



Water and Stone

Pat Steir's new exhibition paints on the CAC itself

MATT MORRIS // JUN 15, 2010

The idiosyncratic personality of the Zaha Hadid-designed Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) elicits conversations similar to those that Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum long has generated.

On the one hand, there are concerns that the building overpowers the work. On the other, when an artist or exhibition manages to strike up a spirit of collaboration with the architect's creativity, one hears comments on the rare privilege of witnessing art's near total integration into our surroundings.

In her new installation-sized project, *Water and Stone*, done especially for the CAC, artist Pat Steir attempts to unify her splashy, drippy vocabulary of painting techniques with the cool, detached personality of Hadid's architecture. Steir manages to expand the basic language of the building, but one doesn't feel directed through the entire experience. I watched a number of viewers make it only halfway down the space before stopping, as if unmoored and lost at sea.

Steir is part of the old guard, those painters who continue to practice and question the tenets of Abstract Expressionism. Born in 1940 in Newark, she's now based in New York and Amsterdam. She earned a BFA from Pratt Institute in 1961 and in 1991 received an honorary doctorate from the same institution.



Throughout her career she's continued to exhibit widely across the U.S. and across the globe: Rome, Reykjavik, Paris, Moscow and Tokyo are just some of the stops in her exhibition record. Cincinnati knows Steir well through her longtime relationship with the [Carl Solway Gallery](#) in the West End, where she frequently has exhibited paintings and prints.

The major project of Steir's career has been an ongoing body of canvases that are bathed and splattered in paint. Rarely are there visible brush strokes; rather, the liquidity of paint media is pushed to an extreme so that each painting embodies a waterfall. These techniques of splashing paint and resisting the urge to manipulate the downward flow appear across three new canvases and their surrounding walls at the CAC.

The three oil paintings on canvas are grand and engrossing. However, their integration into the overall installation is discomforting, tethered as they are to the room's columns with metal cords. Hardware solutions like these make it difficult, at times, to fully enter this painted installation that seems intended to overwhelm.

All of the walls of the gallery (including a false wall that rounds off one corner of the room so that the viewer's gaze swoops in and down the space without initial interruption) have been repeatedly glazed with an inky blue-black color that has been built up to a nebulous, deep visual sensation. A grid has been drawn with chalk over most of this brooding field, sometimes interrupted with rectangles of even darker pitch black. The rigid grid repeated everywhere is accompanied by doodles in chalk and splatters in white (and only occasionally black) paint.

I want to call the walls "deep," but that seems nonsensical. My perplexity is conceivably what Steir was going for: The sense of solidity inherent in permanent architecture is washed away by the ebb and flow of her stylizations. Standing in the gallery with other viewers felt, to me, like taking a communal shower. I felt that I was at the bottom of some drain. The space feels dark and moist from all the splashes and cascades.

These grids and drawings that recall blackboard diagrams are not new to Steir, just updated from earlier forms. Before settling into the work of the "waterfall" paintings, she made paintings in the early 1970s that broke up the picture plane with drawn grids, black rectangles, scribbles and some early experiments with dripping and washing away paint.

A work such as her 1973 "Circadia" (in the collection of the Baltimore Museum of Art) already contains many of the tools at use in her CAC installation. Working this way coaxes the physical room that is the CAC gallery toward more of a conceptual space, as if one had stepped inside a theorization of physics.

Considering the exhibition's title, water wears away at stone. As this might pertain to Steir's washy paintings, they seem to negotiate Hadid's building into a more dissolute state. She seems to have created an installation that carries her own art's evolutionary history with it, so that different periods of work swirl together into a darkened, somewhat uneasy mind space.

WATER AND STONE continues through Aug. 22 at the Contemporary Arts Center.

<https://www.citybeat.com/arts-culture/visual-arts/article/13014208/water-and-stone-review>