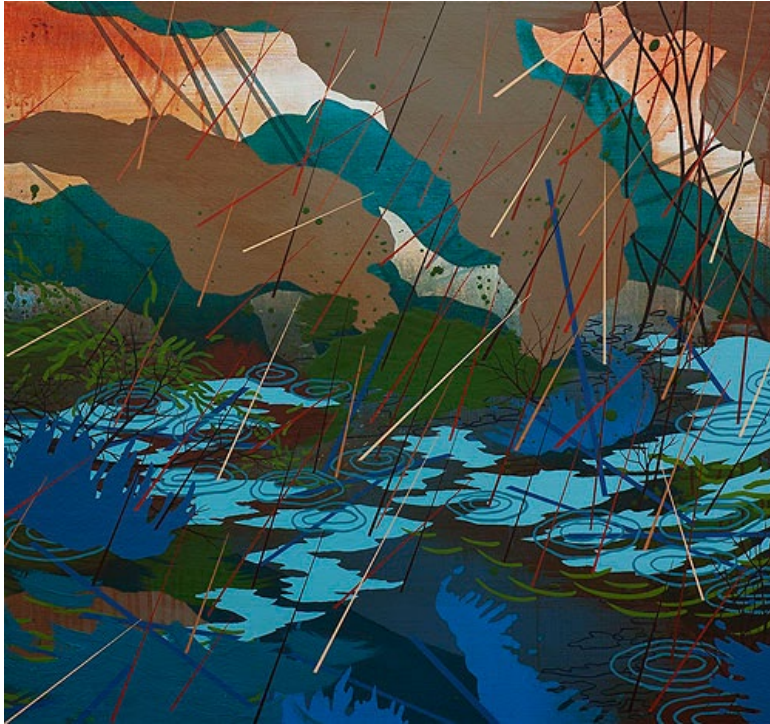


# Artists Ruth Bercaw and Susan Danko make natural partners in Harris Stanton Gallery show

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By Douglas Max Utter, Special to The Plain Dealer



Susan Danko, Hard Rain, Acrylic on Canvas 28"x 30"

Ohio painters Ruth Bercaw and Susan Danko both develop dynamic, semiabstract compositions against broader visions of history and nature, but they move apart along emotional and generational lines.

There's no confusing Bercaw's spacious geometric panoramas with Danko's darkly intimate visions. One evokes open fields and desert, while the other wanders through forests and wetlands, glimpsing hidden places.

But both combine landscape and inscape, thinking about the way symbolic perception fits into the sweep of the natural world. Their work is on view at Akron's Harris Stanton Gallery in an informal two-person show titled "Singular Visions," and it's a good chance to compare two very gifted artists.

In the late 1980s, Bercaw (who graduated from the University of Missouri in 1952 and earned a bachelor of fine arts degree from Kent State University in 1985) exhibited a series of shield-shaped, constructed canvases that featured rich impasto painting and ancient symbols.

Those works, which jutted forward from the wall like body armor or rough tent dwellings, had a human edge that reached back into prehistory.

These days, Bercaw's mixed-media paintings use strong color and multiple series of shapes such as triangles and circles to inscribe personal experience against the vastness of the Earth and the depth of geologic time.

In a statement, Bercaw reminds us that depictions of processions aren't new and that pictorial repetition is no modern invention. She explains that her circles and other shapes travel through fields made up of larger forms, which are renditions of ancient pictographs.

One of her strongest works, "Passing," shows a trail of yellow and blue-black circles superimposed on a rocklike sequence of flat shapes; they run across the canvas like a road. High on the right an orange circle rises; down below, overlapping orange circles suggest memory or birth. "Passing" movingly and economically plots the phases and eclipses of a life.

Danko's acrylic paintings are also full of poetry, less epic but rich in lyric beauty and private musings. Danko, who earned her degree from the Cleveland Institute of Art in 1998, mixes stylized natural imagery with features of contemporary abstraction.

Among her strengths is a sensitive palette that runs to dusky greens and burnt oranges -- halftones that speak of hidden places. Her lush landscapes seem to derive partly from random characteristics of process and surface, developing a wide emotional range as they move toward visual order.

In "Hard Rain" (2011), shafts of rain thrust javelin-like through forest undergrowth, making circular ripples on the surface of a shallow stream. Brown and blue patches of low-lying mist sink downward or rise like plumes of smoke. Tension grows at the intersection of falling and flowing, a sense of urgency and perhaps disaster. Serenity at least is under siege.

But then there's "Emanating Light." The place depicted might be a mineshaft or the ruin of an abandoned interior space like a factory where a roof can be seen overhead, supported by upright beams. Green alternates with lavender and blue in the vast chamber, but yellow rays fan out from a breach in the center, overriding the dark. Tree shapes are visible against the distant light; we're still in the painter's eternal forest.

The synthetic quality of Danko's colors and simplified shapes make "Emanating Light" seem something like a digital image and, in that way, very much part of today's world. But whatever its relationship to reality and the passage of time, in this work Danko joins hands with Bercaw, deploying archetypal symbols as old as the human mind to deliver a message of hope.

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