

THERESA MARCHETTA

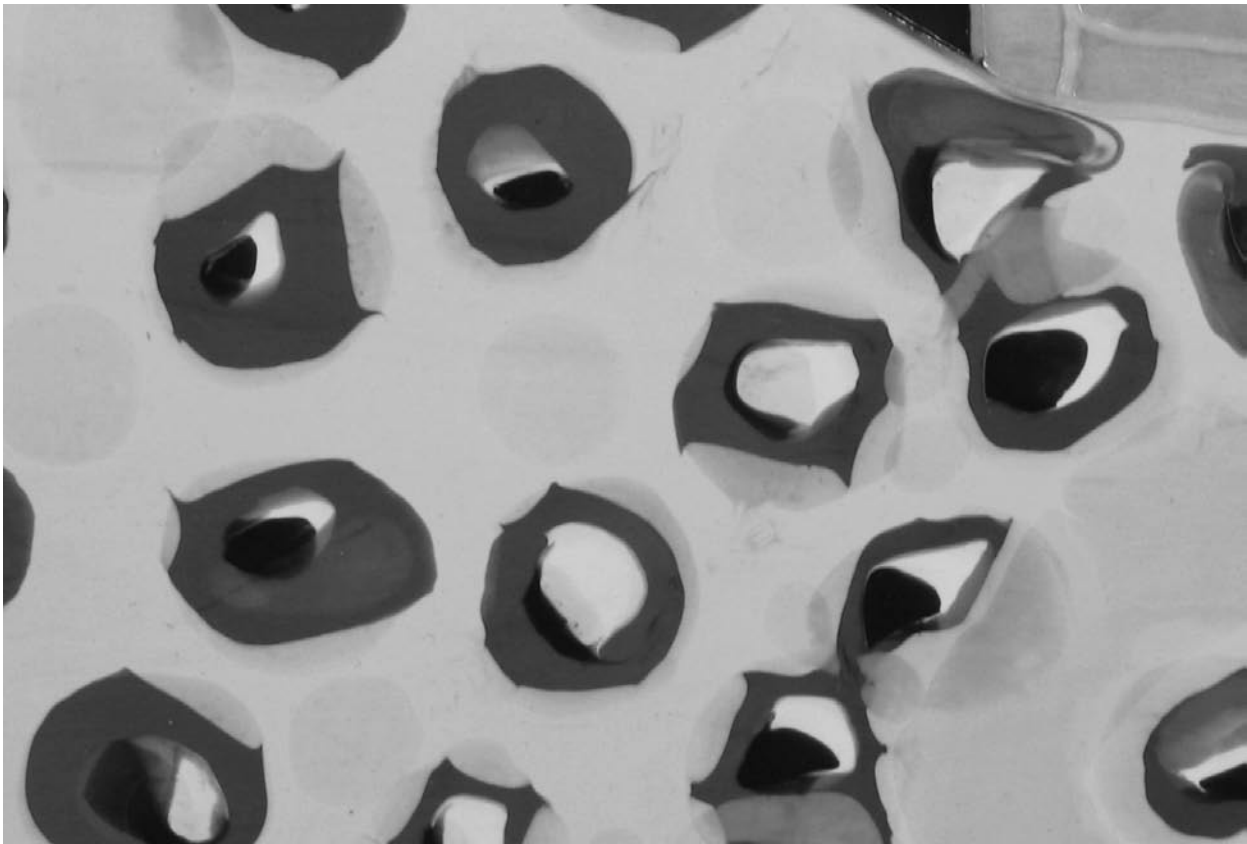
RETREAT



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

JANUARY 11 - FEBRUARY 17, 2007

AUSTIN, TEXAS



Retreat 4, detail, 2007. Acrylic and wax on wood. 4' x 6'.

THERESA MARCHETTA

Making a Retreat

“The landscape reflects itself,
humanizes itself, thinks itself in me.”

– Paul Cézanne¹

Retreats to nature are occasions for personal recalibration and rejuvenation. Pulling back from what is known, dispensing with habitual routine, and becoming immersed in an environment rich for the senses, a person finds him or herself re-attuned to both the forces of natural stimuli and the feelings they elicit. The enlivening effects of a wilderness retreat are not unlike the revitalization that can occur in the process of responding to a work of art. The retreat’s closest aesthetic parallel may, in fact, develop through engagement with images like Theresa Marchetta’s paintings in *Retreat*, compositions that are as interested in a viewer’s experience

of color and material as they are in the depiction of representational subject matter. Looking at paintings that have left behind the familiar territory of a clearly organized pictorial field, a viewer can become immersed in uncharted regions of sensory discovery. In so doing, a viewer, like the figures who inhabit Marchetta’s paintings, can “humanize” the landscape by existing in balance with it, thinking the thoughts and feeling the sensations it has to give.

Artists, historically, have been keenly aware of the relationships between natural and aesthetic experiences, and this tendency persists today. Although her works look little like Marchetta’s, Bridget Riley’s paintings are often attempts to make visible fleeting visions encountered in nature. Moreover, the artist has described a period of her childhood in World War II England in terms

that recall a long-term retreat—a retreat with particularly rugged conditions brought about not by choice, but due to her father’s enlistment as a soldier on the Pacific front. Living without the comforts of modern life, but happily discovering the splendor of the Cornwall landscape under her mother’s tutelage, Riley learned a formative lesson. She learned how to look. Just as important, she learned how to derive pleasure from observing nature in a remote environment; one that despite its climactic difference recalls the jagged terrain of Marchetta’s paintings. Of this time Riley remembers:

My mother took us on walks on the cliffs. She was always pointing out colours: in the sea; the sparkle of the dew; changes of colour when the dew was brushed away. If she arranged anything on the table like a bowl of fruit... she would

point out the colours. “Look, it’s almost got a blue on it.” She wasn’t a painter, she was a “looker.” The pleasure that one could get from looking was part of her personality.²

One avenue through which to approach Marchetta’s paintings would be to consider the compositions not only as abstract representations of sites where communion with nature is possible, but also as paintings that “respond to a look” in the way that a landscape would. That is to say, Marchetta’s paintings interact with their viewer as an actual landscape might; or, to paraphrase a quotation attributed to Cézanne, her paintings create a harmony parallel to nature. The panels not only refer to vistas and caverns, they are also constructed to “give back” something like what a vista or a cavern does after a viewer has spent time with them. Considered in such terms, the paintings become both descriptions of and proxies for the “eerie, fantastical” Southwestern landscapes that first captivated their maker five years ago.

Marchetta goes to great lengths to establish both visual and physical parallels between her paintings and the landscapes that inspired them. The subject she has selected, a natural environment “that is [visually] already very abstract and unspecific, yet is recognizable,” lends itself to the creation of such correspondences.³ This dual approach – an appeal to the visual as well as the physical – creates unexpected analogies between the paintings and the landscapes that they depict, not only in the paintings’ surfaces, but also within the works’ material constitution.

To begin with a rather straightforward example of how the visual and the physical come together in Marchetta’s work, we could take note of the scale of the seven *Retreat* paintings. Measuring four-feet high by six-feet wide, these paintings replicate the expansive views as well as the cavernous enclosures for which the American Southwest is lauded. These are robust landscapes, but

what they have to give their beholder is not always obvious. In a single panel, an energetic looker will find multiple areas of interest as their eyes scan the painted terrain. Sometimes the details of Marchetta’s compositions seem hidden in a surplus of color and light, their subtleties bound within the artist’s tightly interwoven, camouflage-like patterns. In the more cave-like paintings, a want of illumination in the landscape delays the composition’s unfolding. Marchetta reminds her viewer that inside a cave, “There is no horizon.”⁴ Any light introduced to the landscape gets there artificially. In such an environment, one should not expect an immediate revelation.

Marchetta’s use of wooden panels provides a second example of the artist’s combination of visual and physical resemblance. By using wooden supports and leaving portions of their grain bare, Marchetta announces that she has used natural materials to construct an image of nature. This direct representational language takes little deciphering to decode. Likewise, it’s no coincidence that the curvilinear contour drawings the artist lays down in translucent wax atop her panels share formal similarities with the wood grains beneath them. Marchetta’s compositions visually coalesce like the interlocking fibers of the wooden boards they are painted upon.

Finally, and most impressively, the intensely colored acrylic medium Marchetta works with is a substance that has chemical and physical properties which makes it analogous to the elements in the landscapes she paints. As Marchetta describes it, “stalactites and stalagmites are a water-based medium, the result of minerals being dissolved in water and then drying into stone and crystals. Much like the liquid appearance of the acrylic glazes I use, cave formations look like flowing liquids.”⁵

Part of the “flowing” quality of Marchetta’s paintings in *Retreat* comes from the uniform plasticity of the artist’s acrylic glazes. Although the colors of glazes vary, the

consistent, coherent quality of the glaze is punctuated only in those areas where Marchetta has allowed the wood panel to remain exposed. When looking at many modern paintings, a viewer must contend with the fact that the light and airy elements of a scene – a clear sky or a beam of light – are constructed from the same material as the denser objects in the composition – a human figure or a rock formation. The material opacity of Marchetta’s glazes (even those that contain no pigment) causes the paintings to exert an even, overt physicality. This declaration of medium, as opposed to an illusionistic recession into space, has a strong leveling effect on the compositions. No square inch of a panel appears to be more significant than any other, and a viewer’s attention is drawn as much to Marchetta’s technique of representation as to the representations themselves. This being the case, the figures in her flat panels appear to have no more pictorial significance than areas of ground. Likewise, objects and atmosphere are equally privileged.

Understandably, the descriptive techniques Marchetta uses could obscure a viewer’s attempt to read the landscape. Acknowledging this, the artist resorts to the metaphor of existing inside a cave to describe what it’s like to look at her paintings. “A visitor’s sense of space, perspective, depth and color is perplexed. In a sense, touring a cave is a highly artificial and invented experience.”⁶ The converse to this astute statement is that Marchetta’s paintings have the ability to resonate with their beholder as highly natural experiences. As our interactions with the natural world start to seem artificial, and as we realize how artificial representations can respond to a gaze as a natural landscape would, retreats into nature and retreats into art conflate. Paintings of nature may not only *look* like nature, they may begin to *act* like nature, as well. To put it bluntly: Marchetta’s *Retreat*, enables her viewer to make a retreat.

We might wonder how such an exchange could be possible, how an artificial invention could create in us the sensations we feel before nature. To understand how this could be, I return to Riley, who describes the creation of her own works as a process of managing “wild” forces.⁷ Riley has stated that, “When [pictorial] elements are *not* asked to do something which is against their nature – (not asked to serve concepts or to represent) – *then...* they are allowed... to show their vitality... These energies are, in a proper sense, ‘wild’ – one can easily be overwhelmed, carried away.” Likening forms and pigments to untamed natural forces, Riley expresses just how moving a painting can be. For the artist as well as the viewer, there is always the possibility of getting in over one’s head, of being overtaken by the elements that were intended to coordinate the visual experience. “I am supported by the medium but at the risk of being overwhelmed by it – the medium both carries you and threatens to carry you away.”⁸ Indeed it could be possible to retreat too far. Marchetta’s paintings, however, keep us on the verge. We retreat, we regress, and yet we feel more alive.

Caitlin Haskell
January, 2007

¹ Joachim Gasquet, *Cézanne*, second edition (Paris, 1926) p. 132.
“*Le paysage se reflète, s’humanise, se pense en moi.*”

² Bridget Riley, “Personal Interview by Nikki Henriques” (1988), in Robert Kudielka, ed.: *The Eye’s Mind: Bridget Riley Collected Writings 1965-1999*, London 1999, p. 22.

³ Marchetta, “Artist Statement.”

⁴ Marchetta, “Artist Statement.”

⁵ Marchetta, “Artist Statement.”

⁶ Marchetta, “Artist Statement.”

⁷ For a thorough consideration of “the wild” as it applies to the work of both nineteenth and twentieth-century painters see Richard Shiff, “Cezanne in the wild,” *The Burlington Magazine* (September, 2006), p. 605-611.

⁸ Bridget Riley, “In Conversation with Robert Kudielka” (1972), in Robert Kudielka, ed.: *The Eye’s Mind: Bridget Riley Collected Writings 1965-1999*, London 1999, p. 84.

THERESA MARCHETTA

EDUCATION

2007 Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
currently enrolled in MFA program
2004 The Cooper Union Summer Residency Program, New York, NY
2002 BFA, Carnegie Mellon University Pittsburgh, PA

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

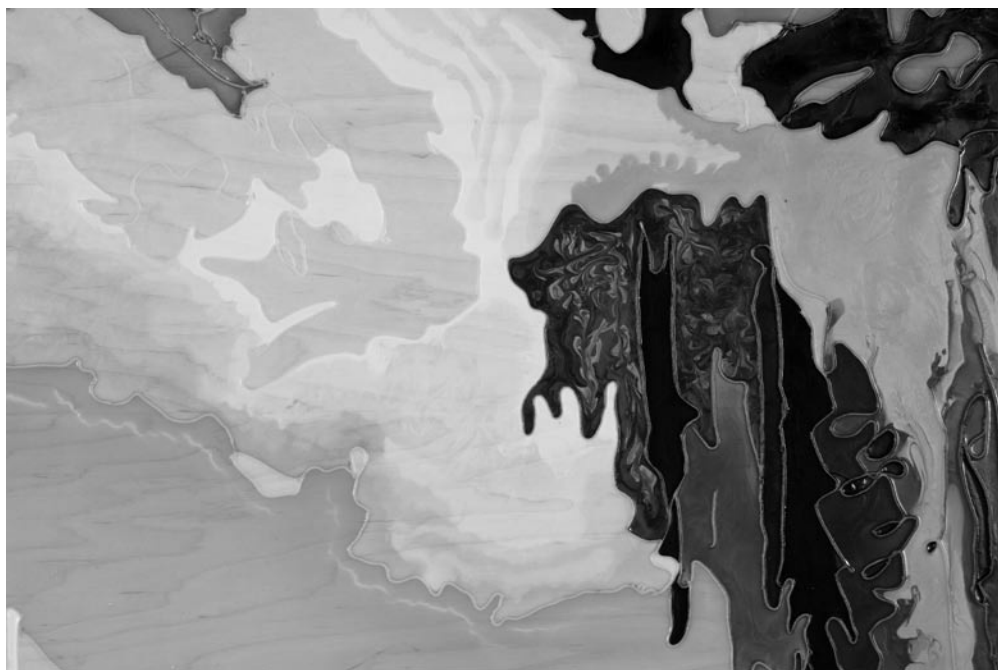
2007 Women & Their Work, *Retreat*, Austin, TX
2002 Numina Gallery, Princeton, NJ

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2006 Pollack Gallery, *Run For Your Money*, Richmond, VA
Iron Gate Studios, *Blush*, Austin, TX
Pump Projects, *Karaoke*, Austin, TX
2005 Pump Projects, *Peep Show*, Austin, TX
Christopher Loftus Project, Philadelphia, PA
The Optimistic, *Salon*, Philadelphia, PA
2004 Cooper Union Residency Exhibition, New York, NY
213 Gallery, *Simulcast*, Philadelphia, PA
Arcadia Univ. Gallery, *Works on Paper 2004*, Glenside, PA
2003 101 Hudson Street, Jersey City, NJ
2002 Foreland Street Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA
2001 The Frame, *Can Strangers See Your Name*, Pittsburgh, PA
2000 The Ellis Gallery, *Jigglers*, Pittsburgh, PA

GRANTS AND CRITICISM

2006 *Cushers*, Summer, 2006 Issue
The Philadelphia Independent, Local Philadelphia Pioneer Newspaper
2004 Art Commentary, *Laura Owens* April, 2004 Issue
Cut and About Pittsburgh, Winter, 2004 Issue
2003 *Bourgeoisie Now! A Review: Jokes That Are Sharp On Both Ends*
Winter, 2003 Issue
2001 *SURG Grant*, Carnegie Mellon, Fall, 2001



Retreat 4, detail, 2007. Acrylic and wax on wood. 4' x 6'.



This Panel: *Retreat 5*, 2007. Acrylic and wax on wood. 4' x 6'.
Cover Panel: *Retreat 7*, 2006. Acrylic and wax on wood. 4' x 6'.



Retreat 6, 2007. Acrylic and wax on wood. 4' x 6'.

WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 2,500 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



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