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# Susan Rothenberg's search for the real

*by Tom Break*

Susan Rothenberg died on May 18 at the age of seventy-five, leaving behind an artistic legacy we're only beginning to understand. You could say she killed a stifling minimalism by running it over with a horse; in doing so, she let some humanity back into the art world. Her big splash came in 1975 in the loft gallery at 112 Greene Street in Soho, shaking up an art world alternately bleary-eyed from the austerities of minimal and conceptual art and overstimulated by a profusion of experiments in video, performance, and installation. She exhibited three monumental but reserved canvases in which the profile of a horse is drawn into a heavily worked, earthy pink ground. Everyone was astonished. Peter Scheldahl has referred to it as "a eureka." Hilton Kramer was highly impressed by the same body of work in a show at the Willard Gallery in 1976, writing, "It is the quality of the painting that is so impressive, the authority with which a highly simplified image is transformed into a pictorial experience of great sensitivity and even grandeur."

*Susan Rothenberg,* Butterfly, *1976, Acrylic on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.*

The show was on the leading edge of a sea change in painting at the time. Rothenberg was included in the influential "New Image Painting" exhibition at the Whitney in 1978 and was the only woman to be a part of the 1982 "Zeitgeist" show in Berlin that announced the arrival of Neo-Expressionism. If you'll excuse another (somewhat inexact) equestrian metaphor, there is a sense in which Rothenberg's work was the Trojan horse that stole into the walled city of high modernism, unlocking the gates to let images back into painting. The subsequent flood of figuration into the art world's mainstream owes something to her courageous early canvases.

These works led the charge in reintroducing imagery and expressionist brushwork to the painterly lexicon. But they are more than art-historical artifacts. In an interview for the Art21 series *Art in the Twenty-first Century*, presented on pbs in 2005, Rothenberg makes an intriguing comment about the motivation behind her paintings: "I find a dragonfly beautiful. And a snake beautiful. Many things, beautiful. But it's not a goal to try for it or expect to achieve it in my work. I'm trying for, let's take, truth. Some kind of truth about some kind of thing." This offers a clue about why her paintings have the presence that they do, about where their sense of deeper reaching comes from. If her attention to the image is a search for the *true* image, if it's about using the image to arrive at a truth, then the imagery isn't an end in itself, and critical accounts of her paintings that begin and end with their imagery only get part of the story. If truth is what's at issue, then each painting must be an investigation and the vision it arrives at, an insight.

*Susan Rothenberg,* Galisteo Creek*, 1992, Oil on canvas. Metropolitan Museum of New York.*

This truth-seeking character might be easier to pick out in her later paintings, made after Rothenberg moved to New Mexico to live with her second husband, the artist Bruce Nauman. *Galisteo Creek* (1992, on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art), for instance, is rooted in something the artist saw—a dead calf by a creek, seen from above, with her dogs running across the water and ravens flying overhead. The oranges piled upon reds vibrating under pinks and abutting dirty whites and grays creates a living, pulsing ground for a painting that's intense yet impersonal, like the landscape. The scattering of animal forms across the canvas like sticks tossed onto the ground evokes the strange dislocation of things viewed from a height. The dead calf, the living dogs and birds, a handprint along the bottom edge all evoke a very specific perception, a lived moment. Finding words to describe what kind of truth about what kind of thing the painting arrives at isn't easy, but one can feel that truth and that thing there.

A more recent painting in which this feeling-out of truth is particularly intense is *The Caribbean* (2015), which I saw a few years ago at a group show, "Blue Black," curated by Glenn Ligon at Pulitzer Arts in St. Louis. In this painting, two heads bob on a field of blues that form the water. A warmer and a cooler blue sparkle against one another, and a black sky on a tilted horizon presses down upon them. So much of what a person could bring to such an experience, what could actually be a part of it, is in there: the isolation of those vulnerable swimmers despite their proximity, the immensity of the water, the impending night. It's not the kind of mechanical truth that a camera captures, but that's what makes it human. That's the source of its radiance.

*Susan Rothenberg,* Caribbean*, 2015, Oil on canvas. Private collection.*

Thinking about truth in this way sheds light on those early horse paintings and Rothenberg's more abstract early imagery. Flipping through images of the first horses, and the subsequent paintings of horse legs and heads and then human heads and hands, I became increasingly aware that she was always painting the outlines, the edges, without any modeling or three-dimensional rendering: just one (or a few) flat shapes against the rectangle of the canvas. And staring at those images, feeling the tensions within them, I realized that the whole drama of the paintings lies in the margin—the changing space between the edge of the image and the edge of the canvas. Careful examination of several of them revealed just how attentive she was to that space between: no line or angle in the images would ever point to a corner or line up with a major dividing line or diagonal within the rectangular support. Part of their freshness surely flows from the way they escape the more sturdy scaffoldings of spatial relationships and intervals that other painters erect in their work. The formal result is an image that appears to fit nicely into the rectangle of the canvas, but that resists its geometry—an image that acknowledges its support but isn't suffocated by it.

This seems to me a critical point, because one lesson we were supposed to learn from the more dogmatic factions of high modernism was that the shape of the support is constitutive of the meaning of the painting. But Rothenberg consistently resists this in her compositional decision-making, giving her images an autonomy that aspires to transcend the material support and reach deeply into the fabric of human experience. Those early paintings, and everything that came after, seem to me now like they were desperate to establish conditions for the possibility of a true image, for making visible some kind of truth about some kind of thing. More than a historically significant return to figuration, or even a rejuvenation of painting, I think Rothenberg's oeuvre provides us with a model for an attentive, searching, and humble apprenticeship to the real, to the true, in art.

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