

NAN TULL: SENSUOUS WISDOM 1984–2009: TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF PAINTING AND DRAWINGDanforth Museum of Art • Framingham, MA • www.danforthmuseum.org • Through November 8, 2009**NAN TULL: NEW ENCAUSTIC PAINTINGS**Soprafina Gallery • Boston, MA • www.soprafina.com • October 2–31, 2009

In a picture, lines and smudges of color merge and become an arm, a tree, a hill. A picture presents evidence of something else besides its physical properties. The more specific the merging of elements is, the more intense the 'picturing' and our belief in what it conveys becomes. Abstraction in twentieth-century art encouraged the abandoning of representation in favor of the exposure of the actual physical elements of what is called a painting or a drawing, but not necessarily a picture. There was, for example, the insistence of flatness—the picture plane, or color as itself: the picture plane without the picture. Abstraction in its severest manifestations dropped the depiction of 'something else.'

Nan Tull's paintings and drawings emerge from the modernism of the twentieth century, their physicality properly overt, emphatic, and expressive. And, Nan Tull quietly restores something akin to a picture to the plane of its traditional residence. The small encaustic painting *Scan 9: Altitude* is a tangle of wax lines that pull towards the left and right sides of the painting, creating an opening in the space that appears to fall away to a depth characteristically associated with landscape imagery. This sense of a pictured

landscape is enhanced by Tull's application of wax surfaces in translucent layers of hot wax, which soften the edges of forms. Da Vinci employed the blurring technique of sfumato, to suggest spatial depth. In Tull's hands, spatial depth quietly restores the illusion of a picture, enabling complex ideas to be joined with sensuality.

Many of the encaustic paintings in the Danforth exhibition and in the Soprafina exhibition share this layering. In her encaustic paintings, Tull also explores dichotomies of organic forms and grid-based images.

Suspension: Heat Wave, a small encaustic from 2007, is a vertically-striped image that shimmers with the sighing subtlety of a recalled fragrance. This work has a color-field heritage that diminishes the landscape suggestion, but retains a sense of air and climate. Tull's emphasis on abstract elements of color, gesture, and structure enables a representation of behavior that transcends picturing as a primary mission.

In her wide-ranging approaches, Tull, who has worked both large and small (she did two 12-by-21-foot wall drawings in 1989 at P.S. 1 in New York and two even larger wall and ceiling drawings at the Boston Center for the Arts in 1990), is an artist frequently engaged in the pursuit of strong singularities of form. Her large charcoal drawings get their particular muscularity and body identity from an athletic elbow-and-shoulder methodology of delivering marks to the paper. Tull's images recall for the viewer her reach, her speed, and rhythm of laying down often massive strokes of black. Tull's *Black Beauty* drawings developed as a meditation on two amaryllis plants that had been given to her during a serious illness. The plants became metaphors of her struggle towards recovery, with the Black

Nan Tull, *Scan 9: Altitude*, 1999, 18 x 18", encaustic on linen on board.

Beauty drawings delivering an exuberant and monumental toughness. The largest work in the Danforth show, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom: Intuition, Astuteness, Sagacity, Knowledge, Prudence, Integrity and Patience*, 1985, a painting in black and white on seven vertical canvases, is a stately assembly of columned floral forms extolling and modeling their named virtues.

Tull's *Scattered Seed* drawings based on milkweed pods are evocative explosions of form. These eruptive images are at once sexual and soulful. As pictures, they present the force and energy of biology and regeneration, while as abstract drawings they manifest the generative action of the artist herself. These are passionate productions of aliveness—momentary, rigorous, and without rest. Their sfumato blur is foregrounded, a reversal of pictorial manners in which distant ambiguity advances toward the viewer. The elements of the drawing act are exposed as pictorial and spiritual markers.

Tull's work is most persuasive when it is most exploratory. *Genera: Lacing Up*, 2000, is a small white-on-black encaustic that shares the explosiveness of the *Scattered Seed* drawings with a contradictory corseting or harnessing of its own energy. The image is decisively ambiguous, split, tense, and candid, familiar and foreign—a question asked and unanswerable.

DAVID RAYMOND

Nan Tull, *Suspension: Heat Wave*, 2007, 14 x 14", encaustic on board.

Soprafina Gallery, BOSTON
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