

Richard Shiff

## CATCHING UP WITH THE INSTANT

For many years, Lilian Garcia-Roig has been painting images of dense forest, working at outdoor sites. Her canvases show obvious signs of landscape representation—vertical tree-forms, branching elements, the colors of vegetation. Yet, especially in areas of accumulated detail, these works leave an impression of pictorial abstraction. Both the large scale and the aggressive surface quality encourage a viewer to zoom in on individual sensuous strokes of pigment, perhaps assuming precisely the point of view that the artist must have taken as she engaged her developing painting directly, intently, establishing this degree of material presence. Seen close up in isolation, any given area of one of her forest scenes threatens to degenerate into mere deposits of pigment, as if no mimetic impulse had been guiding it—as if the painter, in a moment of material concentration, had forgotten the trees just beyond her canvas. In the context of the whole, however, this impression reverses. The collective rhythm of Garcia-Roig’s strokes and their range of color generate effects of form and illumination readily translated into features of a natural scene. She has mastered the art of keeping tactile materiality and the optics of representation in balance and in productive tension. She calls her work “maximalist” because no sensory aspect, psychological orientation, or perceptual attitude escapes it.

Garcia-Roig is a restless, adventurous artist. During the past year or so, her impulse to experiment has led her to creating images of moving water. When I asked her to explain this relatively new interest, the terms of her understanding confirmed what her maximalist paintings had already revealed to me. Glassy, stilled water has little appeal to her as a representational subject. She notes that the conventional inclusion of water in landscape painting usually does little more than create a kind of pause or relief in the context of more actively articulated forms of terrain and vegetation. It seems that painters often get lazy about water, rendering it with pictorial rigidity, contradicting the inherent instability of fluids in nature. Even in a quiet lake, water moves. Garcia-Roig recognizes this aspect of water and welcomes it into her art. She accepts the challenge that the rapid currents of a woodland stream or a wilderness river pose. With its ever-changing palette of reflected color, fully animated water presents a visual density

comparable to the weave of trees in a lush forest where, as Garcia-Roig points out, “the figure is the ground and the ground is the figure.” Within a dense forest, no background ever emerges: behind the trees are more trees, filling all available space.

Why, more precisely, does Garcia-Roig perceive in moving water effects analogous to those of the forest? We might object that water, after all, is transparent—vision penetrates this substance while failing to penetrate a wooded grove. I imagine the artist countering with considerations along the lines that follow. When we view an active stream or river, we observe one level of color and light building on another, combining levels of depth. To look into moving water while also glancing along its surface is to explore interchangeable, ultimately impenetrable, effects. Reflection is affecting everything, everywhere. Reflection fills the space. For the painter who troubles to look, moving water generates pictorial possibilities very similar to those of the forest—a perspective both yielding (illusionistic, representational) and resistant (materially textured, abstract).

Garcia-Roig’s paintings of moving water depict it in at least three of its aspects. The water moves with respect to its immediate physical environment (the banks and stream bed that contain it), it moves in interaction with ambient light (its reflections), and it moves relative to the position of the artist painting it. “The idea that I am looking at something that is changing,” Garcia-Roig says, “makes the challenge of capturing a cumulative experience of that image very exciting ... there is no one right (or even obvious) way of doing it.” As she paints, she observes multiple qualities that she feels she must convey: “With flowing waters, one usually looks first at the general flow and surface of the water, but then one might focus under the water, and then notice a reflection.” If she is to paint what she sees, the representation will be in triplicate (or more): she needs to represent the water’s flow, its unmoving base underneath, and its transient surface reflections above. This last factor amounts in itself to a double movement: the material surface, the actual water, is moving, pulled along by gravity; but the material source of reflection is also moving, for example, clouds passing in the distant sky, brought close by water’s optical play. The painter has to put all of her resources to work to convey this accumulation of effects. In response, her surfaces become remarkably varied, punctuated by boldly abstract, thick strokes, often applied by pressing pigment directly out of a tube. She also inverts this exaggerated

materiality by either reserving, or scraping down to, thin spots that reveal a white painting ground. In the representational context of highly reflective water, these thin areas can evoke a view below the surface into a visually quieter realm or, quite the contrary, a complicating variation belonging to the surface of reflection at the top.

The fact that Garcia-Roig renders these related features—flowing water, a stream bed underneath, reflections of sky above—evokes for me an experience recorded in another era in a different medium: what Henry David Thoreau wrote at Walden in 1854. Moving water fascinated Thoreau just as it does Garcia-Roig, and he anticipated her paintings with his poetic words. Along with the forest and other elements of nature, moving water inspired in Thoreau some of his most profound philosophical thoughts. “Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in,” he wrote in his journal: “I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars.” Thoreau can see the sky reflected in the stream; the optical phenomenon provokes his musing over stars and pebbles. The visual effect leads him toward a temporal abstraction. Through the metaphor of the stream, he grasps an immaterial phenomenon by a material aspect (like a painter using her colors to grasp light). The time Thoreau imagines is both intimately close and utterly remote. We use the word *deep* to describe both waters below us and heavens above us. Observations of a shallow stream suggest to Thoreau that, in one respect at least, the deep eternity of the sky is shallow enough to be accessible from his humble position on earth. Pebbles, stars, and Thoreau himself constitute a single nature—both transient and eternal, near and far.

“Eternity remains,” Thoreau concluded long ago, out in the woods. This realization might apply just as well to Garcia-Roig’s renderings of dense forests or streaming water. Eternity remains, while the painter often works to compress into a single surface the changing illumination of the entire span of daylight, hour by hour, for as many as three successive days. One day in 2010, she slipped out of her usual custom, having been especially pleased with the look of a diminutive 18 by 24-inch canvas completed during the morning hours alone. The view of this work, *Fluid Waters Morning*, is an extreme close-up of a segment of the Skykomish River in Washington. During the afternoon hours of the same day, the painter returned to precisely the same position

and rendered *Fluid Waters Afternoon*. The two canvases have significantly different ranges of color—*Morning* is cooler and greener, with contrasting yellows, whereas *Afternoon* is warmer and redder, with contrasting blues. This is barely a description, since both canvases contain Garcia-Roig's characteristically broad range of hues and values.

Most, if not all of Garcia-Roig's other views of this river include the rocks that protrude from the underlying bed, accounting for much of the agitation in the current. The two *Fluid Waters* paintings represent animated water exclusively—the current, its deviations, its eddies. The artist framed the view to eliminate the rocks, making the effect that much more abstract, with moving paint-strokes representing moving water, nothing more. In essence, paint is liquid just as water is, so each inclines to imitate the other: a photograph of a water stain can look like a paint stain, even though Garcia-Roig's paint would be the most viscous water nature has ever known. Some of her thickly applied strokes waver or seem to tremble (a breeze strikes the surface?); some are straight and direct (forceful, unimpeded current?); some punctuate the presence of others (spots of reflected light?).

All of these effects occur simultaneously within the painter's range of observation but not within her course of action. She necessarily makes her marks in succession, shifting from one gesture to another. To develop a working method fast enough to suit the subject of flowing water—and also for her forest scenes, which, after all, waver with the animated passage of light—Garcia-Roig will have at hand a palette of as many as 65 commercial oil pigments, supplemented by around 100 mixtures of her own devising that she prepares in tubes. As she observes one color after another in nature, she attempts to seize these transient combinations by choosing from the vast array, switching pigments as rapidly as conditions seem to demand. Her project requires that she somehow catch up with nature. Any artist, no matter how well prepared, loses this contest; but Garcia-Roig plays the game as well as any and in her own way. Art is the result—Thoreau-like art, perhaps.

With her densely physical paintings, Garcia-Roig, like Thoreau, touches eternity. This is quite a claim, but it feels right to me. It is my own claim, not Garcia-Roig's; she is more modest, more pragmatic, about such things. So I need to explain. To paint nature is to be involved with natural

cycles of passage and renewal. To paint water is to confront, all the more obviously, the phenomenon of time—eternal, ever-moving time. With her pictures of moving water, Garcia-Roig enters a natural cycle in a specific location. Water itself, no matter where we find it, participates in a round of evaporation and condensation. And, as a fluid, it can assume any shape and take any direction. Its natural movement is downward—“seeking its level” in accord with the universal force of gravity—but evaporation (and at times sublimation) reverses this effect to restart the cycle.

It may be that Garcia-Roig cares little about gravity, condensation, evaporation, and the like—these are a natural scientist’s abstractions, not those of an artist who renders nature with her own material means. Yet each of Garcia-Roig’s paintings enters a natural cycle. Her art is less about fixing the image of a moment, more about participating *in* the moment, which heightens the artist’s sensitivity to her existence within nature’s continuity. In one sense, as Garcia-Roig paints, she must lag behind time, which defeats her attempts at being true to nature, seizing water’s movement by its passing color—the tail of the beast. Whatever effect she captures has already run past. But we need to recall that the finished painting is as much an abstraction as a representation. As a material abstraction—as the object that Garcia-Roig has fashioned—the work is complete when (in her words) “my eye is never stopped in any one place in the painting.” In this respect, when she faces her finished painting, it is no longer “finished.” At this moment of contact, the painting never ceases to move, nor do Garcia-Roig’s vision and comprehension of it come to a static rest. Her art establishes an eternal harmonic balance—an energizing equilibrium that, like nature’s configuration, keeps changing.