

## Earth

Nena Tsouti-Schillinger, 2014

*I have to render myself to what surrounds me.... I have to morph into a union with the clouds and the rocks, in order to be what I am.*

Caspar David Friedrich

The home page of Vicky Colombet's website greets us with a photograph of the artist as a traditional manual laborer. The photograph has a dramatic immediacy. Working on her *Glass Wall* (2005-12), a permanent site-specific installation, Colombet is seen dressed with a laborer's full body white suit standing on a ladder while drawing and cutting vinyl around an elevated courtyard pool at the Villa Nurbs near Barcelona, Spain.

A collaboration with the Spanish architect of this unconventional house, Enric Ruiz-Geli, Colombet's mural, as she herself stated "was inspired by an aerial view of the real topography of canals, ocean and sky surrounding the house, which is conceived as a linear landscape, folded onto the site in an ascending spiral. The project evolved from a painting laminated between curved glass of 150 X 12 feet that surrounds the pool in the middle of the house and opens to the sky through a sandblasted glass." Certainly the process recalls Land art and

Robert Smithson who once said “Instead of putting a work of art on some land, some land is put into the work of art.”

While Colombet is best known as an abstract painter of reductive poetic canvases, over the years mirror and glass (sandblasted) have found their ways into her repertoire, which, in keeping with her work in other mediums (photographs and digital prints), include depictions of severely reduced landscapes.

In her *Fibonacci Table* (2011), for instance, the etched glass forms on the tondo evoke allusions to natural systems. It is also interesting to mention that the seven bronze legs of the table are numbered following the Fibonacci sequence—after the greatest Italian mathematician of the Middle Ages. Each subsequent number on the table leg is the sum of the previous two (1, 1, 2, 3). This mathematic sequence applies to nature as well as landscape.

But nevertheless, it is the act of painting that remains the absolute center of Colombet’s life. Often topographical in character, her abstract pieces utilize systematic arrangements of line, color and space. Visually evocative and perceptually seductive, her densely layered canvases are at once organic and highly structured.

Colombet works in series—one series evolves into another, which in turn evolves into yet another. Or to quote Robert Morris when he was asked how he came up with the idea of working in series “I think Wittgenstein’s term ‘family resemblance’ might be just as good or better than the notion of ‘series.’” Inspired by the change of seasons in her upstate New York countryside studio, the artist began working on her new “down to earth” pieces entitled *Earth* in early 2014.

As with her earlier works, Asian philosophy is one of the important threads that run through this new series, as nature appears evocative and elusive rather than descriptive—all representational elements having been removed. The artist explains that she is looking for this split second where we don’t know what we are looking at—to free the viewer of preconceived ideas “idées toute faites.” This idea is further emphasized in a number of her *Earth* paintings as she has deliberately left some areas of the canvas blank in order to “enhance” the fragility, the disappearance of what we see. In some instances as much as 30% of the canvas remains void, yet the entire painting is suffused with the sense of a “mist” recalling landscapes of the Chinese Song Dynasty masters.

Colombet has been recognized for her commitment to process and her ability to create paintings in which the surfaces, although from distance seem textural and tactile, are in fact seductively smooth, strangely matte, and remarkably fluid (because she is adding alkyd, mineral spirit and wax to her oil paint). Using the fold marks mostly—the smallest representation of the world as explained in *The*

*Fold* by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze in his interpretation of the theory of “monads” by the German mathematician Gottfried Leibniz—the canvas is further manipulated to form crevices, which the artist then “follows” with precision with soft brushes revealing rather than concealing the characteristics of the surface, while in the process she is further removing the traces of the brushstroke.

However, unlike her earlier series, in the Earth large paintings, the artist is working on raw linen canvas prepared with rabbit skin glue. The brown canvas being a metaphor of the earth—earth pigments/*particules*/earth.

Colombet uses a variety of colors to create her dazzling works, which she tends to change from series to series. In her Earth pieces, which are nearly monochromatic, she uses a range of black and white pigments as well as indigo, turquoise, and lapis-lazuli blue. But in *Untitled 2014* a strikingly large canvas, the predominant shade is red ochre, a color which she has never used before.

Asked why she chose red color, the artist replied that it suggests the red ochre of the soil of the South of France—alluding to the iron-rich landscape of that area.

Creating astonishing visual experiences, the artist's works invite closer examination of and larger thinking about the natural world, which surrounds us. Abstract to the casual glance, one might even say that perhaps her landscapes are not landscapes at all but are instead states of mind, a state of dreamlike

vision. A patient observer however, is rewarded, as with time, Vicky Colombet's "canvas-landscapes" will slowly open up, revealing forms and colors which seem to evoke natural systems—a painting has secrets; a spectator has questions. The conversation begins.