

A Form Between Forms: An Interview with Celia Gerard

By Charlie Schultz

ArtSlant

January 2014

Celia Gerard is an artist for whom two sticks of charcoal, a bit of white paint, and a strong sheet of paper is plenty of material. “Line Quality” could be her mantra, and looking at her works one can see why. Gerard’s abstract compositions are built on geometric foundations of linear marks that may be subtle or bold but are always decisive. While her solo exhibition, “Lost at Sea,” was being hung, ArtSlant editor Charlie Schultz paid Gerard a visit to discuss her newest body of work.

Charlie Schultz: On first sight your work looks abstract. But nearly all the titles in the show refer to the landscape, either sea or city. How does this relationship between the abstract image and the landscape function for you?

Celia Gerard: I think of this work as an investigation of depth and space on a two-dimensional surface. A sense of a landscape develops, but I feel they’re still very much abstract works. My hope is that the viewer recognizes something in them, which may be a landscape—a placeless place—something familiar but unnamable. It could be a feeling too.

CS: The lion’s share of titles in this new body of work refers to “the sea.” Can you tell me about what the sea means to you? Is there a specific sea or sea-experience you are drawing upon?

CG: I have very personal associations with the sea. When I’m in the sea and I’m floating, there’s this sense of the sea and the sky, and I’m in between, but I’m part of it, as a third piece. That’s something I play with in my work, the sky and the ground, which becomes another landscape question, a classical one. There’s the duality—sky/ground and sky/sea—but what’s in between and how do they merge? And what’s the third element? That’s something that really interests me.

CS: Can you tell me about your process? How much is improvisation vs. premeditation?

CG: There is a process, but for the most part it’s improvisational. It’s improvisation within a defined set of parameters. The title of this show is “Lost at sea,” which is a bit of a metaphor for my process. In the studio it’s about working into the unknown. But of course I’m not totally lost. I know my materials; I know how to use them, but I don’t know where I’m going to end up when I get started.

CS: *Do you find one work influences another?*

CG: Definitely. I work on multiple pieces simultaneously and ideas in one piece might activate another set of questions in a different piece. But I've learned to let them each have their own life and see through the questions on their own instead of trying to answer every question in one piece.

CS: *What about the materials? What are you using?*

CG: I keep it basic. I find that you can do a lot with very little. There's graphite, charcoal, chalk, ink. I use a great goat milk-based paint. But I also use sand paper and an electric sander. The paper is so strong. It's handmade and wouldn't fall apart if you put it in a washing machine.

CS: *There is a sculptural quality to your works, at least partially because of the physicality of the mark making. To me, they aren't quite drawings, or paintings; it's more like you're using techniques of both mediums to create a heavily worked surface that feels sculptural even though the works are on paper and mounted behind picture frames. Is this negotiation between mediums something you think about or is it more of an unconscious effect of the process?*

CG: I'm trained as a sculptor. That's what I majored in undergrad and studied as a graduate student. So I'd say I identify more as a sculptor than a painter. This series, which I began in 2007, came out of sculpture that I was making at the Studio School. I was studying the figure and looking at proportion and I became interested in a kind of depth that I couldn't achieve in sculpture. So I started working in low relief, and playing with very small increments of depth that of course become huge increments in space. So working into space, into depth, has always been an interest and a priority, and sort of by accident it lead me to this two-dimensional work.

CS: *There are a lot of basic geometric shapes in your work—triangles and circles are dominant—that overlap and build into fluid, even lyrical, compositions. Do you think of these shapes on a strictly formal level or are there secondary or even tertiary relationships at play?*

CG: I think of them as elemental. Everything in nature is based on these basic shapes. Cezanne made that observation and it influenced a lot of modernism, cubism certainly. For me, the exchange of depth and flatness is also interesting. When do these shapes become three-dimensional? When do they flatten out again? I'm interested in moving them around in that way. There is also a sense of anonymity to these kinds of shapes. It makes them universal, easily recognizable, familiar.

CS: *Sea Song (Khora III) is especially interesting to me because of the reference to khora, which is a philosophical term Plato used to describe the space or interval when forms take shape. It's almost womb-like, in a way. And in relationship to the rest of your pieces it shifts the emphasis away from tactile bodies of space, like sea or city, and into philosophical dimension. Can you talk about what khora means to you?*

CG: I became somewhat obsessed with the khora a couple of years ago when color started coming into the work and I saw some elements of landscape imagery starting to seep in. I began asking, what is this? What is this about? What is this landscape? I don't want them to be literal landscapes, and they aren't. But what are they then? Something in between, a form between forms. I like the elusive quality of an unnamable space, something that feels both familiar and strange. That's what this series is about in a lot of ways, navigating between the familiar and the unknown.