

A Conversation with Virginia Katz

Sabine La Bousnière

Virginia Katz is an abstract artist, based in Orange County, California. Her muse is the environment and what it consists of, which she integrates into her art, shown primarily in museums and galleries throughout Southern California. Influenced and prompted by the landscape itself, she also appreciates Mark Bradford's paintings that are the result of his interaction with the streets of LA, Julie Mehretu's use of semiotics in her paintings, Richard Long's natural systems, and Georgia O'Keeffe's landscape-based abstractions, among others. Katz has a fine sense for detail. Aside from using complex art-process techniques, which she skillfully masters, she approaches her works like a scientist. For example, in her Ocean piece "The Difference a Day Makes," she produced an installation of drawings based on her perception of tidal cycles in which each line she drew corresponded to the size and color of each wave as it broke on 11-foot-long Washi scrolls. In another project, "The Hunt," she examined people parking their cars and walking to stores at a local shopping plaza (for a 12-hour work-period) and indicated each shopper's movement by drawing a line to and from their destinations. In contrast to her earlier work, where she observed the environment first-hand, her recent "Land Series" is based on satellite images of the earth's surface.

SL: In 1985 you graduated with a B.A. in Philosophy and about 20 years later you received your Master's degree in Fine Arts. Why did you change directions and how do these two fields of interest come together in your work?

VK: Well, Philosophy is a subject that had and continues to have great appeal and satisfaction for me. I've

always taken seriously the words people use when expressing thought and then questioning those views. I tend to look at the other side in every argument. So, Philosophy just seemed a good fit for me. It is the only field of study I know that underpins every other subject. There is a system of logic at work in Philosophy that, at first, seeks to clarify basic questions and then moves forward toward complexity. This principle underlies any inquiry. I don't view studying Philosophy and then Art as "changing directions."

Philosophy's application in Art is the underpinning of my aesthetic practice.

SL: For the past few years, you've been mainly concentrating on the environment. You first made a series of the wind, then the atmosphere, ocean, place and land. What is it that fascinates you about environmental issues?

VK: Although I was born in Brooklyn, New York, as we all know, a major metropolitan area, I spent the majority of my youth upstate in a rural, mountainous and densely wooded region. As a young person, my playground was the woods. In winter, my friends and I would ice-skate on my friend's frozen pond. We rode horses all year long, hiked and picked wildflowers in the spring. In summer, we built forts in the woods, waded through icy cold springs, collected rocks, camped and hiked. Looking back, I think that I paid close attention to everything around me. I remember how, after a snowstorm, the sound of quiet from the insulating snow was a sensory shift, the perfumed scent of the air during autumn, when the entire forest was changing color and shedding its leaves, and the calls of the Blue Jays and the locusts in summer all gave me pause. Another important influence



Formations - Aqua Minor, 2009, mixed media, mixed process on paper, 66" x 36".



was my father, who was a landscape architect and forester. I grew up being exposed to his knowledge of trees and plants. He considered their cycles as they interacted with seasonal changes and chose them as a design element of landscape.

SL: You are from New York, but have lived in California for many years. Where did you start experimenting with the environment?

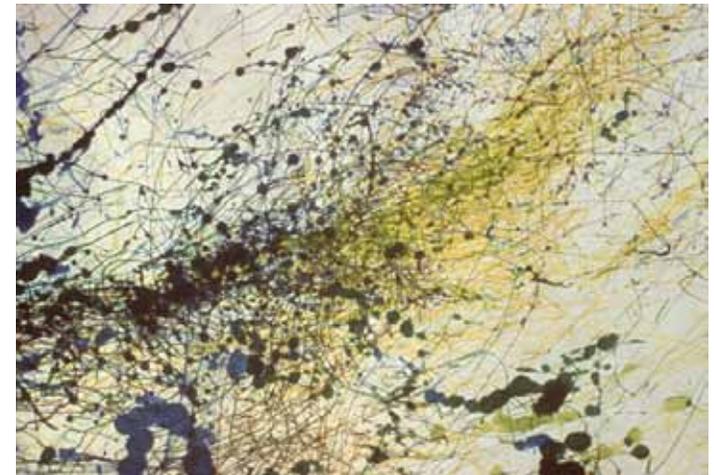
VK: When I first began painting, I worked in the Plein Air style. I spent long hours painting on location. I never painted inside - it was always with brush and paper outside. When I began working in a more conceptual, abstract manner, I began with the Wind series. I tied strings to tree branches and, at the ends of the strings, I taped pens. The paper was weighted on the ground and, when the Santa Ana winds blew, it was the wind's force that moved the branches and then the strings that left traces of the wind's movement on paper. I would remain with the process in gale-force winds for up to 16 hours to record these wind events. All of this work was done in California; but, I believe it was my early exposure to the environment in upstate New York that was preparatory to my work here.

SL: You had two exhibits outside of the United States - in South Korea and in Paris. Was there a significant difference as to how people perceived your work over there?

VK: I think that perception of an artist's work can vary even in one location. It depends on who is doing the looking. I can tell you that the work sold-out in Europe. Since I was not in attendance at either venue that is the only thing I can go by.

SL: In Wind Diagrammatic III, we can see these fine lines and blurs of color. The image has a poetic quality, which reminds me of the work of Catalanian artist Jordi Alcaraz. In which way do you see yourself similar or rather different from him?

VK: Our work does appear to share some similarities and has some differences. What Jordi and I appear to have in common are interests in perception and process. In his work, he seems to want to play with our sense of perception and skew it as seen in his "Process to Reduce This Room into a Painting," where there isn't one right angle in the room, thereby completely throwing one's physical and intellectual sense of perspective into a tizzy. My interest in perception, however, is one that focuses on those things that we don't easily perceive but that have true form. For example,



(clockwise from top left of page) detail of *The Difference a Day Makes*, 2005, watercolor on Washi scrolls 130, 11'x11"; detail of *Path - Intersection*, 2010, mixed process and mixed media on paper (monoprint, collograph, and oil on paper), 72"x26"; detail of *Wind Diagrammatic III*, 2003, ink on Washi paper, 72"x36".

in the wind drawings, the form or pattern that is made is one not easily seen unless captured on something tangible. Jordi creates his environment and alters perception. I work with the existing natural environment to find it in its invisible form. Jordi and I are also engaged by process. Both of us, I believe, are interested not only in what we have done with an idea, but also, we both plan to leave room for the viewer to experience and come away with his or her own unique perceptions.

SL: In your last show at Ruth Bachofner Gallery, you were inspired by satellite images of the Earth's surface. What made this series unlike the previous ones?

VK: The land works are different from the earlier investigations in that they do not rely as much on a "fill-in-the-blank" system in which information by some other action, other than my own, dictated the outcome of the piece. So, in the wind drawings, I let the energy force of the wind create the marks. In the ocean drawings, I let the ocean waves and their size determine the day's recordings. The same is true in "The Hunt," when I let the shoppers' actions determine where the lines would go. In the "Force-Fields," "Formations," "Path" and "Mud" series, there was more of a painterly process involved in their making and they have become more of a hybrid between representation and abstraction. The earlier works were purely abstract.

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