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Ellen Steinfeld's Paintings and Sculptures at the Burchfield-Penney

by Eric Jackson-Forsberg

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"Yellow Leaves" by Ellen Steinfeld

Suspended Motion

Suspended Motion—the title of the exhibition of Ellen Steinfeld's recent sculptures and watercolors at the Burchfield Penney Art Center—may be the perfect phrase to encapsulate Steinfeld's work as a whole. A sense of motion may be evident here, as Steinfeld's work is never static or lifeless. Suspended motion, however, conveys the connotation of motion that is temporarily arrested rather than permanently ended. For that matter, suspended motion suggests moving forms that have been artfully hung up—kinetic energy translated to potential energy and put on display. On various levels, Steinfeld's work represents such transitions of energy, conveying them with a subtle power, whether in two or three dimensions.

Like many (if not all) sculptors, Steinfeld works from sketches to visualize her compositions. Her watercolors are a natural outgrowth of these sketches, and, like their three-dimensional counterparts, demonstrate the artist's mastery of balancing line, form, and color. One group of watercolors, including *Aurora*, *Night Shade*, and *Spring*, has a fairly spontaneous, aqueous quality. Steinfeld's fascination with nature is indulged here in densely saturated thickets of organic form, poised somewhere on a continuum of nature-abstractation that runs from Rousseau to Burchfield and O'Keefe.

The second group of watercolors is distinctly more precise and diagrammatic, with a balanced combination of controlled abstraction and implied movement akin to Kandinsky's compositions. The latter group of watercolors demonstrates the most affinity with Steinfeld's sculptures, as her common vocabulary of form—leaf shapes, arcs, crescents and sinuous, vine-like lines—is shared between the two and three-dimensional work. In this sense, the paintings in this group, such as *Beginning* and *Yellow Leaves*, are the highly evolved progeny of Steinfeld's preparatory sketches for sculpture. The generous white spaces between elements in these paintings are akin to the artist's sculptural forms, where shapes are connected by slender, rigid lines of steel. Despite the relative precision of these compositions, they too are alive with implied motion. Plant or animal-inspired forms seem to swim in and out of the frame, some following the structure of intersecting arcs, others ping-pong off like so many strange protozoa on an illuminated microscope slide.

Many of Steinfeld's paintings are diptychs or triptychs of paper framed together, the forms continuing across thin rifts of negative space that draw attention to the media. These rifts are bridged by Steinfeld's lively forms, accentuating their motion and implying that their energy is not bounded by the artificial constraints of the picture plane's grid. This speaks to Steinfeld's fascination with the contrast between natural and artificial constructions, the complex interplay between natural and artificial systems. Steinfeld's work seems to reveal, even celebrate the fact that all art is an artificial synthesis of natural inspirations.

While not overt, references and inspirations from art history also peek through some of the paintings. For example, *Bolero*, by virtue of its title, invokes thoughts of Spanish music; accordingly, aspects of Miro's cartoon-like abstractions come to the fore, and one can perceive the shape of a whimsical, dancing harlequin with an insectile tambourine. The checkerboard grid in this composition again invokes the counterpoint between the natural and artificial; it's permeable and incomplete, as if fragmented by the more organic forms around it.

The sculpture in the exhibition most clearly conveys a sense of suspended motion. Each has an implied vertical axis, like a Calder mobile suspended yet arrested by some invisible hand. In many of the sculptures, small spheres or disks are like vehicles travelling along the steel arcs in an elegant version of the child's game "Mousetrap." Such three-dimensional mazes are closed systems, but the ambiguous motion implied by Steinfeld's sculptures suggests these travelling members could launch themselves into the space beyond the composition.

In a discussion with the artist at the opening, I commented on the fascinating shadows cast by the sculptures, and she replied that she requested they be lit that way. The implication is that these sculptures extend their formal presence into the gallery space, leading our eyes to follow their forms along the pedestals, floors and walls. The suspended motion of these works is challenged by their apparently inherent impulse to project themselves into the space around them.

Comprehensively, one could say that Steinfeld's work in *Suspended Motion* embodies entropy—specifically, that moment of exquisite tension when an organized system is about to fly apart. This explosive impulse is restrained in Steinfeld's work as compared to the paintings of Zaha Hadid or Julie Mehretu, but this restraint serves to convey a particular sense of energy and motion: lyrical and rhythmic, but not frenetic. Physics tells us that entropy has a tendency to increase, transforming the relative order of organized systems. To the extent that this gloss of science is true, we could say that Steinfeld's suspended motion is an attempt to game the system.