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Painter Megan Olson Has Double Vision: Abstract and Realist

Still Movement *Exhibition*
Depicts Dynamics of Nature
With Oxymoronic Precision

BY HILTON KRAMER

The American painter Megan Olson (born 1971) calls the current exhibition of her paintings *Still Movement*, which I take to be an allusion to still life -- an impression that's amply confirmed in pictures that depict the dynamic processes of nature with a precision, stability and concreteness that are traditionally reserved for the painting of inert, three-dimensional objects. To this oxymoronic endeavor Ms. Olson brings an eye that's steeped in the movement of the heavens as well as the ocean tides, and a sensibility that finds in the changing character of natural light a challenging range of pictorial subjects.

Museum-Ready at a Tender Age, Olson Captures Natural Light

The result of this concentrated attention to the nuances of nature is a pictorial style that's at once highly abstract and persuasively realist in its fidelity to observed detail. It may be that in the rigorous design of Ms. Olson's pictorial structures some viewers will discover a kinship with the abstractionist aesthetic of Jackson Pollock's celebrated "drip" paintings, but it's doubtful that any such reference is intended by the artist. What's more likely is that a familiarity with abstract painting will incline viewers to discover certain elements of abstraction in what are essentially faithful depictions of the natural world.

This double vision, as it may be called, defines the essential aesthetic character of Ms. Olson's paintings. In studying them we find ourselves observing the way light is refracted in watery depths and in the changing configurations of luminescent skies. This is not landscape or marine painting—or, for that matter, sky-scape painting—as we usually encounter them. There are no horizon lines to be seen and no landmarks to direct our attention, but instead myriad close-up views of unbounded spaces in which to observe the metamorphic impulses of nature itself. The painstaking detail with which each of Ms. Olson's subjects is rendered is itself a feat of micro-representation, and this gives to each painting the look of an elaborate conception that has been fully realized.



Original and compelling: Megan Olson's *Fiery Ocean*, 2004.
Maxwell Davidson Gallery

In Ms. Olson's drawings there's a similar control of abundant detail. These drawings are in themselves a significant achievement: The largest of them in the current show—a 2003 untitled work in watercolor on paper measuring 60 by 40 inches—is a tour de force of such amazing mastery that it instantly nominates itself for prompt entry into a permanent museum collection.

It's a characteristic of Ms. Olson's paintings that she favors a single color for the space that encloses the swirling configurations of silvery light that is her principal subject. In *Fiery Ocean* (2004), for example, the swirling traces of light disport themselves in a ruby-red sea, while in *First Light* (2004) and *Failing Star* (2005) it's an oceanic blue that dominates. In every instance it's color that generates a sense of energy and movement. The pictorial result is unfailingly original and compelling.

Who, then, is Megan Olson, and where has she come from? Her dealer, Maxwell Davidson, provides the following background in his text for the show's catalog:

"During the summer of 2000, Megan Olson was a part-time staff member at the Maxwell Davidson Gallery while she completed a three-month independent study course towards her degree at the San Francisco Art Institute. When we visited the project's unveiling we felt strongly enough about the work to offer Megan representation. Since then, Olson has gone on to have two very successful shows of her organic abstractions done in a variety of mediums, but all applied to paper. This exhibition entitled *Still Movement* marks her third one-person show with the gallery but her first experience on large-scale canvases."

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Clearly, this is an artist with a very promising future. Meanwhile, *Megan Olson: Still Movement* remains on view at the Maxwell Davidson Gallery, 724 Fifth Avenue at 57th Street, through June 25.