

Santa Fe

BETH AMES SWARTZ, Elaine Horwitch Galleries

Beth Ames Swartz' current return to the canvas is not to be seen as a departure from or a disavowal of her burnt and layered paper pieces of the last few years. Large-scale, dramatically encrusted with jewel like paint and metallic foils, these older works were the residue of an elaborate on-site ritual process involving a cyclical program of birth, decay, and regeneration. This internalized creation mythos is equally prominent as a generative force in the new series of paintings.

Swartz covers her canvases with eccentric, nervous gyrations showing a kind of modern *horror vacui*. An undercurrent of religio-mystical energy has always been intrinsic to her work; now, a kind of hyped-up emotion has burst forth, no doubt accounting for the sudden need to set brush upon canvas. The effort Swartz used to muster to tear and sear paper has been channeled into more conventional pictorial means, but the communicative level of the work has been expanded and enriched as a result. The paintings are redolent with symbolic expression. The surfaces—all ecstatic tracery—exhale meanings: whirlpools of color become celestial orbs, Van Gogh's cosmic extravaganza, a cabalist fantasy. Pulsing spirals are ancient patterns, universal symbols of growth.

Embedded in this concentration of whirling energy are animal totems—birds (specifically the peacock), horned fire-spouting beasts, snakes, deer, fish—which compound the nature imagery and pull one back into more concrete realms. The title of the show and of a series of paintings, "A Moving Point of Balance," suggests a resolution of natural forces: life/death, male/female, earth/sky, Yin/Yang, and untold other dichotomies that find unification in a grand pantheistic convergence of pictorial elements. Despite sinister overtones, Swartz' work articulates a benign, accommodating universe. Even the rubber snakes collaged to the surfaces are not evil incarnations: their suggestion of water (whirlpools when coiled and waves when uncoiled) and healing makes them particularly apt as personal symbols related to a belief in art as a restorative principle.

The questions Swartz tackles in her art make it either irresistibly appealing or impossibly obscure. Either way, she continues in her commitment to content within a new, provocative esthetic program, and manages all this without losing her trademark touch: those glittering, sensuous surfaces of a mystical Byzantine richness that dazzled viewers in her "Israel Revisited" series.

—*Carol Donnell-Kotrozo*

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