idealizations of shamanistic tropes by Joseph Beuys, for example. Fortunately, Oster's attention to fine detail and expressive presentation lends these works a powerfully animate power all their own.

In concert, Ruskin's paintings and Oster's sculptural ensembles create their own meta-subject, or a shared topology of effect. Formally they both tend toward the value-emphasizing monochrome with flashes, accents, of saturated color. Both artists are invested in the expressionist possibilities of their respective mediums, with Ruskin perhaps the more understated of the two in this respect. The intricate subtleties of scale and material expression in Oster's work is brought out by Ruskin's painterly reserve, just as the architectonic allusions in Ruskin's paintings are reinforced by Oster's imaginary structures. The real benefit of mounting a tandem show of such sympathetic artists is the fact that the one is made wonderfully aware of the combined imaginative territories, the shared topologies, that can be creatively mapped out between the two. Whatever "subject" one chooses to take away from this complex experience, whatever art is made between the viewer and the assembled works, is most likely the ultimate aim of both artists.