

**CATHERINE
COURTENAYE**

Avian Witness



FOREWORD [TO COME]

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Julie Gustafson, Gallatin River Gallery

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Essay by Susan Floyd Barnett.

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cover: detail, *Transcription* 2018, oil on three panels, 24 x 72 inches

CATHERINE
COURTENAYE

Avian Witness

GALLATIN RIVER GALLERY



*“The calmness, the solitude of horizons lures me
towards them, through them, and on to others.
They layer the memory like strata.”*

*“The peregrine sees and remembers patterns we do not
know exist: the neat squares of orchard and woodland,
the endlessly varying quadrilateral shapes of fields.
He finds his way across the land by a succession
of remembered symmetries.”*

—J. A. Baker, *The Peregrine*



Circumnavigate 2017, oil on canvas, 40 x 44 inches

TOPOGRAPHIES OF FLIGHT

SUSAN FLOYD BARNETT

THE SKY WAS CRYSTALLINE BLUE, the air brittle with cold but hushed by new snow. I waxed my skis and took a few strides into the deep white. Looking down, I noticed tiny footprints, meandering, crossing and recrossing. And then, with increasing space, they found direction, a straight line dotted toward infinity . . . and ended in a finite, crimson blot. On either side, a perfect imprint of feathers traced the edge of outspread wings.

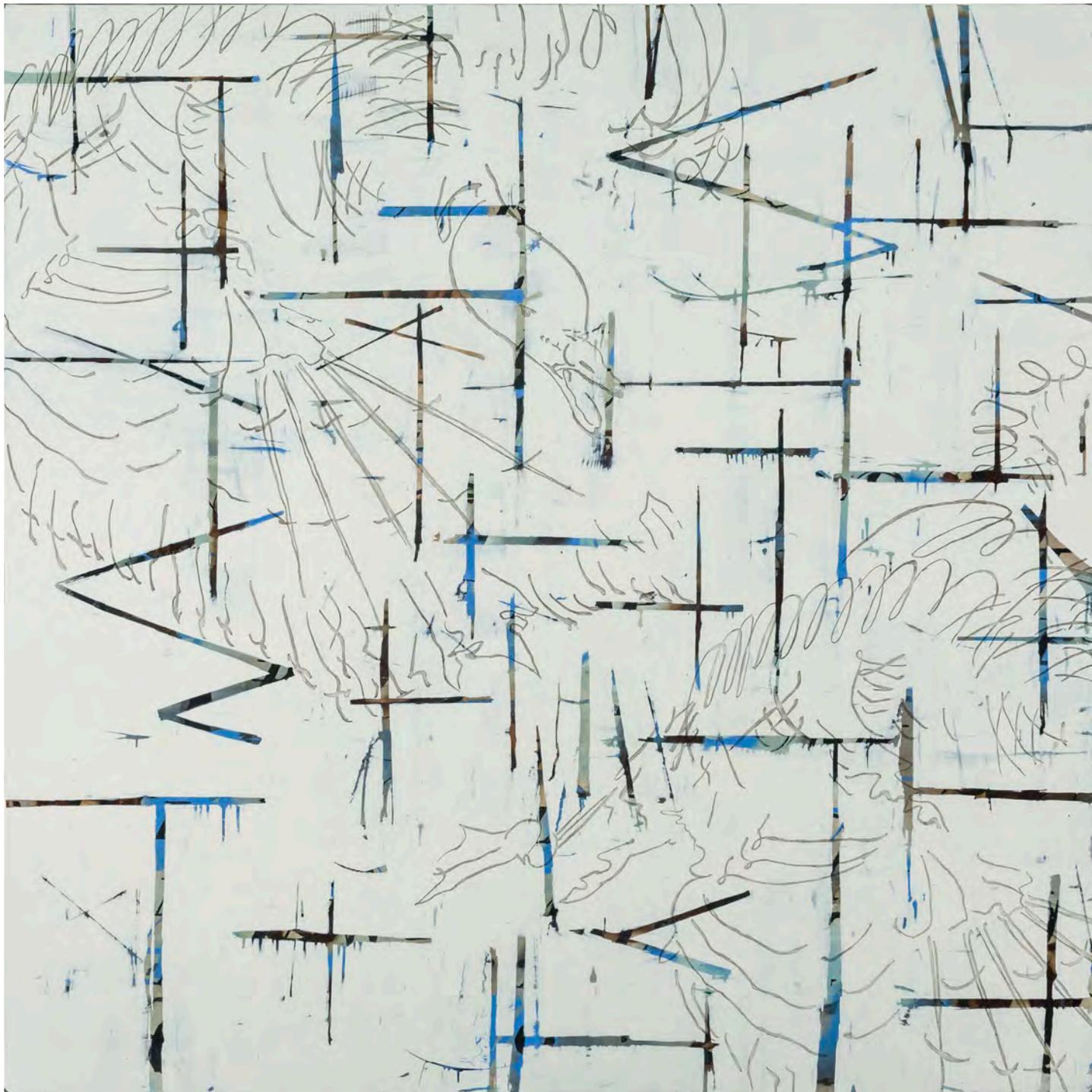
Catherine Courtenaye's inky marks rest as lightly on the surface of a painting as the brush of feathers on snow. Calligraphic birds skim across layers of ciphers and fissures, over loose grids of intersecting lines. Brightly colored underpaintings drip into the tinted white surface. Fore and background flutter and reverse. Now the cracks appear as chasms, suggesting layers of time. The picture plane is emphatically flat, despite depth in the strata and shifting illusions of perspective.

Courtenaye thinks of these paintings as aerial landscapes, fully aware that any nod to landscape painting today is complicated by the fraught relationship between natural and human habitat. In her recent work, elements of nature and culture intersect without melding. The smooth, not-quite-white surface,

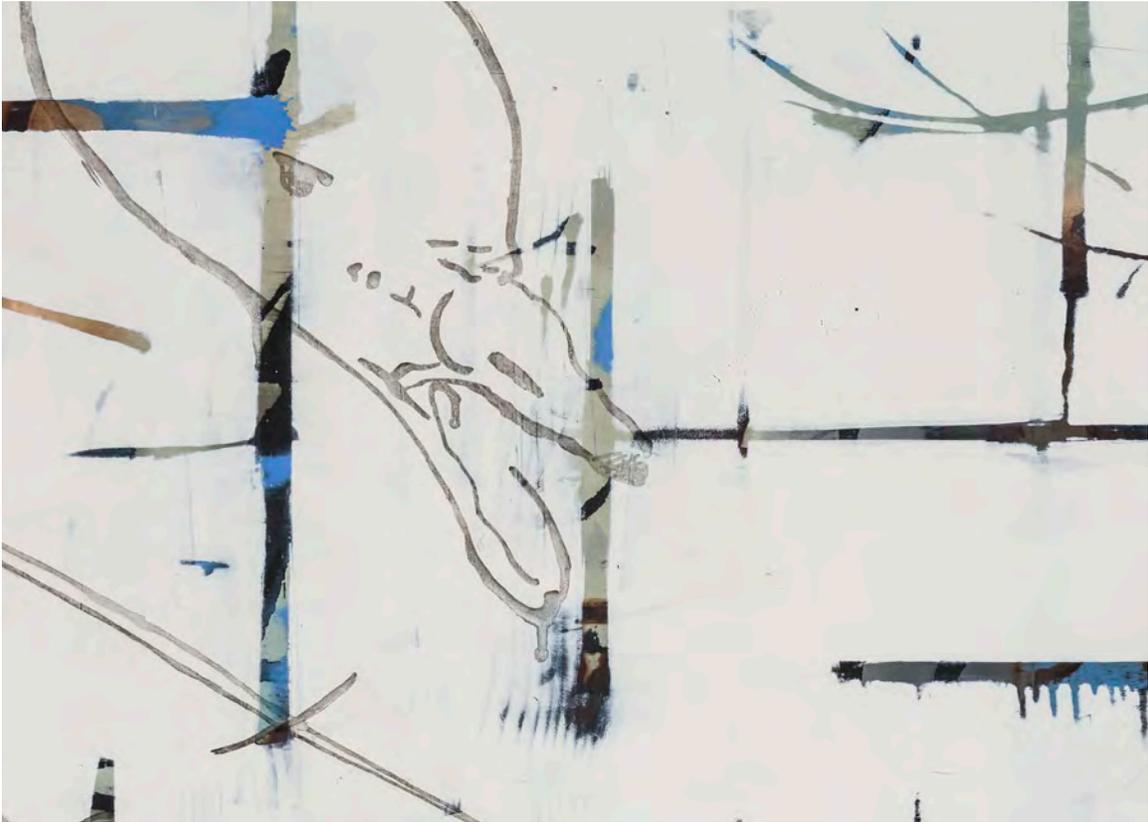
like bright, cloudy skies or sun-bleached wood, is broken by a loose grid of demarcations. These "shards" reveal underpaintings of vivid color, curves, edges, symbols—and text. She points out that many of our letterforms have their origin in natural patterns and animal forms. For her, written language can connect nature and culture. The human urge to communicate through the written word, maps, and diagrams of movement is glimpsed through slivers in the otherwise all-over surfaces of her paintings.

Fluid tracteries of birds flit across each painting, interacting with and yet maintaining separation from deeper layers. Birds—ancient symbols of nature, freedom, fertility, and flight—are abstracted into loose ink lines on the surface. Linear forms without volume, they resemble flourishes of penmanship from the Age of Exploration, with curlicues and bony spikes for wings.

The paintings' surfaces break into vertical and horizontal openings, rhythmic and insistent, fading back and pushing forward. Loose, drippy, and approximate, they evoke human interaction with the landscape: telephone poles, electrical grids, fences, roads, furrowed fields, schematic drawings, and architectural forms.



Articulation of Geese 2019, oil on canvas, 60 x 60 inches



detail, *Articulation of Geese*

The artist feels the pain of separation, but still dreams of a world where human development and primeval forces can coexist. She expresses “a need to incorporate natural rhythms, as well as cultural vestiges, into my studio work.” She thinks about the velocity of lines, and about landscapes as fields of motion, migration, and seasonal change. These paintings are hard-won, searching for an uneasy balance between man-made and natural ecosystems.

In *Articulation of Geese*, the partial form of a bird repeats diagonally, the head and leading wing entering from the top left, a trailing foot and looping edges suggesting an identical second bird exiting bottom right. A sense of motion, feathers, and flight is hastened by diagonals and frustrated by perpendicular lines. A pinnate fan of wing, jointed with crossings, mirrors the intersections of the underlying grid. The birds seem to float across

the architecture of the underpainting, drifting over and through a maze of passages.

Transcription features a brighter palette and with open bands of color. Red, yellow, and blue bleed into neutral grays and washes of blended tints. Bits of cursive and hints of feather and beak peep through the broken, milky surface. Slivers of color ooze up from the depths, drip, narrow, and swell. A bold gesture, resembling a bird in flight, is inked across the surface of the three joined panels, and meanders downward, looping, swirling, connecting with the rhythmic, glowing verticals. The implied movement is forward as if we, the viewers, could fly, gazing through beating wings.

Similar in composition, *Skylander* sprawls across multiple panels, its horizon a broad expanse. The colors recall the golds and blue grays of autumn; geometric fields and farms marking arbitrary boundaries under infinite skies. Beak to beak, we confront a curling representation of an avian hunter with outspread wings. A second flurry of wings to the side: companion, reflection, friend or foe? We gaze over the land, gliding on updrafts across inconsequential borders.

Verge and *Overland* are kindred in size and a shared feeling of entrapment. The dark, rigid, underpainting seems to ensnare the playful swirls skittering on the surface. In *Verge*, the avian ancestors of the curvilinear overpainting can barely be deciphered. The marks are disembodied, fractured, and frozen like the image of an explosion.

Small drops splatter across the surface. In *Overland*, the implied left-to-right motion of an owl-like form meets a barrier and its wing rush to halt forward momentum. The loose calligraphy is almost completely constrained by the hard lines and sharp points of a claustrophobic grid, communicating a sense of conflict, struggle, and defeat.

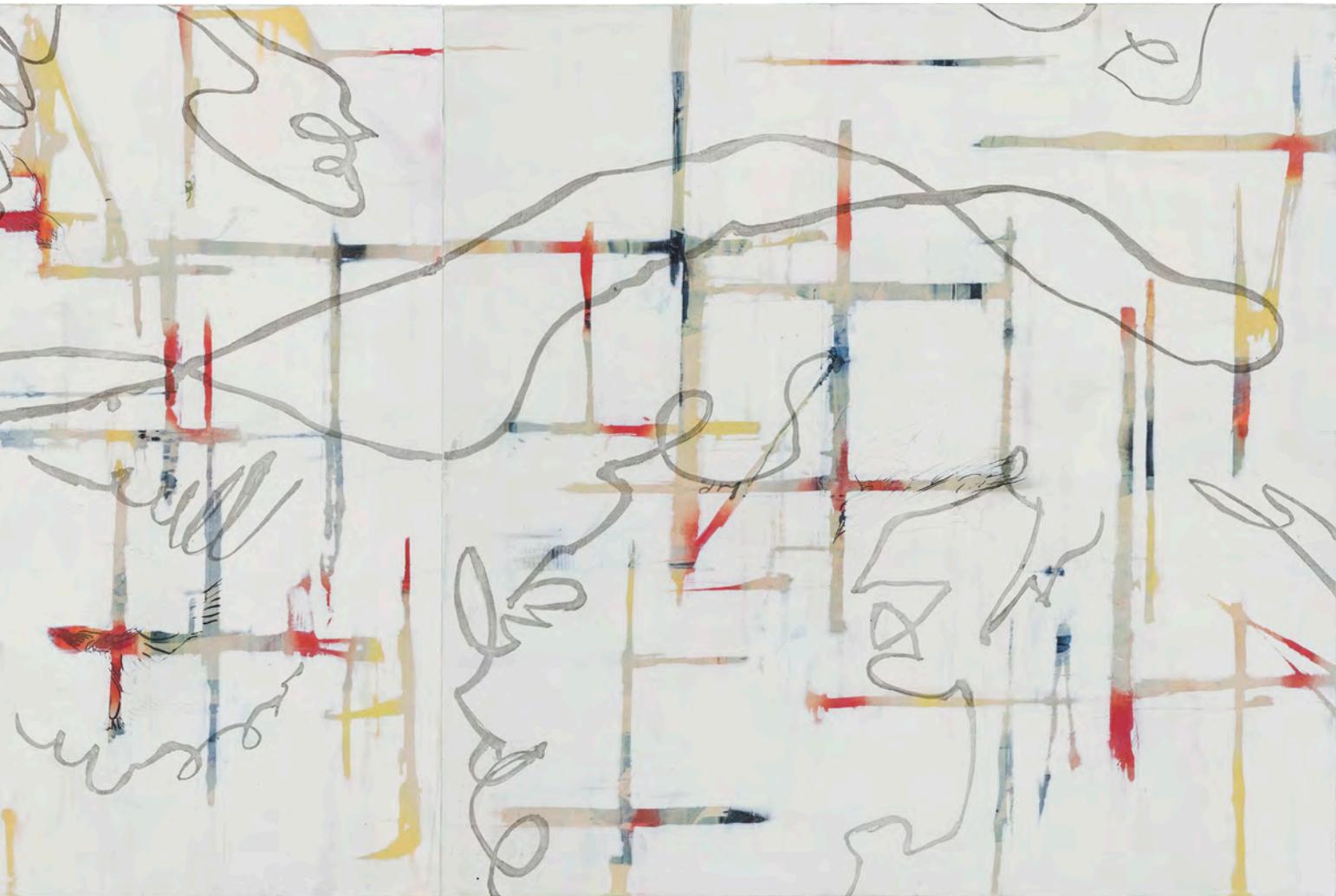
In *Peregrine over Manhattan*, nature and culture find a more positive, but still precarious balance. The warm reds, yellows, and red violets of neon sunrise verge into black, softened with thin washes of white. The eye settles into the deep color, only to be distracted by the ink drawing of a raptor on the surface. Although stylized, the bird is recognizable as a peregrine falcon, its feathered wings hunched in anticipation of flight. I am reminded of raptors nesting across from Central Park, adapting to the cliffs and crags of the urban environment.

Imprint is rosier and not as abstract as most of Courtenay's paintings, depicting a world more or less in synch. The inked overpainting outlines five ducks flying from right to left, their overlapping forms and relative sizes creating the illusion of rhythm and spatial depth. Directional lines in the underlying grid support the implied motion and subtly suggest the V formations of migratory flight. In science, "imprinting" refers to a chick's first attachment, usually to its mother. This early experience establishes its identity as a bird and a future flock member. Can the patterns of migrations and seasonal cycles of flight also imprint on the land over time?



Transcription 2018, oil on three panels, 24 x 72 inches

“Walking in the Big Belt Mountains, I stare down, so as not to trip, at the Pollock-like forest floor texture thick with kinnikinnick berries, moss,



leaves and branches, with just a skiff of snow. I'm constantly on alert for the unmistakable, out-of-nowhere wingbeat of grouse."

Catherine Courtenaye



Skylander 2019, oil on four panels, 12 x 48 inches. Private collection.

Unable to take in these works at a glance, the mind zooms like a camera lens, focusing between surface and depth. The paintings offer clues and concealments that allude to the limits of perception. What sliver of reality do we absorb through sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste? Albert Einstein said, “It is entirely possible that behind the perception of our senses, worlds are hidden of which we are unaware.” Evolutionary science suggests that we perceive only what we need to survive and reproduce. Sight allows us to recognize food and foe, with different lenses depending on our roles as predators and prey; taste differentiates between sugar and strychnine; stereo hearing pinpoints the snake. The surfaces of these paintings reveal and conceal, their fractures suggesting

land forms, boundaries, and uncharted territories and offering glimpses into the unknown.

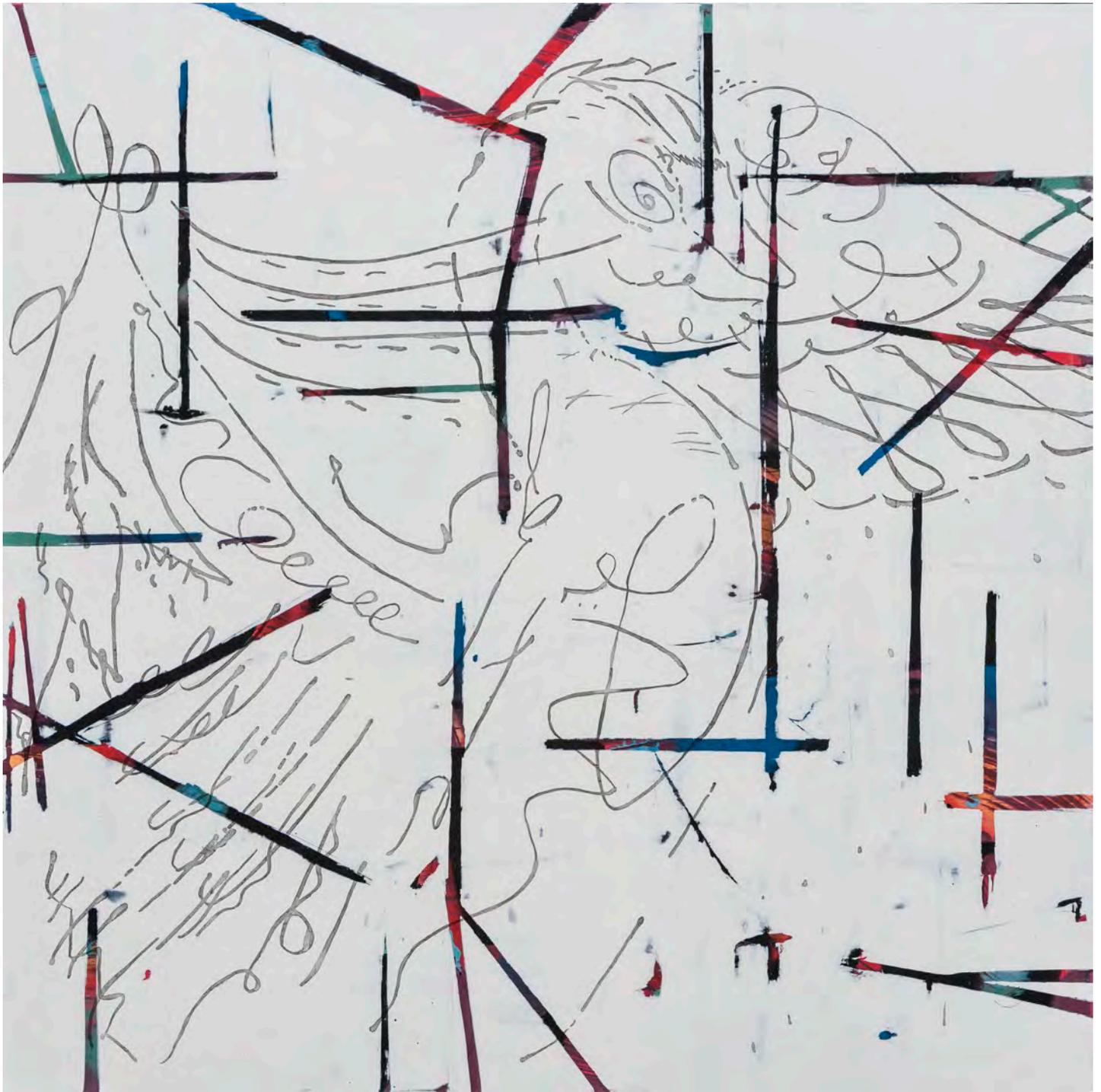
Like seventeenth-century wunderkammer, this work bridges logic and wonder, rational order and divine mystery. Inspired by the mapping of movement, natural and cultural history, and the romantic beauty of flight, Courtenay’s images chart the intersection of nature and culture, knowing and the unknown. Absorbing her cryptic images in stillness, over time, we are rewarded with stories as subtle and fleeting as the imprints of seeds, footprints, and feathers in new fallen snow.

Susan Floyd Barnett
April 2020

Susan Floyd Barnett is Curator of the Yellowstone Art Museum, Billings, Montana.



Peregrine over Manhattan 2019, oil on canvas, 20 x 18 inches



Verge 2020, oil on panel, 30 x 30 inches

Biography

Born Madrid, Spain

EDUCATION

University of Iowa, Iowa City, M.F.A.
in painting and drawing, 1984
University of Iowa, Iowa City, M.A. in
painting and drawing, 1983
Massachusetts College of Art, Boston,
1980
Colby College, Waterville, Maine, B.A.
magna cum laude in English, 1979
University of Bath, England, 1977
American School of Tangier, Morocco,
1973–1975

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

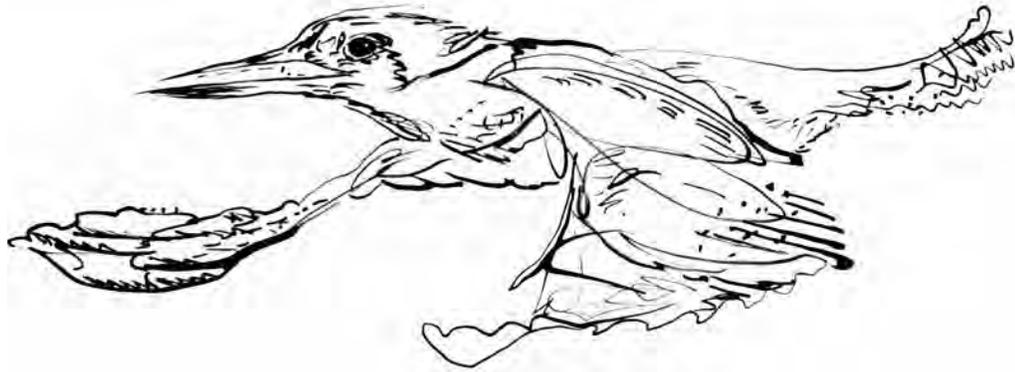
Stremmel Gallery, Reno, Nevada, 2014
Gallatin River Gallery, Big Sky,
Montana, 2014
Modernism, Inc., San Francisco,
California, 2012
Gallatin River Gallery, Big Sky,
Montana, 2012
Boise Art Museum, Boise, Idaho, 2011
Modernism West, San Francisco, 2011
Modernism, San Francisco, 2009
Cheryl Pelavin Fine Arts, New York,
2009 (two-person)
Bentley Gallery, Scottsdale, 2008
Stremmel Gallery, Reno, 2007
Cheryl Pelavin Fine Arts,
“Ghostwriters,” New York, 2007
Bentley Projects, Phoenix, 2005
Stremmel Gallery, Reno, 2004
Lobby Gallery at 455 Market, San
Francisco, 2003

Latham Square Building, “Sampler,”
organized by Oakland Museum of
California, Oakland, 2002
Hunsaker/Schlesinger Fine Art, Santa
Monica, 2000
Shaker Museum, South Union,
Kentucky, 2000
LIMN, “Paintings of Shaker Objects,”
San Francisco, 1999
Grover/Thurston Gallery, “The Colors
of the Soul: Paintings of Shaker
Objects,” Seattle, 1997
Andrew Shire Gallery, Los Angeles,
1994
Hartnell College, Salinas, California,
1994
Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco,
1992
Bank of America World Headquarters,
San Francisco, 1990
Kouros Gallery, New York, 1989
Iannetti-Lanzone Gallery, San
Francisco, 1988

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Michelle Bello Fine Art, “Tending
Our Fragile Earth,” San Francisco,
2019
Telluride Gallery of Fine Art, “Winter
Selections,” Telluride, Colorado,
2019
Gallatin River Gallery, “Earth and
Sky,” Big Sky, Montana, 2018
ArtMiami 2018. Presented by Zolla
Lieberman Gallery
Yellowstone Art Museum, “Boundless
Visions,” Billings, Montana, 2018

Yellowstone Art Museum, “Montana
Triennial 2018,” Billings, Montana,
2018
The Durden Gallery, “Natural Bent,”
Billings, Montana, 2018
Telluride Gallery of Fine Art,
“Summer Highlights,” Colorado,
2017
Yellowstone Art Museum, “Echo:
Unspoken Dialects” (four-person),
Billings, Montana, 2016
Telluride Gallery of Fine Art (three-
person), Colorado, 2016
Telluride Gallery of Fine Art, 30th
Anniversary, Telluride, Colorado,
2015, catalogue
Montana History Conference, Sundog
Fine Art, Bozeman, Montana, 2015
Slate Contemporary, “The Spring
Collection,” Oakland, California
2014
Turman Larison Contemporary, “A
Conversation,” Helena, Montana,
2014
Gallatin River Gallery, “Earth and
Sky,” Big Sky, Montana, 2014
Telluride Gallery of Fine Art, “White,”
Telluride, Colorado, 2014
Stremmel Gallery, Reno, Nevada,
2012, 2013, 2014
Crocker Art Museum, “Minimal and
Optical Qualities,” Sacramento,
California, 2013
The Emerson Center for the Arts and
Culture, Bozeman, Montana, 2011
ArtMiami 2010, 2011. Presented by
Modernism, Inc.
Bentley Gallery, “Small Works,”
Scottsdale, 2010



- Chandra Cerrito Contemporary,
"Inscribere," Oakland, 2007
- Gensler, "Chroma," curated by Chandra Cerrito, San Francisco, 2007
- San Francisco State University Fine Arts Gallery, "Cali/Graffi," A California Calligraphy Summit, San Francisco, 2006
- Anne Reed Gallery, Sun Valley, Idaho, 2006
- Roshambo Gallery, "Firecrackers: Artists to Watch," Healdsburg, California, 2006
- LIMN Gallery, San Francisco, 2006
- "Freefall: Contemporary Painting in the '00s," online exhibition curated by Chandra Cerrito, 2005
- The Contemporary Museum, Honolulu, Hawai'i, "Contemporarities," 2006
- Michelle Bello Fine Art, "Handpicked," San Francisco, 2003
- San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Artists Gallery, 25th Anniversary Exhibition, San Francisco, 2003
- Stremmel Gallery, "30 Years/30 Artists," Reno, 2003
- Kala Art Institute, "Solos: The Contemporary Monoprint," Berkeley, 2002
- LIMN Gallery, "Wrap Up," San Francisco, 2001
- Sloan Miyasato, "Black and White and Read All Over," San Francisco, 2001
- Bedford Gallery, Leshner Center for the Arts, "Abstraction: From Raucous to Refined," Walnut Creek, California, 2000
- Hunsaker/Schlesinger Fine Art, Gallery Artists Summer Show, Santa Monica, 2000
- Missoula Art Museum, Regional Drawing Exhibition, Missoula, Montana, 2000
- Jeffrey Coploff Gallery, New York, 1999
- Jan Baum Gallery, "Precious," Los Angeles, 1998
- Patricia Sweetow Gallery, "Pharmacopoeia," San Francisco, 1998
- The Jewish Museum, "L'Chaim: A Kiddush Cup Invitational," San Francisco, 1997
- Sherry Frumkin Gallery, Santa Monica, California, 1996
- San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Rental Gallery, "Refound," San Francisco, California, 1996
- Richmond Art Center, "Anonymous Arrangement," Richmond, California, 1995
- Gallery Concord, "What's in a Word?" Concord, California, 1995
- Schneider Museum of Art, "Art Faculty Exhibition," Southern Oregon State University, Ashland, 1993
- Vladimir/Emeryville Cultural Exchange, Vladimir, Russia, 1992
- Asher/Faure Gallery, Los Angeles, 1991
- Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland, Oregon, 1991
- "Art: the Other Industry," Emeryville, California; John Caldwell, juror, 1990
- Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, 1990
- Galleria San Benigno, "America, Italia, Spagna," Genoa, Italy, 1989
- The Fourth International LA Art Fair, Los Angeles, 1989
- ProArts Annual, Oakland; Graham Beale, juror, 1988

San Francisco Arts Commission
Gallery, "Chain Reaction," San
Francisco, 1988

Los Medanos College, "Ten Women
Artists of the Bay Area," Pittsburg,
California, 1987

Richmond Art Center, "Bay Area
Drawing," Richmond, California,
1987

Oakland Museum Collectors' Gallery,
"Small Treasures," Oakland, 1987

ProArts Annual, Oakland; David
Ireland, juror, 1987

"Art: The Other Industry," Emeryville,
California; Sidra Stich, curator, 1987

University of Iowa Museum of Art,
M.F.A. exhibition, Iowa City, 1984

AWARDS AND HONORS

Artist's Innovation Award 2018,
Montana Arts Council

TEDx, University of Montana, speaker,
2015

National Endowment for the Arts
Individual Artist Grant, 1989

Ford Foundation Grants, 1982, 1983,
1984

Phi Beta Kappa, 1979

RESIDENCIES

Experimental Workshop, monotypes,
Emeryville, California, 2001

Ucross Foundation, Clearmont,
Wyoming, 1991

Virginia Center for the Creative Arts,
Sweet Briar, Virginia, 1985

PRESS

"Catherine Courtenaye: Exploring
Parallels," Michele Corriel, Big Sky
Journal, Summer 2018

Montana Arts Council Artists
Innovation Awards Press Release,
2017

The Cumberland River Review, Issue
6-4, October 2017

"Ones to Watch: Spotlighting the
Works of Catherine Courtenaye,"
Michele Corriel,

Western Art & Architecture, Winter
2013

"Don't Miss," Kenneth Baker, The
San Francisco Chronicle Sunday
Datebook, September 23-29, 2012

"Lines and layers," Michele Corriel, Big
Sky Magazine, Winter 2011

"Flexibility brings pressure for
Courtenaye," Kenneth Baker, San
Francisco Chronicle, November 14,
2009

"Ghostly Cursive on Jay," Arts
Advocate, Battery Park City
Broadsheet, March 2007

"Catherine Courtenaye at Hunsaker/
Schlesinger Fine Art," Charlene
Roth, Artweek, January 2001

"Abstraction: From Raucous to Refined
at the Bedford Gallery," Juan
Rodriguez, Artweek, October 2000

"Driven to Abstraction," Sarah
Lavender Smith, Diablo Magazine,
August 2000

"Nostalgic," Rick Deragon, Monterey
County Herald, November 1994

"Art as a Civic Virtue," Jennifer Crohn,
The East Bay Guardian, November
1991

"A Promising Quartet," Kenneth Baker,
The San Francisco Chronicle, May
10, 1990

"Drawn to Richmond," Jim Jordan,
East Bay Express, July 10, 1987

"Richmond's B.A.D. Show is g-o-o-d,"
Charles Shere, Oakland Tribune,
July 7, 1987

"Drawing Conclusions," Phyllis
Bragdon, Marin Independent
Journal, July 6, 1987

"Direct Marks and Layers of Mystery,"
Dan Nadaner, Artweek, May 30,
1987

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Achenbach Foundation for Graphic
Arts, Fine Arts Museums of San
Francisco

Bank of America

Boise Art Museum

City of Reno, Nevada

City of Walnut Creek, California

Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento,
California

Deloitte LLP

Frontier Adjusters of America

Farmers and Merchants Bank, Lodi,
California

Folger, Levin & Kahn, LLP

Hyatt Hotels

Lehman Brothers

Matsushita Investment & Development
Co., Osaka, Japan

Oakland Museum of California

National Endowment for the Arts
Loan Collection

Pillsbury Winthrop, LLP

Renown Health Center, Nevada

Silk, Adler & Colvin

Tucson Museum of Art

Westin Verasa Hotel, Napa



Imprint 2019, oil on canvas, 60 x 60 inches



GALLATIN RIVER GALLERY



MONTANA ARTS COUNCIL
Strengthening the Creative Economy of Montana