

**Claire Sherman Sempervirens**

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I am tempted to talk about the “S” word here. No, not “sex,” although Claire Sherman’s paint handling is certainly sexy—and I don’t mean scale, despite it being a dominant characteristic. Framing this delicately, her paintings have the capacity to evoke the sublime for the viewer. Focused mostly on the sequoia forests of Sierra Nevada and the California coastal redwoods, Sempervirens brings to mind Margaret Fuller’s “Summer on the Lakes” from 1843. Fuller described how her search for the sublime during her trip to Niagara Falls was limited by her preconceptions until she was afforded an unexpected vantage point, giving her the sensation of awe and danger that she sought. Sherman, like the early renegade female travelers she admires, has been making it a priority to visit such iconic landscapes. The resulting paintings give us an experience analogous to what Fuller described, because their powerful sense of abstraction immerses us in environs that eclipse our understanding.

After spending time in the wilderness, Sherman returns to her Brooklyn studio armed with source material. Referencing multiple digital images, she paints spontaneously, completing most work within the first day. Her ability to do this with a light hand is remarkable. Because she works on such a large scale with most canvases exceeding 6 feet in height, the risk involved creates landscapes that are transformative and vital.

She is a painter who is able to transmute knowledge of color and representational bravado from the past into something that clearly belongs to the 21st Century. From prior epochs, Sherman has carried the earth-toned underpainting forward into a

time when it can complement palettes that alternate between the day-glow cadmium chroma of a computer screen to the more muted hues of a doctor’s waiting room. While the large, bold brushstrokes bear a kinship to AbEx forbearers, accidental scrapes and runs contribute to a sense of geology, serving a double life as painterly strata and description.

Many years of making gutsy paintings has helped her achieve this freedom with form. In “Cave” (2014), the seemingly slapdash only partially behaves as landscape. Through a blackish umber framed arch, the floor and foreground of the cave behaves riotously as a sort of monochrome Kandinsky with flecks of light seafoam green and pale, cotton candy pink. While casual abstraction is in fashion right now, the way that Sherman uses perceptual observation as a way to inform her paintings allows them to take on a complexity and richness of form that many of her peers cannot match.

In fact, the humbly titled “Trees” (2014) brings this to new heights as a matrix of angular dark lines map out vertices that converge into chaotic scaffolding. If it were not for the chiseled patches of apple and acid green that flit between the lean hard edges of what are presumably trees, the scene would resonate as industrial infrastructure rather than the natural world, its dense and almost nuclear chroma suggesting an ecological warning.

More subtly, close-ups of sequoia trees and their stark silhouettes act as a vanitas. The cropped trunks within “Tree” (2014) tower ominously. Its overall composition initially appears deceptively reductive, like a Franz Kline painting, but upon closer examination, an almost baroque network of understated lines converge at the timber’s nodes. Here is a tree that delicately reflects the technological world nearby. A clear message cannot be read, but the tone is foreboding.