

**THE ART OF ALLISON STEWART :
RETREAT TO NATURE IN SEARCH OF REVELATION**

By Dominique Nahas
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Allison Stewart's mixed media works on canvas and panels holistically depict the *suchness* of the Louisiana Bayou in transfiguring visual terms. Her energy-charged brushstrokes, glancing along and across her pictorial surfaces, suggestive of light, resist sculptural solidity. At other times we see the artist applying her color filled brush as it dances over some sections while elsewhere she drags heavily loaded paint into configurations invoking the worlds of crystallography, botany, and meteorology, and cartography. Nature in Stewart's imagination is mythic, incantatory, sensually redolent of continuous interplay between stability and instability. For Stewart, Nature is evoked through personal painterly gesture. Metaphor dissolves, giving way as process, product, subject, object, are fused in existence and experience. Nature is felt and perceived as an effervescent field of energy, perpetually exploding, and blooming. She is simultaneously observable and non-observable, poised between the accidental, the incidental, and the constructed. As viewers we are immersed in Stewart's paintings' play of alterity and contingency. Colors are continually passing into each other, bypassing solidness and emphasizing the impermanence of all things where all appears *in* and *as* flux.

Allison Stewart's seems almost preternaturally aware of the forces within nature, and the paradoxical link between human sensibility and naturalistic sensations in all botanical structures, in all creatures, animals, human and otherwise. Her Bayou paintings, so affecting and nearly ecstatic, suggest that she a keen observer of the natural conditions she bears testimony to. Careful observation is obvious, so

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much so that the treatment of her pictorial surfaces, with their wealth of gestures and mark making, infer to me that this artist has a thoroughly felt, animistic connection with the enviroing world. Stewart recalls the resemblances of the natural order. She steps herself in the appearances of the natural world yet her work participates fully in the essences of natural phenomena. Such essences, defying qualification and quantification, are imagistically multivalent.

Stewart holds her fantasy world in equipoise between a fully subjective rendering of bayou worlds and a distanced, objective approach in depicting polyvalent Nature. It must be said at this point that Stewart's art needs to be seen to be felt, understood and appreciated directly as a body of work responding to the body of Nature in all of its efflorescence's. Stewart's work, a vast nuanced sensorium where the world of the Bayou comes alive, cannot abide mediated interpellations. Reproductions cannot approach the delicacy and subtlety of Allison Stewart's painterly vision that takes into account Louisiana's wetlands through sensing and perceiving. The transfixing watershed sites as arenas of generative botanical activity and feverish sentient activity are brought alive through compositional brio, sophisticated paint handling and often-numinous coloration. These teeming areas are primordial in their beauty; time stands outside of earth-bound concerns and the artist bears witness to presencing itself as the essentializing element at play in such conditions.

Nature, as transcribed by Allison Stewart on her paintings' surfaces, is a mystic writing pad of memory and experience, ineffably mysterious, unfinished, necessary. The artist paints the qualities of an ongoing metaphysical presencing, a liminal quality, as well as sensations of the ephemeral, the fleeting and of contingency, even fragility that quivers in the night as well as the sensations of awkwardness, tenderness, and sensuousness in a fresh, joyful, way. These qualities, conditions, aspects seem inevitable, perhaps pre-ordained. If there is a lingering feeling here it is that Stewart

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underscores through her description of the fundamental features of wild water places that such areas are outside our ego, that they are extra-epidermal in that they have their own skin. Stewart's visual narratives recount the sensuous surface of things and this surface attracts us by its qualitative richness, especially in the form of what philosopher Edward Casey terms the "*manifest palpability*" of wild, uncultivated nature.

Stewart's transcriptions of Nature are presented in ways that are palpable to the viewer. Her gestures, marks and colors personify the essences, touches and smells of nature: an incantatory air fills her worked-on surfaces. What I find mystifying in the artist's work is how effortless she makes it all seem. Her compositions are alive with the peculiarities and convulsions of natural cycles and I am amazed, for example, at how the artist elides the natural and the geometric in her work with such suave effort, without the hint of contrivance. Such antinomies course through Stewart's work: the hard and soft, the silky and the rough, the light and the shade, the hot and the cold, growth and decay, life and death, renewal and transformation. The breadth and the flow of flux permeate Stewart's Bayou paintings; we can feel the intense *longueur* of a Louisiana river area in the experience of encountering the beauty of nature in a hush as if it had never existed before. John Berger writes: "*Art is an organized response to what Nature allows us to glimpse occasionally...the transcendental face of art is always in the form of a prayer.*"

Allison Stewart's "organized response" by way of painting involves making the work that she produces seem to be a natural, inevitable consequence or result of her, as artist. Being with nature and channeling her energies through the tip of the artist's brush. Naturalness and fresh spontaneity is a felt presence in Stewart's work --- such presence has an elemental *in-dwelling* quality. It allows us entry into the realm of the senses: Stewart's sensibilities, those of nature, our sensibilities and sensations are aroused, as if we under the sway of a visual enticement, as aphrodisiac.

Not surprisingly a deep phenomenological sensibility courses through

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Allison Stewart's painterly vision. Her work is the result of intense mindfulness, if not devotion, to transcribing what she sees and feels as she communes with natural surroundings. The artist's macrocosmic and microcosmic transcriptions of the Bayou inspire us to move beyond surface forms. Stewart's art plays with perception and reminds the viewer that ultimately we must transcend our senses; her art is there as a guide. It allows the mind to internalize the art as we pass (in a re-application of Herbert Read's words): "*...from the perception of discrete phenomenon, of objects...to the conception of an invisible agent manipulating these objects.*" Allison Stewart's vision thus bespeaks of a retreat to nature in search of revelation. Unveiled are transcendental points or thresholds in which sensory capacities are overloaded, where rational understanding fails surrendering to the onrush of pure experiencing of sensual being. At the core Allison Stewart's aesthetic vision is perception giving way to mindfulness. Such mindfulness, in turn, gives way to the realization of one's connectedness with all things in Nature, an attitude that forms the condition for grace.

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