

Painting Before and After Words: Margaret Wall-Romana

BY CHRISTOPHER ATKINS

Margaret Wall-Romana's MAEP exhibition, "Painting Before and After Words" addresses painting as both noun and verb. The works in this exhibition are not illustrations of an idea or concept, nor are they purely abstract, gestural tracings. By focusing intently on forms and composition and experimenting with painterly moments of emotional excitement, she subjugates narrative to meaning. Her paintings are sensuous and experiential, seen and felt but not necessarily described.



Rogier van der Weyden, c. 1399–1464, *Descent from the Cross*, 1432, oil on panel, 86 x 103 inches, Museo del Prado, Spain photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY

The body of Christ is the compositional focus of Rogier van der Weyden's painting, *Descent from the Cross*, of 1432, pictured here. The subject's lifeless limbs are positioned so they lead viewers' eyes through the painting in a figure-eight circuit that illuminates each of the mourning faces in the funeral entourage. Following Christ's left arm to the right side of the canvas the viewer's sightline loops down through the head and shoulders of Mary Magdalene. It then

ascends diagonally through the length of Christ's body to the left side of the canvas. There St. John supports the Virgin Mary, whose left hand almost touches the right hand of her deceased son.

Descent from the Cross is an important artistic touchstone for Wall-Romana. For years she has responded to its innovative composition, its unusually shaped panels, and the precision with which the Flemish artist captured a sense of grief and mourning. Her *Painting Painting (with van der Weyden)* is a rejoinder to that famous work, as are many of her paintings that refer to the established works that make up the art historical canon. Both a painter and a keen student of art history, Wall-Romana gleans from hundreds of years of painting, yet innovates by borrowing techniques from Flemish landscapes and Abstract Expressionist compositions and fusing them into her original works.

Eschewing sketches, Wall-Romana paints directly, employing precise control of and fluid response to the vicissitudes of oil paint. *Parentheses (Here & There)* is a hanging garden of verdant foliage, decomposing grass, and wilted blossoms bunched together and floating, impossibly, in a perfectly blue sky. The massive root ball at the center of the painting, full of both life and death, is on the verge of disappearing into the clouds, despite its illusory weight. It hovers on the panel, balanced by the artist's ability to assimilate forms, styles, and action into a single painting.

These paintings employ complex configurations of scale and perspective that shift from photo-precise still lifes to vast atmospheric distances. Approaching Wall-Romana's paintings, viewers can experience a terrible boundlessness that carries their eyes and minds beyond reality. Wall-Romana channels the sublime grandeur of earlier painters, but succeeds in striking viewers at a sensory level rather than belaboring the narrative themes of history painting.



Memento Lucem (Remember the Light), 2010
oil on panel 58 x 133 x 2 inches

She achieves a wide spectrum of paint densities, by which she brings images right up to the surface. As she works the paint onto the panel, Wall-Romana sands and scrapes layers from specific areas. She then continues painting, sanding, and burnishing, creating dramatic patinas and uncovering hidden textures and veins of color. In *Towards & Away*, her broad, ribbon-like whorls of oil-slick oranges and greens sit on top of, but don't pollute, the yellowing clouds of the sunset sky. The paint is stable and fluid, a surface as well as a layer. Her panels can be seen as excavation sites where color, form, and pigment create illusions in which one layer is barely hidden by another. Her flower petals couldn't be any thinner or more delicate, yet faded smears of paint look like bruises that have turned into a rainbow of color.

"Certain paintings 'temporize,' or generate their own time within time, even beyond the powers of language," writes George Steiner, in *Grammars of Creation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). "Such paintings draw us into a time-grid integral wholly to themselves." Time is also

integral to Wall-Romana's paintings. In the literal sense, she spends months working on each of her paintings. This delicately labored process is matched by her reflections on art history. She decants her knowledge of paintings and techniques and makes them her own. See the way she cites the Venetian Renaissance painters by elevating her still lifes to dramatic effect. Alternately, she applies hazy violets and reds that echo the non-figural planes of Color-Field painters. Her *sottobosco* (forest floor) imagery bows to the micro-ecosystems created by the Dutch painter Otto Marseus van Schrieck in her *Memento Lucem (Remember the Light)*. It's as if she is quoting the artists who have influenced her without footnoting the sources. Wall-Romana's paintings create their own sense of time, where so much history is compressed into contemporary paintings that refuse to be idealized or nostalgic.

Some art can inspire feelings that are impossible to put into words and in doing so, remind us that art is about response and reaction. Art can also be a sobering reminder of human

mortality. Wall-Romana's paintings are filled with, but do not illustrate, this double-edged awareness of life and death. Even in their stillness, her bright white daffodil petals can't help summarizing and anticipating the cyclical beauty of nature. The same is true when looking at the skull in *Memento Lucem (Remember the Light)*. Like all *memento mori*, it emphasizes the passage of life, but for Wall-Romana, it's not meant to be a warning; it is, like a ruin, a beautifully sundered fragment from the erosions of life and decay.

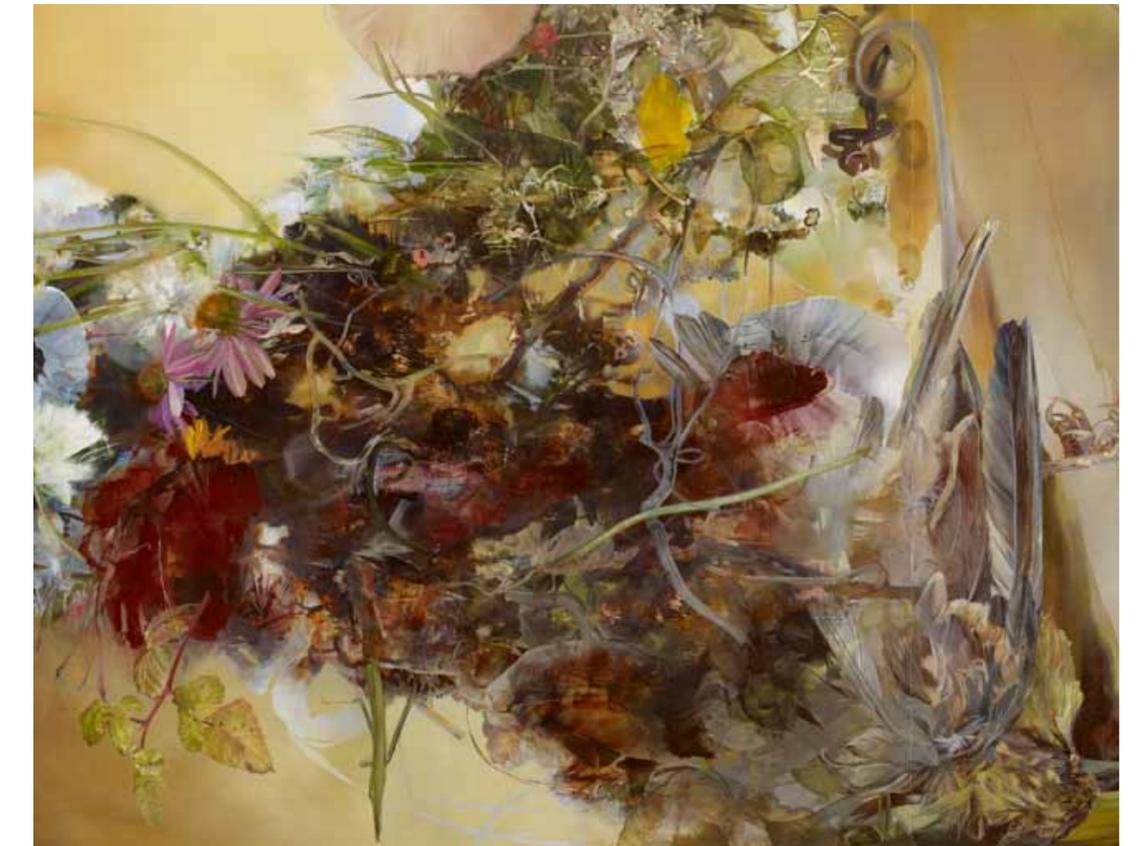
Cover: *Painting Painting (with van der Weyden)*
(detail), 2009, oil on panel, 58 x 75 inches

Flap: *Memento Lucem (Remember the Light)* (detail),
2010, oil on panel 58 x 133 x 2 inches

Christopher Atkins, *Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program (MAEP) coordinator*

This exhibition is presented by the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program, a curatorial department of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, which features work selected by Minnesota artists. MAEP is made possible in part by generous support from the Jerome Foundation.

Towards & Away (detail), 2010, oil on panel, 46 x 116 x 2 inches





Painting Painting (with van der Weyden), 2009, oil on panel, 58 x 75 inches

Painting Before and After Words
Paintings by Margaret Wall-Romana

AND

Ground Truth
Works by Peter Happel Christian

January 21 to April 3, 2011
Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program Galleries

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Thursday, January 20, at 7 p.m.

Artists' Talks
Thursday, February 17, at 7 p.m.

Gallery Discussion Placeholder
Thursday, March 17, at 7 p.m.,

ALL EVENTS ARE FREE, OPEN TO THE PUBLIC,
AND TAKE PLACE IN THE MAEP GALLERIES.

For more information about the artists,
this exhibition, and MAEP, visit:

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