



SUE HETTMANSPERGER

SUE **HETTMANSPERGER**

**PAINTINGS, ENTANGLEMENT SERIES**

**ESSAYS** *by* KATHY EDWARDS & JOE FYFE



This catalogue is published on the occasion of a one person exhibition at A.I.R. Gallery in Brooklyn, New York, October 5-30, 2011.

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CATALOGUE DESIGN *by* BRADLEY DICHARRY

PHOTOGRAPHY *by* CHARLENE TRAWICK

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2011  
oil on linen  
30" x 27"



**SUE HETTMANSPERGER:  
21ST-CENTURY PAINTER OF AMERICA'S  
DYSTOPIC NATURAL HISTORY**

by KATHY EDWARDS  
*Chief Curator, University of Iowa Museum of Art*

KATHY EDWARDS has been a curator at the University of Iowa Museum of Art for thirteen years, initially as curator of prints, drawings, and photographs. Her most recent exhibition was *Lil Picard and Counterculture New York*.

Traditional painters of natural history, like Charles R. Knight, John James Audubon, and others, provided visions of the Mesozoic and Jurassic eras. I see the paintings of Sue Hettmansperger as the latest additions to that esteemed lineage. While Hettmansperger's vision is diasporic and dystopian, it still retains the beauty and sense of wonder present in the works of those nineteenth-century artists.

The paintings to be included in her upcoming exhibition at A.I.R. Gallery hang on the walls of Hettmansperger's studio like sentinels. Each is at least three inches deep, the canvas perfectly stretched. Some are 27 × 27 inch squares alluding to the artist's fascination with symmetry and emblems. These dimensions are carefully considered so that each piece has a quality of "objectness"; they impart an impression more like relief sculpture than two-dimensional painting. Because the artist uses the computer as a tool, and has for more than ten years, the paintings also refer to the monitor as a doorway to new worlds.

These worlds are both vast and mysterious. Hettmansperger's paintings are populated by lone multi-dimensional structures that mostly float in the middle of the composition in undefined spaces. I think of her spaces as "scapes"—simultaneously landscape, bodyscape, and mindscape.

Some structures have a tether, a foot or a ligament that seems to secure it to the ground or even to a membrane. The structures relate to the artist's collages, which function as studies for the paintings. The collages, compelling in their own right, are created from paper cut from various sources, including photographs. Like them, the structures in the paintings are built from multiple elements. Some materialize like archaic spaceships or alien beings composed of recycled junk and body parts. Simultaneously ancient and modern, visceral and beautiful, Hettmansperger's structures are amalgamations of remnants of civilizations, decomposing stuff in compost piles and interior body organs.

To assemble the structures in her paintings, Hettmansperger has researched the basic building blocks of forms in nature—surface tension as it appears under a microscope; three-way body joints in engineered models; the patterns of drying, cracking mud; branching structures; theories of topology; and various topographies—and celebrates them in her work. Well read in complexity and chaos theory, and utilizing computer software, Hettmansperger has



explored notions derived from advanced theories of topological transformation, which involves the folding and stretching of forms, connectivity and other mathematical studies of the properties of objects. When I found her in her studio perusing Stephen Wolfram's *A New Kind of Science*, an advanced study of biological systems like cellular spaces, I again thought about those famous 19th-century artist-naturalists.

Not only is Hettmansperger influenced by mathematical and biologic theory, she can easily refer to a great lineage of artists, whose methodology she admires. One such artist is Joseph Albers and his seminal 1972 work *Formulation Articulation*, which has contributed to Hettmansperger's understanding and unique application of theories in geometric design, complex relationships of color, and the creation of compositions that successfully bestow illusions of movement and visual conundrums. Hettmansperger wants to proceed to a point where what's happening in her paintings doesn't seem to resolve, so that for the viewer reality seems to slip and is unhinged.

"Our world view can be pushed, mutated, morphed from one reality to another," noted Hettmansperger, "into a newly invented and expanded, relational world view, a complex reality redefining everything."

That the artist has been a long-time supporter of and participant in the ecological movement is evident. Some of her forms are inspired by the shapes of plastic containers, mass-produced packaging, and the synthetic DayGlo colors of other ubiquitous throwaway products. She considers places like Superfund sites and chemical dumping grounds to be both horrific and beautiful, and she thinks about the discomfiting position of humans as both participants in and witnesses to the destruction of the earth.

The artist also celebrates forms in nature: underbellies of clouds in a tornadic Midwest sky, for example, create a sense of transformation. The color is stunning, gorgeous. Oil paint applied with classic glazing techniques creates interplays of luminous, jewel-like tones and rich optical effects.

Hettmansperger's signature use of "drag"—the pull of a paint-laden brush over a different-colored layer of partially dried paint—is almost literally the icing on the cake in her complex and highly skilled lexicon of techniques. Fat paint layers, some cool colors, some hot, drag over prior more thinly applied layers in an abiding conversation between artist and paint. That modernist, private collaboration between an artist and her materials, and between the viewer and the phenomenon of an artist's accomplishments in that arena, still brings me great joy. I love the experience of recognizing that conversation.



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30" x 27"

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**SUE HETTMANSPERGER'S PAINTINGS**

by JOE FYFE

*Dans les plis sinueux des vieilles capitales  
Où tout même l'horreur, tourne aux enchantements,  
Je guette, obeissant à mes humeurs fatales,  
Des êtres singuliers, décrépits et charmants.*

LES FLEURS DU MAL, LES PETITES VIELLES

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

JOE FYFE is a painter, writer and curator who has had solo exhibitions of his work in NY, LA, Paris and Vietnam. He has written for *Arts Asia Pacific* and *Artforum* and writes regularly for *Art in America* and Artnet.com. Fyfe is the recipient of numerous awards including a Pollock-Krasner Award, a Guggenheim Award, and a Fulbright Fellowship.

When we first begin to acquaint ourselves with the recent paintings of Sue Hettmansperger, we find an image that is both obscure in what its carefully brushed and limned interpenetrations describe and dimmed by a crepuscular atmosphere that seems to have both a psychological and a painting-historical dimension. As to the latter, the pictorial space is familiar enough—standard, almost academic illusionistic shadows provide contour, etc. but it seems deliberately vague, almost to the point of a kind of psychic need.

As to the former, one remembers Michael Crichton's recounting of Jasper Johns arrival in Los Angeles for a visit many years ago. His hostess picked him up at the airport and apologized for the overcast weather. The artist reassured her that gray was his favorite color. Like Johns, it seems that Hettmansperger prefers to situate her painted world in an atmosphere that is akin to that of a Petri dish, a hermetic landscape, as much of the mind as of the mysterious realities depicted. Duchamp suggested to Johns that he might have physiological need to make his dense, matte painted surfaces. Similarly, it always seems to be dusk in Hettmansperger's paintings—this is perhaps to foreground the doubt about the future that hangs over the work as well as contradictorily, reassure by replicating the cozy fade of evening.

Baudelaire wrote about the corners of the old cities as if they were organic places, like the natural landscape sites of his Romantic predecessors. He describes his excitement in being in the twisting folds of the cities, places where the surging populous has left its mark. He is charmed by traces of scurrilous, frantic activity. Baudelaire's investigation of the social, psychological and economic terrain of the urban landscape is more relevant than ever today, as the planet

becomes a city. More than half the earth's inhabitants now live in cities. Huge populations of the poor have ringed the edges of massive metropolises, forming a ring of dwellings that resemble an asteroid belt of slums. There is a tremendous sense of potential activity in these areas along with disease and desperation.

Walter Benjamin wrote that Baudelaire imagined the city as submarine. When we begin to ascertain the mixture of architecture, flora, human tissue and artificial synapses that seem to constitute the offal of distopias depicted, we are entering into Hettmansperger's world, which is also a critical picture of a real thing, too real to depict without the distortions of the grotesque. Instead of alienating the viewer, this method makes the image more palatable.

The mimesis of growth in these recent paintings is that of the product of a kind of demon seed, a Monsanto product whose corporate strength, a rough blind beast, stalks the midwestern area where Hettmansperger lives and works. When Gertrude Stein wrote that America was the oldest country because it was the first to become modern, she wrote from the perspective of a celebrant of the modern spirit. The enlightened pessimism contained in Hettmansperger's work anticipates how consumer capitalism's promise has become a techno-entertainment state of standardization and control but with the negative bonus of economic difficulties for decades to come. The rapid destruction of former life and the closing up of new possibilities has become an accepted fact.

Which might explain the curious ripples that cohere in the paintings, how they seem to emerge from its facture. They are reminiscent of shoals or gravel bars, an effect of ocean current in shallow water. In this sense the paintings are like fossilized remains of the present found in some extremely distant future, seeming to remind the viewer that though they and all their works may depart from here this sphere in space will live on. Hettmansperger does not describe this amalgamation of sinew, artifact and architecture in order to depress us, however, more that she is Baudelairean in the sense that she finds in this extreme crisis of our contemporary reality a route for the imagination to live in and to abide in.

We might also look at the images as traces of artworks past, found as if on a shipwreck, or a rocket-wreck, for that matter. As if we are peering at partially dismantled, aged, destroyed sculptures, paintings, and mainframes—whatever was once considered what Donald Kuspit describes as “art...regarded as a treasure of civilization, sometimes the only civilized thing produced by an uncivilized society.”

The hopefulness exists in the seeming presence of life, as if these ruins are living and breathing, buried under some futuristic adaptation that combines plastic surgery, implantation of computer hardware and various environmentally necessitated armoring, some of it pre-natal. This is a portrait of our present moment, but we don't know if it's animal mineral or vegetable or all three simultaneously.

When we contemplate the century we are currently occupying, we might be reminded that Elizabeth Bishop called the last one “The worst so far”. Another look at these elusive portraits brings up the very common twenty-first century image of wreckage. Where the twentieth century seems to be about human slaughter on a massive scale, this century seems to be more about disaster, whether it is directly commissioned as in 9/11, from neglect, as in the gulf spill, or more recently what has happened in Japan, the news is always accompanied by images of wreckage.

In Hettmansperger's new paintings we are faced with the cruel fact that disaster is the zeitgeist, that though things keep growing, they keep morphing and changing and breaking up, be it regimes, buildings, personalities or icebergs. That what we call civilization is melting. Hettmansperger declares her loyalty to the artist as poet, the one who internalizes and legislates, that begins to interpret what must be interpreted through feeling and depiction.

The artist David Salle once described the Mexican tequila that had the worm in the bottom of the bottle. The worm was supposed to extract the poisons from the liquor in order that it is drinkable. Salle said he saw that as the artist's role in society. It is similar to what Hettmansperger is up to in these paintings.



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oil on linen  
27" x 27"

2011  
oil on linen  
27" x 27"





2010  
oil on linen  
27" x 30"

2010  
oil on linen  
30" x 27"





2010  
oil on linen  
57" x 54"



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This catalogue is produced on the occasion of a one person exhibit at A.I.R. Gallery, Brooklyn, N.Y.

Sue Hettmansperger is a Professor at the University of Iowa, and received a 2008 John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship in Painting.

ONE PERSON SHOWS include A.I.R. Gallery 2011, 2007, 2003, 1999, 1994, 1990; as well as numerous university galleries. Her work is included in New American Paintings-Midwest, 2010 & 2005.

GROUP VENUES include Cedar Rapids Museum of Art 2006, Bowling Green State University 2005, Northern Arizona University 2005, Grinnell College 2003, University of Texas, San Antonio 2002, Des Moines Art Center 1996, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago 1992.

MAJOR GRANTS include Iowa Arts Council Public Art, 2010, U IA Faculty Scholar Award 1999, and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship 1983.

RESIDENCIES include UCROSS Foundation 1992, Roswell Art Museum 1990 and 1975, and MacDowell Colony 1977.

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