

ZOLLA/LIEBERMAN GALLERY INC.

Abstract Musings: Susanne Doremus

Lisa Wainwright
Professor, Art History, Theory and Criticism Department
School of the Art Institute of Chicago

Susanne Doremus' paintings are endlessly engaging to behold. Replete with the indexical marks of thinking and being, painted lines rhythmically meander across the surface, pours puddle and stain, paintbrush drips dance in staccato arabesques, and notations and glimpses of texts and figures punctuate the largely abstract passages with their playful signifying codes. There are vestiges of architectural scaffolding, automatist doodles, scratches, and rubbings all celebrating the vitality of expressive subjectivity. These are dense paintings, for they are worked and reworked, the artist adding and subtracting in a process that is both unconscious and then completely deliberate. Even so, their exceedingly complex surfaces yield a pitch perfect harmony. The balance of the many disparate parts and varied vocabularies is astonishing, elegant, satisfying in a way that speaks to how we cope with the glorious cacophony of life.

Like the great abstractionists before her: Kandinsky, De Kooning, and Joan Mitchell among others, Doremus harnesses visual gestures that move and countermove in response to her immediate circumstances—situationally and psychologically. Doremus was grounded in mid-century abstraction while studying at the University of Wisconsin in the 60s with Hal Lotterman and Milton Resnick and has been practicing this language for over fifty years. And like her forebearers, hers is a kind of sensorial consciousness activated line by line and mark by mark. It's bodily, impulsive and messy, tabulating moments of her consciousness. It's a fight for purpose against an otherwise existential state. The project of abstract expressionism reemerges today with artists such as Charlene von Heyl, Molly Hartung-Zuckerman, Josh Smith or Oscar Murillo who counter the numbing dominance of the digital with fulsome passages of luscious, viscous paint. It's all so physically rich and Doremus finds herself central to this moment. And then there is Cy Twombly to whom Doremus has close ties. Her work has affinities to his grand Untitled (Bolsena) from 1969 that hangs in the Art Institute of Chicago, (Doremus was on the faculty of the School of the Art Institute from 1990-2019), for both elegant scribble and use of erasure as mark-making method.

Doremus's paintings are visual diaries of the life of the mind with all its prosaic foolishness and its sublime discoveries. She often draws with her eyes closed as if her hand can more closely link to her thinking when she shuts down perception. And with eyes open, Doremus takes in her urban milieu, the architecture of her downtown Chicago studio and the Dan Ryan Expressway circle exchange just outside her window (Interchange (page 22) was made as she looked at the expressway out her window). The mundane gets registered and translated into paint: lists for the food store, her bank balance, something she's read that day. To be distracted is to then "let something else take over, something more primal and deep" as she puts it. Doremus' ability to juggle a range of thoughts and actions on the canvas may also come from her experience of motherhood. To say these are feminist in their orientation is too bold,

ZOLLA/LIEBERMAN GALLERY INC.

although Doremus showed at the important feminist collective, Artemisia Gallery, early in her career. But the transparency of process, how she accrues marks and motifs, then wipes things out and paints over passages, she claims relates to having had children. “I was so used to cleaning up. Having children means making mistakes is just part of life.” A visibly evolving process of making is certainly New York school in its orientation, but the amount of change and interruption evident in her canvases may also speak to the kind of full roster and necessity of multi-tasking that women know so well.

There are figures in most of Doremus’ paintings, usually hidden, she explains, but sometimes evident and they have been in her work since the very beginning. Like so many lovely escorts into the uncontained depths of her painterly fields, they recall her figure-drawing teacher in Wisconsin, John Wilde’s surrealist treatments of the isolated figure engaged within fantastical landscapes. On the *Precipice* (pages 18/20), a black painting with white markings, shows a woman perched at the far right looking down into a range of scattered shapes and lines. Doremus used a lot of pouring in this painting, and the irregular molten marks suggests an eerie and treacherous ground into which the figure dares to leap. And *Warrior II* (pages 36/38) hosts a figure in the lower left, part of an array of syncopated lines making up a compositional ring of sweeping gestures. Drawing is Doremus’s method and using water-based acrylics, she draws with paint, rendering figures with an economy of line. They are made from a few simple strokes that echo the drawn markings within the other parts of the painting. Renaissance drawing has always captured her imagination, Leonardo in particular, and that preference for what the Florentine Italians called *disegno* is evident throughout.

Some of the works suggest landscapes. The weight of the compositions is often heavier in the bottom half. *Casting Light* (pages 8/10), created first with an unstretched canvas on the floor, with evident pours and shoe prints, was then stretched and vertically worked with markings and rubbings and diagrammatic notations. But the darker masses of color reside in the bottom half, while a schematic sun form occupies the upper left. Our orientation is as if to a landscape, but one that becomes rhizomatic the more we look. Julie Mehretu comes to mind, but Doremus is scaled more intimately and so more accessible and personal in an idiosyncratic way. Some commentators have also compared the work to maps. And indeed she worked as a cartographer for a period while in Wisconsin in 1969. But these are maps exploring a mental territory. They don’t clarify direction, but rather yield composite courses with changes, disruptions, errors and corrections together all at once.

Doremus’s triptych called *Passage* (pages 16/17) is a tour de force of her painting agility. The left-hand panel with its thick triangular element teetering off of an area of more detailed linework, juxtaposes with a middle section blacker, inkier and more architectonic. The final panel is the most unleashed with denser passages of brushed painterly shapes underlying dancing skeins of paint. Like an orchestra conductor who yields their baton to choreograph the sounds of different instruments into a symphonic whole, Doremus’s myriad marks form a visual ballad of stress and release, loudness and quiet, presence and absence—all of it jammed together like the stuff of existence.