

Barbara Ellmerer

Recent Work

Opening Thursday 16th November 2017, 6-8 p.m.
Exhibition 17th November 2017 - 27th January 2018

Pink hills, blue dales: the forms in *Atomjumps*, Barbara Ellmerer's new series of paintings, are soft and quite definitely libidinous. Round, flowing and supple, they evoke warm, lazily lounging human bodies. The tonality of cool pinks or dull blue-grey-purple, however, is pale and insipid, as if cold and strong laboratory lighting had all but obliterated the colours. Our minds hold the impression of gentle softness alongside a notion of sobriety and aseptic chill.

Ellmerer's art conjoins sensual painting and intellectual nature exploration; it combines a delight in colour with a scientific quest for knowledge. The Zürich-based artist boldly explores the boundary zone between art and science. Her previous works and series featured quite clearly identifiable natural elements such as parts of flowers, or microscopic living organisms. Her new series, however, delves into unknown, submerged realms. Her expeditions take her from plant to leaf, from cell to atom, into worlds that, while conceivable, are nevertheless invisible to the naked eye. What drives her is a plainly Faustian desire to '... understand whatever / binds the world's innermost core together, / see all its workings, and its seeds.'

Ellmerer traces Goethe's *Wirkenskraft* – the 'workings' or primordial energy that generates and drives all life – spiritedly, in colour. The extremely well-read artist also takes creative liberties, however. The drawings in one of her series, for example, were inspired by a renowned didactic poem written in the 1st century BC. In *De rerum natura* (On the Nature of Things), Roman poet and philosopher Titus Lucretius Carus, introduces the principles of atomism, and presents a physics-based cosmology that is driven entirely by natural causes. Her sketches inspired by Lucretian hexameters by turn evoke architectural structures, human body parts, or delicately evanescent landscapes.

'Absolute terrain can be explored in painting or through scientific formulae.' Such is the maxim of this equally courageous and knowledge-thirsty artist. For years now, she has made experimental use of her canvases, transforming them into a chemistry lab, as it were. Take her frequent unconventional juxtaposition of colours in stark tonal contrasts, or the way in which she combines enamels, varnishes, oils, and silver nitrate, in order to explore how these unusual materials interact with, or repel, each other.

In the seven parts of the latest series, *Atomjumps*, Ellmerer has decoupled nature and science. She has turned away from natural objects, instead adopting scientific observation methods to explore painting per se. Greatly magnified microscopic sections of her own earlier works give rise to soft and tantalising yet sterilely grey-ish formations. The slight irritation that emanates from these paintings' cool sensuality is heightened by the absence of a clearly defined up or down: the canvases can be hanged any which way. Anything is correct. Anything is wrong. There is no certainty. It is in this way that these paintings reflect ancient philosophical doubts about human cognition.

Ellmerer's abstract yet figuratively sensuous paintings reveal what lies beneath the visible surface – the secret of life, the secret of art. The artist herself, however, rejects the term 'abstract': 'Is an atom (not) an object?'. With her brush, Ellmerer successfully explores deeply philosophical issues.

Alice Henkes