

Claire Anna Baker, *Suspended Wire*, Moskowitz-Bayse Gallery, September 20, 2017

Claire Anna Baker's suite of landscape paintings *Suspended Wire* presents a poetic, associative, and imaginative recording of a personal journey.

It began with a trip to Marble Canyon in Death Valley, a landscape of striated rock and treeless desert, where the scale of rock cliffs is daunting, and a narrow cut of canyon brings a person into close relationship with the land. Hikers clamber through shadowy crevices, grab handholds to navigate, run into boulder-sized chokestones impossibly wedged in the narrows by some long-ago flood: it's an encounter with scale and deep time that gives rise to awe. Light dances everywhere, emanates from the cliff face, bounces across surfaces, pierces through sunlit cracks, and in occasional glimpses, can be seen simmering on the horizon. *Suspended Wire* is a record of the artist's attention to this place, how she placed her body in the wild and opened her senses, developing a touchstone for painting, a strong and lasting memory of land.

From this wild desert, Claire Anna Baker returned to L.A. and her Boyle Heights studio and began to work. She spent the first couple of months constructing an assemblage she calls *The Source*. This fierce undertaking resulted in a somewhat-Rauschenberg-like, densely organized mass that nearly fills the entire studio space, a roundish heavyweight cloud. It's made of "the scrappy, artificial, natural, and simulated"—ropes, remnants of made things and work stuffs, sheets of Mylar and red plastic. Deep in its interior, skinny fluorescent rods illuminate secret spaces and shine as brilliant verticals.

For Baker, *The Source* is another mnemonic environment. She built it as "a source for painting, a concrete armature for the abstraction, where information about ideas/experiences in the wild landscape are stored, along with the "no-space, no-air" sensation of the urban landscape. It's about things in space, objects and light within and without, complex plays of light and shadow. It also holds my physical sensations and feelings experienced in the act of building. It holds poetics and descendent ideas."

I'm fascinated with *The Source*, the poetical thinking that led Baker to its construction and also the poetics of its existence. It's not part of any exhibit, but it holds the promise of communicating more honestly than usual about landscape and memory. About

how thoughts and images of human-made and wild-made environments collide and smash into each other, and how, on any path to contemporary landscape painting, they *must*.

Baker says, "Poetry was my first exposure to imagery, listening to poets and imagining pictures," referring to her childhood, spent in the poetry community of Northern California and beyond: her mother, poet Joyce Jenkins is founding editor of Poetry Flash. Amid the many pathways taken by poets and family friends—Zen Buddhism, the great outdoors, sexual freedom, pot-smoking, wandering, anarchy, alternate economies, socialism— there was a general agreement that poetry emanates from the wild places of Earth and Mind; and that poetic free speech can awaken and change the world.

"The community of poets first, and artist teachers later, also showed me that an intellectual structure is needed in an artistic practice. I learned how to carve out form within a raw state of being that feels formless, and to develop a poetic logic for visual expression and material plasticity, allowing the work a context within a larger intellectual dialogue. And my father and grandparents—visual artists and designers—pointed me towards a highly personal process. "

In this larger dialogue of painting and art history, poetic thinking, fevered construction, and self-directed inquiry have long been the realm of the landscape painter. If you put your body in nature and spend a lifetime working with the materials of Earth, you'll end up thinking about existence and perception, creation and phenomena. Who knows what the cave painters were doing, but it was related to carrying nature in the mind. Ancient Greek writers and artists built a poetic concept of the pastoral, viewing nature as a rejuvenating wellspring, estranged and separated from urban life. Moving forward, Caspar David Friedrich's gentleman gazed into a landscape that was "not only what he has in front of him, but also what he sees inside himself." and Cezanne said, "The landscape thinks itself in me." Taking this metaphysical thinking even farther into ideas of painting, Agnes Martin named one trembling pink grid, *Flower in the Wind*.

For the contemporary landscape painter, the conversation keeps widening, and so do our concepts of nature/self. In her practice, Baker says, "I devised a closer physical engagement with the landscape, engaging with the 'interruptions', so I can erode

assumptions of the purity of wild nature." She guides herself consciously through steps of creating a painting, like a decoding of what landscape painters have always done.

In this context the room-sized *Source* sculpture is a thought-in-material. It's a thought about disruption—the kind of interference experienced when a landscape painter is obliged to return to the studio and urban life, where everyday thoughts intrude and merge with the beautiful dream of wild Earth: the midpoint thought of many landscape painters. The way Baker included this thought physically in her process reminds me of a passage of Virginia Woolf's: "Life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. . . and most interesting here is the examination of the mind, of how a thought-in-material can happen. Let us . . . trace the pattern."

Yes, within the pattern. The mid-point thought. Hanging there like a heavyweight, partially-lit light-bulb.

The Source is so insistent it requires the artist to duck underneath and squeeze against the walls. I don't know how Baker paints in there. I don't know how any of us paint, given our crowded minds, given the distraction of the urban world. If there is a mirror here of nature, it's a big old chokestone forced between the studio walls by some long-ago flood of human thinking and doing.

After the sculpture's construction, Baker carefully observed it. Over many weeks, on many piles of paper, she sketched it like a still life, first drawing gestural marks in ink, assembling a communicating vocabulary, and then making finished drawings, mapping out space, rhythmic line, light and shadow, density, weightlessness. Finally, she created small paintings in acrylic on polyester, each one as preliminary for a large finished work in the same medium.

Baker has said, "I consciously built my painting practice in parallel to what I've read about poetry-making. At the basis is something similar to what I read in an interview by US Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith: "The responsibility of the poet is to the urges that set the poem into motion. Generally those urges are for something that is more concrete, more nuanced, more visceral, more observable, and more mysterious."

Finally, Baker assembles blank surfaces and begins to paint the finished work, and *The Source* takes on new dimensions, "carrying the image to the end." The act of building

it—a physical feat—seems important now as a re-construction of personal space so the wild self can go ahead and paint. The studio is no longer an LA warehouse, but a place transformed by imagination, where intuitive wilderness, homo sapiens junk, touchstones, philosophy, science, soul-building, play, poetics, stupidity, not-knowingness, and brilliant insight can speak to one another.

As she paints—ink-like acrylic and water on polyester— Baker looks at *The Source*, dodging its low hanging flaps, cramming up against walls. She also summons the remembered wild stillness of Marble Canyon. She works intuitively, watching as landscapes emerge. Her studio becomes the den of a scavenger, its floor decorated with hand marks, feet marks, spatulas, rags, and containers of paint.

She says, " A performative aspect supports the creation of the painting, an immersive physical act of drawing, seeing, and sensing conducted through a choreographed structure, balancing the weights of my touch with the movements of my body in time and space. The marks are often fast, capturing the Chinese ink painting technique of 'empty wrist' in order to catch the life and breath of the mark. But my process is slow, adding layer upon layer in cycles of markmaking over months. I created depth and space through the interaction of those layers, looking and looking until the pictorial space leaps and jumps, near and far. And I gauge the movement of individual marks. The presence of the work arrives when all this movement creates stillness. The finished painting is the stillness, transformed into the sensation of lightness.

When discussing poetics, the poet Ann Carson tells us, "It's really important to get somehow into the mind and make it move somewhere it has never moved before. . . Given whatever material. . . how can we move within it in a way we've never moved before, mentally? That seems like the most exciting thing to do with your head. . . to take a piece of Hegel and move it around in a way that shows you something about Hegel is a satisfying challenge."

In agreement, in practice, Baker works with materials to literally stand inside our currently most problematic dialectic: the human environment vs. the natural one. She works to merge the two environments in real life and in her memory. Then she creates imagery from this merging, working towards an inclusive ecological identity. Of course as she paints she goes beyond the single dialectic, distilling experiences into formally-

considered paintings. The dance of painting becomes a journey of awareness, touching on other binaries: abstraction/realism; vagueness/likeness; light within painter/light within landscape; dark/light; weight/weightlessness; imagination/fact—and she arrives layer by layer at delicately-threaded connections.

Her conversations are also quietly radical. To paint abstractions and also acknowledge the landscape as source; this can undo—if we think about it—our earlier thinking about abstraction. To use the abstract-expressionist intuitive gesture, but replace their Heroic Search For Truth with art-making as personal practice also unwinds art history more than a little. And to replace ab-ex grandiosity and nihilism with an open-ended inquiry and a yearning to merge with the planet we live on—to admit that we want to joyfully, innocently merge with the love-object—this seems radical to me. It also seems like life-lessons and courage learned from poets:

There's the familiar, "Let the soft animal of your body love what it loves." (Mary Oliver)

And, "When I was a little kid in Oklahoma I used to get up before everyone else and go outside to a place of dark rich earth next to the foundation of the house. I would dig piles of earth, smell it, form it. It had sound. Maybe that's where I learned to write poetry." (Joy Harjo)

And, "To act in this world, without irony or condescension. . . seems to me an act of great courage." (Marie Howe)

In Baker's work there is both courage and connection, a sense of known landscape. Among the paintings' great spaces, gestures and shadows, illuminated openings, translucent and opaque ledges, I sense where to leap and jump. My body knows how stillness hums. Where vast space falls, I fall. Somehow the light carries color and emanates from an opening within myself. Who can put this into words? It takes the thingness of painting to express it. I experience light glowing, emanating, and piercing within, as well as shadow deep and dark. The logical density and weightlessness of these painted spaces balance an understanding: outer and inner ecologies the same.

The environmental philosopher Bruno Latour urges us to do what Baker does here: move outside our familiar dialectic of human/nature and think in what he calls translations: what we can also call poetics. He suggests a contemporary anthropology where tracers of thinking and doing move across boundaries in a living way. Because Baker's paintings bring us into her generous and open inquiry, I find in them tracers of soul building, felt depths of landscape, a transcendental connection with our planet. Her art practice is—at the same time—a science project about perception, spiritual ritual of belonging, narrative of personal desire, dance of the wild self.

Baker doesn't call herself an environmental artist, and I know many landscape painters who try to create a political narrative will instead end up pulled in the direction of love, absorption, and wonder. But if we can think poetically, think in translations, why does one love affair with Earth not connect to another? Baker's visual language creates a shared experience of absorption. She communicates the landscape as continuation of self, transmitting our shared, helpless love of Earth. So although we can't explain this idea well in words, or print it in the headlines, it's possible that paintings like hers are the most honest eco-criticism we are capable of.

In a painter's way of saying it, Baker writes, "I'm following the light, and in the end the light has the final say."

Patti Trimble