

Raquel Rabinovich's Paradoxes

I.

Raquel Rabinovich was inspired by the art of both the near and the distant past that she saw while living in Paris. There she began working on a group of drawings, *Thrones for the Gods*, where she explored how subtle linear buildups of graphite, charcoal, and pastel might generate effervescent fields of near monochrome grey. In 1993 she returned to her home in upstate New York and, soon after arriving stateside, she built a spacious, light-filled studio. There, after continuing work both on the *Thrones for the Gods* series, and on another related series of drawings, *Garbhagrihas*, which she had begun in England in 1990, she started work, between 1995 and 1997, on a series of paintings built up with layers of oil and wax, each with the subtle graphite inscription: "Gateless Gate."

At the dawn of the new millennium Rabinovich quietly set aside painting to commence work on an ongoing investigation of the forests and rivers near her home as a site for sculpture. Utilizing the placement of rocks in organic sculptural and site-specific arrangements, Rabinovich had the idea to join this materialist exploration of nature with her formal innovations within painting and drawing. On a trip to India, where she lived by the Ganges River, she was inspired to source mud from rivers and make aesthetic use of it by soaking pieces of paper in the mud so as to thus generate delicate monochrome washes that are related to those found in her paintings and other drawings. This gave rise to a series of drawings, collectively titled *River Library*, which she started working on in 2002.

Rabinovich's curiosity was sparked when she noticed that the mud from different rivers would give rise to a diverse array of colors spanning a whole range of grey, ochre, even orange tones, which are, again, serendipitously analogous to those found in her other work. She has consequently expanded this series over the years by sourcing and receiving muds from rivers around the world, and when they arrive, it is, for her, like receiving an alphabet of language yet to be deciphered—an unwritten history of nature and culture. In line with this, these archaeological and anthropological elements of Rabinovich's process have led her to corresponding modes of display, as with *River Library with Rivermaps*, where the drawings are presented laid out on a table, as if manuscripts to be carefully studied. Rabinovich had further played up this literary analogy in a series called *River Library Scrolls*, in which drawings are rolled up, sealed, and arranged across a table, as if mysterious addendums to the river maps. Both leave open the question of where legibility and meaning resides, and its relationship to the painterly, if subdued, color field.

II.

In the *Gateless Gate* paintings each letter of the title they all share is carefully and precisely rendered at the bottom of the canvas, as if with the aid of a stencil, and demarcates a subdivision of the picture plane, which we come to realize Rabinovich has partitioned vertically with penciled lines that have all of the sensitivity and fragile beauty of Agnes Martin. This emphatic, but nearly imperceptible structural underpinning serves to drive the curious, seemingly paradoxical opticality of the works. For the works display a range of gray tones, spanning dark to light, and we would expect for this palette to render the paintings resolutely obdurate and

material, these being, conventionally, the metallic colors of industrial production. But, spending time with the works, we find that, despite initial appearances, they are as close to Brice Marden's evocative, shifting gray monochromes of the 1960s, as they are to Johns's joining of dense encaustic surfaces with enigmatic wordplay.

This makes sense when one considers that, like Marden, Rabinovich layers different colors that, aggregated in the final painting, approach a uniform gray. Thus, with prolonged viewing, and especially under the changing conditions introduced by natural light, these colors inflect the gray such that it takes on different characteristics, becoming warmer or cooler depending on such contingencies as where we are standing in the gallery, how long we have been looking, and what time of day it is. However, unlike either Marden or Johns, Rabinovich doesn't simply play with suggestions of tactility and the lower frequencies of color, she also incorporates an undulating, painterly field of brushstrokes, which weave together into a shimmering tapestry that operates at a low pitch, and against our expectations of such traditionally neutral, even ascetic pigments.

We find that Rabinovich's major achievement in these painting is thus that she engenders a delicate set of reversals—what appears material dematerializes into a rippling incandescence, what appears to be simply an agglomeration of painted marks, parts to uncover a written inscription. And the text in each work, "Gateless Gate," points to these very kinds of paradoxes that the paintings engender at the level of form, and of visual and phenomenological experience. A "gateless gate" is a Zen koan, wherein the two sides of a seemingly contradictory duality are meant to be experienced and held in the mind simultaneously, leading to a kind of

enlightenment that is not one where all thinking is obviated, a situation which would be pure chaos, but rather one which is more intuitive and felt, than intellectually worked out.

III.

It is along these lines that Rabinovich's *Gateless Gate* paintings must be experienced. For it is not that every suggestion of material presence, for example, is subverted by its optical analogue, but that the two are somehow presented by the painting simultaneously. Often we find that, in beholding one of the works, we are caught unaware by the painting's ability to act on us in one way or another, its apparent neutrality quickly becoming charged in an understated but direct way, perhaps via what initially takes form as a barely recognized flicker in the corner of our eye. Or else we discover that we hone in after a particular aspect of the work that we find to be primary, or at least to have first drawn us in. For example, if we are originally struck by the solid presence of the grey field, then an attempt to size up its physicality will most likely lead to us to experience that very sensation of physicality melting away under the sheer pressure of our gaze, as the field separates out into its component brush strokes, which in turn become imbued with a kind of gentle, pulsing luminosity, operating at a barely perceptible pitch. This temporality of viewing, by which an extended period of time must be actively spent with each canvas, is related to that of an Ad Reinhardt black painting, wherein prolonged examination is necessary in order to activate the subtle play of forms and colors entering and receding from view.

As Rabinovich herself has said, showing her recognition of the paradoxes her works engender, “I know that a painting is finished when the ground becomes groundless and the surface dissolves into that groundlessness.” This is perhaps one of the things that painting, as a medium, can especially accomplish. That is to say, a sensation of dualities suspended and held together in productive and provocative tension. For a painting cannot today be seen as anything other than a hybrid, chameleon entity, one that is always both a certain kind of three-dimensional object, if a shallow one, projected off the wall (or any number of other surfaces), and a frame for an image, constantly shifting and moving between both poles of its always multifarious existence.

By painting the sides of her canvas the same grey as the surface, Rabinovich acknowledges this shallow three-dimensionality particular to painting, but uses it to push forward and emphasize the frontal picture plane which, because of the cultural conditioning engendered by centuries of image-centric painterly work, we read as an indication of an “elsewhere” than the here-and-now of the space in which we view the work. It is thus that it becomes a somewhat optical experience. In a culture where we are often expected to either act on, or be acted upon by the devices and objects we encounter, to come in contact with a painting which subtly presents these two extremes of contemporary experience, and makes us aware of them as such, this is a quiet radicality that allows for an expansion of consciousness that is as concrete and intellectual as it is effervescent and spiritual.

- Alex Bacon, Berlin, 2014