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## **The Sweep of the Hand: Catherine Howe at Cross Contemporary**

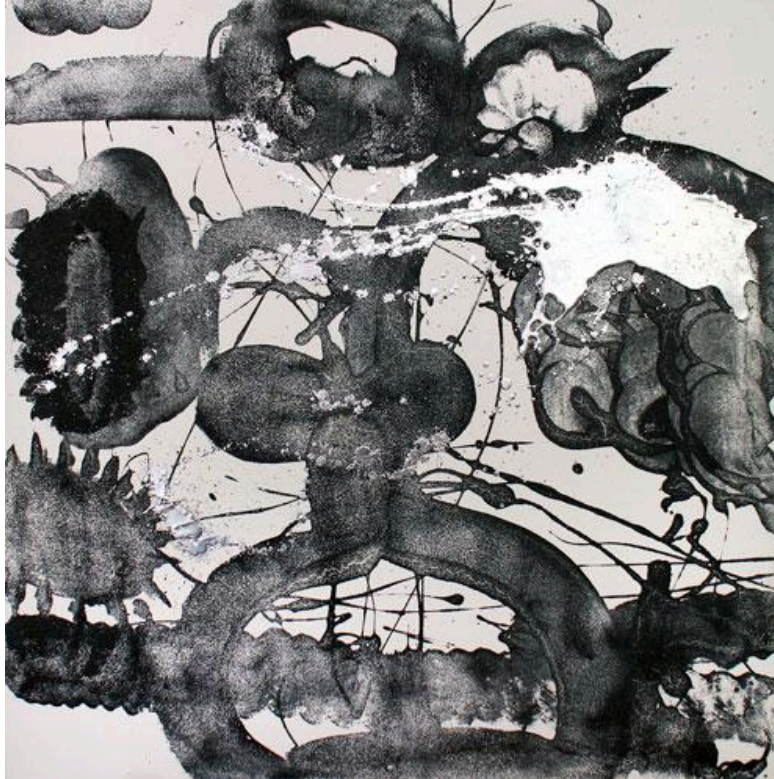
by Jonathan Goodman

**Catherine Howe: Supreme Fiction. Monotypes & Mylar Paintings at Cross Contemporary Art,**

**July 3 to 26, 2015**

**81 Partition Street**

**Saugerties, New York 1247**



Catherine Howe, Carborundum and Silver (splashy), 2015. Acrylic, intaglio ink, polyester sheeting, 40 x 40 inches.. Courtesy of the Artist and Cross Contemporary Art

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“Supreme Fiction,” the title of Catherine Howe’s strong show in upstate New York, likely refers to the amalgam of painterly surprise inherent in work that references both baroque effects and nature. The title also makes use of Michael Fried’s idea that painterly imagery does not have to come from a realist bent, being in some cases entirely imaginative in nature. Her paintings, which at times have attained the quality of low relief, use nature as a springboard for a highly active imagination. Her collection here, of monotypes and works done on canvas or Mylar, resist easy categorization but define a place that begins with the New York School and extends toward the past in its rococo impact and to the future in its fusion of imageries and contemporary materials (carborundum grit and polyester). The sweep of Howe’s hand is expansive and exuberant but also controlled; never fussy about the consequences of her brushwork, she also demonstrates a discipline that links her to art history in ways that intensify her audience’s viewing involvement.

Actually, pleasure is what one thinks of when facing these dynamic images. One black-and-white work, made of carborundum-infused acrylic on canvas, consists of flowers and bulbs that float in a sea of gesso white. Drips and thin skeins of paint actuate the rounded blooms and plant life; the effects of these nods to earlier abstract expressionists are actually muted to some extent by the sheer energy of the present tense, always active in Howe’s style. As a painter, she wants to give us the *immediate*



beauty of what she depicts; this desire is evident in the roiling, tempestuous quality of her brushwork. Here, mostly blackened forms, which admit a gritty sparkle in certain light conditions, surround a white flowerlike crown in the upper center of the painting. The viewer has the sense that the painting exists as a passionate embrace of an esthetics based in nature. It consequently becomes clear that Howe's high regard for nature brings her beyond mere quotation of expressionism, a movement that reached its zenith generations ago.

Even so, someone like Fairfield Porter serves to contextualize Howe's efforts—despite the fact that their imageries are not related closely! His combination of brushy strokes and interest in the outside world finds a later reflection in her art. In the tall, reverse-painted Mylar work entitled *Geisha* (2015), she imparts a fiercely emotional treatment of a sunflower in a short vase, with other white blossoming shapes looming in the upper register against a blue background. The brushwork is strongly about feeling, made evident by the powerful intuitive forms that sprawl across the Mylar. Clearly, this work and the others in the show concern the performative aspect of painting just as much as they address issues of figuration and abstraction; Howe's audience has the sense that these paintings exist as fields of play—being action paintings in the best sense of the word.



In the discussion I attended in late July with Howe and fellow painter Suzanne Joelson at Cross Contemporary Art, the primary word used was “gesture.” As a descriptive term, it certainly characterizes the main impulse behind Howe’s art, which is gestural in the extreme. The question facing the artist and those who support her work has to do with authenticity: at what point does history intervene and make the gestural image antiquated, even obsolete? To her credit, Howe has found ways of keeping the gesture alive, primarily by emphasizing the baroque impetuosity behind a lot of expressionist art. Even so, the problem of historic precedent needs to be addressed. Howe’s considerable technical skill allows her nearly to caricature the role of the sinuous brushstroke even as she makes it clear she is in love with the luxuriousness of such a style. But perhaps it can be said that her paintings encapsulate the conflict between a historically derived embellishment and the need to make things new—a requirement in today’s art, no matter what the origins of the impulse may be.

A monotype, mostly in yellow and red, seems to be about brushwork description. A blossoming crown on the top feels like an opportunity for Howe to paint demonstratively, while the bottom half of the composition consists of a pile of transparent brushwork, whose edges exist in red. Musical in its emotive impact, *Rise* (2015) delivers a punch that suggests both intensity of motive and cathartic skill. Howe, who has a home in upstate New York herself, shows that she is comfortable with the



landscape and flora this part of the world consists of. She knows the public gardens of the area well, deriving inspiration from a nature that is actual rather than second-hand. In her work there is a liberating voice based on the artist's willingness to work deliberately with beauty. While such an approach cannot be seen as utterly original, at the same time, in Howe's hands, it must not be understood as mere quotation. She balances memory of previous art with a real need to display her own reading of contemporary life. Indeed, she thoroughly succeeds in doing so.