

San Francisco Chronicle

Art & Galleries

Sherie' Franssen, Debra Bloomfield search for ways out

By Kenneth Baker

Updated 9:26 pm, Wednesday, December 24, 2014

The work of Southern California painter Sherie' Franssen has long satisfied what seem to me the requirements of solid contemporary painting. It is improvisational, history conscious, unstinting and frequently surprising.

However, not all the surprises are good in her latest show at Dolby Chadwick. (Note: The gallery will be closed until Friday, Jan. 2.)

Like Franssen's previous exhibitions here, this one confirms that her work's successes hinge not only on her adventurous, and so, occasionally wayward, color sense but also on technical adjustments such as relations of scale between brush marks and the dimensions of a canvas.

Those relations could hardly be better in smaller pictures such as "Poems on the Floor" (2014) and "Untitled" (2014), but they falter in "The Heaven We Chase" (2014) and collapse in "Dawn in Timbuctoo" (2014).

Most of Franssen's paintings begin with human figures that, in her best work, tend to get dissolved in brushwork to the point of complete, or nearly complete, abstraction. In several pictures in the current show, the figures stand tattered but exposed, conferring an almost embarrassing nakedness on Franssen's process. "Pink Wave" (2014) presents an unhappy example that not even her fearless color can redeem. But the low point of the show is surely "Intimate With Madness" (2014), a small picture in which Franssen appears to have tried to channel Francis Bacon (1909-82), without success.

Years ago, Franssen worked her way to an authentically individual, demonstrative sense of painting as decoration of a surface. "Decoration" gets denigrated critically by those who see it as a signature of triviality. But Franssen has the chops to animate a decorated

surface with guidance and pleasure for the eye, modeling the very sensations that, moment to moment, give value to life. Consider the way the small untitled picture here, consciously reminiscent of Cubism, conducts attention through adventures of light and shade, of substance, transparency and depth.

For these reasons, I see a loss of nerve in her reversion to overt figuration. I hope it turns out to be merely a phase.

Debra Bloomfield at Robert Koch: A series of recent works by Bay Area photographer Debra Bloomfield probes the look and meaning of wilderness in an age when, as ecological controversialist Timothy Morton puts it, “there is no ‘away’” anymore, once we recognize the biosphere as a finite, integral whole.

Morton defines global warming as a “hyperobject,” a terrifying development whose impacts touch the remotest places on Earth and the most private reaches of individual conscience and consciousness.

But even viewers of Bloomfield’s show who reckon global warming a mere episode of a broader planetary “normal,” disconnected from human doings, or as a conspiracy of scientists chasing research grants, will find their beliefs teased out by her pictures.

Bloomfield set out for the Pacific Northwest and Alaska in 2007 to find situations that could still produce the sensation of entering wilderness, places where humanity’s reverberations appear no more pronounced than an observer’s own awareness at any given moment.

She chose destinations that she could reach by water and on foot, rather than by air, the better to experience civilization receding as she went.

In a sense, the images most emblematic of Bloomfield’s project are those that show the water wake of a skiff or ferry trailing away, like a wound healing, and those that sight through befogged windows, suggestive of nature attempting to withdraw as the photographer approached. These represent her arrival as an intrusion whose effects natural forces promise to repair.

Other images evoke unbridgeable traverses: woods too thick to penetrate, darkness falling too fast and too enveloping, bodies of water too wide and deep to cross. Yet others note the flights of birds that seem indifferent to non-avian observers.

Such pictures register a cold emptiness suggesting that part of Bloomfield’s effort was to try to empty herself of artistic ambition and let her tools and the phenomena take expressive control.

But the most striking images are the most lyrical, such as “Wilderness 34717-10-08” (2008), moments that Bloomfield seems to have found pictorially irresistible and piercingly beautiful. Without striving for the affinity, this view of a lacework of white

saplings against snow and dark forest has a soft elegance reminiscent of Mark Rothko's painting.

A single title — “Wilderness” — covers all the works in Bloomfield's landscape series. Reference numbers serve to identify individual images.

The Koch show celebrates the publication of a book, also titled “Wilderness” (**University of New Mexico Press**; 127 pages; \$50), containing a much larger selection of Bloomfield's images, elegantly reproduced.

Unusually, the book includes a CD, co-edited by her son, Jake Bloomfield Misrach, filled with Bloomfield's field recordings of sounds she heard traveling to and in the wild: a ferry engine, bird calls, wind, rain. Whatever the CD's intended effect, I find listening to it more affecting when not looking for correspondences among her images.

The book contains one heartening feature: two maps of the United States speckled with dots indicating the number and location of environmentally protected zones before and after the passage of the preservationist-inspired Wilderness Act of 1964. Comparing the two leaves a reader feeling that, in spite of all we hear, something has been moving in the right direction.

Kenneth Baker is The San Francisco Chronicle's art critic. E-mail: kennethbaker@sfchronicle.com Twitter: @kennethbakersf

Sherie' Franssen: The Gorgeous Nothings: Paintings. Through Jan. 31. Dolby Chadwick Gallery, 210 Post St., S.F. (415) 956-3560. www.dolbychadwickgallery.com.

Debra Bloomfield: Wilderness: Photographs. Through Jan. 31. Robert Koch Gallery, 49 Geary St., S.F. (415) 421-0122. <http://www.kochgallery.com>. / www.debrabloomfield.com