

DAVID HUNT
SCROLLS OF NOTHING

The rain pleased Raymond immensely, as it always did. It whispered, cancel your duty to the outer, get fetal, think of caves.

Barry Hannah “Yonder Stands Your Orphan”

Ah rain! Such a trusty romantic metaphor. It announces it’s versatility with the subtlest of ringing overtures. Drench a dark alley in it, and voila!: instant prefab noir. Sprinkle a parched field with it and watch as the dustbowl farmer raises his blistered hands in grateful benediction. Let it ping softly against the windowpane as the camera zooms in on this week’s tragic heroine. She hangs her head mournfully, right on cue. Furtive movements shimmer on the other side of the glass. Fugitive glances ensue. Two suspended worlds, separated by the weather. Thunder, as you might have anticipated, provides the readymade soundtrack. Lightning, no surprise, the necessary spot-lit drama. Rain, with its built-in arsenal of Pavlovian responses, establishes a mood faster than a cloud of cigarette smoke in *Drugstore Cowboy*. No poet, or slacker, or ambitious indie film director should leave home without it.

But what about a painter? Have you seen, for example, a storm clear on a recent abstract painting? Do drops run in snaking rivulets through puddled trenches? Are baptismal metaphors, however trite, suddenly springing to your mind? It’s unlikely given the surfeit of illustrational painting available at the moment. These days, painters don’t make, or build, or construct, or even (gasp) “paint” a canvas, so much as strategically negotiate a design solution. Painting, in 2001, is a puzzle. Solving that puzzle involves thinking like an architect, toying around with a CAD program. In this scenario, there is no division between inside and out, between an enveloping world inviting you to lose yourself, and a reflective sheen bouncing your own image back at you. Just surface.

Recent painting, to call a spade a spade, resembles an industrial sealant, its glistening geometry coated in an impenetrable varnish. Viscous strokes (remember those?) have a tendency to bead up and evaporate within this desiccated habitat, rather than cascade arbitrarily like molten lava. First stroke is best stroke in this aesthetic equation because

there is no room for accidents. Here, the messy drama of the self is closeted, cancelled like a sitcom. The forecast, among these rigid Op-Art semi-circles and matte wedges of color, is unequivocally sunny, without a scattered shower in sight. The idea of rain, then, in which no two drops are alike, doesn't stand a chance here. Symmetry, uniformity, and the algorithmic repetition of a few pattern motifs are the hothouse flowers thriving in this immaculate canopied world.

But before I invoke the symbolism of windswept dunes and arid mesas let me mention the effect on the viewer. To admire today's painting is to revel in its "good design," a vague concept that flatters our sense of discernment and taste, while leaving spontaneous emotion out to dry. "Good design," in the most basic sense, is merely scrupulous attention to detail where every mark is placed with careful deliberation, and expressiveness is sublimated in favor of order, interval, and precision. Painting like this is indeed a puzzle, but more specifically, it's a kind of visual Rubik's Cube where the viewer's eye twists and turns in an attempt to "assemble" the work, or complete the simple formula offered by the artist at the outset. In effect, this turns us into a kind of escape artist, wriggling Houdini-like out of this conceptual straitjacket, into a kind of partial, compromised freedom engineered by the artist. Sounds more like the trials of a standardized test than the pleasure of whatever amounts to your idea of a religious experience in our landscape of secular postmodernism.

Enter Michal Sedaka. Punctually I might add, since her floor to ceiling canvasses -- unstretched, unframed, indeed, unconcerned with traditional forms of commercial presentation -- invite exactly this kind of comparison between the heartfelt organic and the heartless industrial. In fact, before I saw Sedaka's restless attacks on the canvas, I had no occasion to organize my thoughts on the graphically enhanced, downloadable new painting. I simply assumed recurve lines and calligraphic strokes were par for the course, and iMac flavored colors (blueberry, tangerine, teal) the shortest distance between a painter's studio and a gallery show in Chelsea. Now, thankfully, I know better. Red, that much beloved, oft-forgotten primary color, is easily holding its own against the trendy

designer shades that are more mix-and match decorator accent than candid dispatches of our subliminal feelings.

Red needs no introduction. It stars as the flesh – diva-like, magisterial -- as easily as it plays the understudy in any savage, bloodletting dream. Red is the aborted aftermath and the unfurled velvet curtain, waiting. It takes no cues, but simply offers the graveness of reality. Red announces, like Sedaka, the end of shopworn fictive genres and ingratiating formal strategies. Clearly we're not gliding over some fractal surface in a cyberspace simulation, or plunging into a swirling dimensional portal in a childlike approximation of fantasy. While current painting asks us to get lost in a kind of numbed out, arcade game zone, Sedaka's paintings, with their fissured wounds, immediately remind us of our fragile mortality and the millions of bio-dramas percolating just beneath our skin. You look at, say, a vector of her dripping puncture marks laid out as casually as a slab of meat, and then you look back at your own body, *as if it were* a slab of meat, and this comparison hastens the parting of the curtain.

Sedaka named her series *White Lace*. And I'm assuming she did so with a healthy dose of irony since there's nothing impishly sweet or erotically cliched about it. Pitched somewhere between fervent abandon and post facto terror, the paintings never vacillate about this one thing: full disclosure. But let me put it simply: if you can imagine the collision between a high speed train and a wooden cart full of roses you have some idea of the messy lyricism Sedaka's stirring up. She has nothing to hide, and even if she did, the effect of these roses rendered in a time-lapse glimpse of decay, would disabuse her of any coquettish pretense. What remains is her impulse to divulge. Bodily transgressions are recorded here. Innocent rain has a wise surrogate: blood.

Rituals abound, as we all know, for the standard rites of passage -- birth, communion, graduation, marriage, death – and they all come equipped with the kind of Kodak-moment pageantry designed to go straight into the scrap book. Point, click, celebrate, forget. Nothing wrong with that, a healthy pragmatic form of nostalgia. Then there are those moments not to be shared; the giddy rambling optimism of a potential lover, the

tickertape blather of hopeless indecision. These whims were never meant to be spoken, but still they can, and are, recorded. Sedaka, though, is operating way beneath the radar of both these forms of commemoration. She's charting the mute pauses and dead air of the mind in between the task and it's fulfillment. It could be anything: waiting in line at the bank, standing in a crowded subway car, mixing the pigments for that day's painting. So what does mental chatter look like? Does it even have a profile? Well, mostly it's a blur. Notions crest over inclinations and the result is a smear. Ideas do this. They rub up against each other. Thought becomes an abrasion. Sedaka, doubtless, feels this as much as she knows it. The evidence is in the lack of measured rhythm. For once, painting is not like jazz – no tempo, no syncopation, just a succession of weirdly elastic notes. To underscore the concept of a clandestine diary of fleeting thoughts, Sedaka paints, in Hebrew, the words that dart through her head. And, like Vladimir and Estrogon, they don't really get us anywhere settled or definitive. But then, painting's transcendence has never been about destinations.

