

Nancy Genn
Paper Paintings
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Andrew Crispo Gallery

PAPER PAINTINGS

Viewing the work of Nancy Genn is like experiencing a Rothko painting or the subtle cracks and patina of a simple plaster wall in the Zen gardens of Kyoto's Ryoan-ji: the more one allows oneself to be drawn into an individual work, the more the content and complexity of that work become apparent. Genn's work emits a quiet power and intensity which draw the viewer into a series of contrasts that delight and instruct. Initially drawn to the bold geometric grid and powerful colors of the work, one studies the work and becomes involved in the varied textures, the interplay of colors, and the lacy deckled edge contrasted with the crisp lines embossed into the surface. Like a painstakingly orchestrated Zen garden, Genn's images are implied rather than literally presented. Rather than impose a rigid pattern—as in an 18th century formal Western garden— or depict nature in the raw, Genn's imagery reflects the more naturalistic Oriental garden form that has been extremely influential on her native California. Though meticulously planned, Genn's images—like those gardens—allow for a certain amount of contrast and contradiction within the image that is finally resolved by the viewer in experiencing the work. The viewer's eye is brought into the image and gradually led to perceive more and more nuances of color and texture and subtle "veils" of diffused light created with "washes" of natural colored Japanese gampi fibers over areas of dyed cotton rag pulp. Nancy Genn is masterfully painting with the paper pulp, within the sheet of paper. The resulting images are "landscapes," not literal images of specific places, but evocative landscapes that distill the combination of man's geometric, structural order, or rationality, with natural chaos, or intuition.

The images reduce the landscapes of Genn's own experiences to their simple essence, "besides the form."

*I would not paint a face, a rock, nor brooks, nor trees.
Mere semblances of things, but something more than these.
That art is best to which the soul's range gives no bound.
Something besides the form, something beyond the sound.*

Anonymous 8th century Chinese poet

Nancy Genn's present commitment to her own techniques in handmade "paper paintings" are a comfortable marriage of her strong training and experience in both painting and sculpture.

She grew up in an artistic household where Japanese master

prints are among her early memories. She studied painting and sculpture at the San Francisco Art Institute and the University of California at Berkeley. Her first professional works were large paintings of calligraphic lines on paper mounted on stretched canvas. She spent a number of years doing major works in cast bronze, including several significant commissions. She then turned to large expressionistic paintings on canvas and finally introduced geometric shapes to structure the calligraphic aspects of the paintings. These interests made her introduction to handmade paper processes with Garner Tullis, Don Farnsworth, and John Koller particularly fortuitous. Genn quickly developed her own method of building up paperworks using strips and layers to create an image. Some of the layers were pulled back to reveal earlier strata. Genn's earlier works in this technique rely heavily on the grid structure to create a geometric unity. Gradually the formal geometry gave way to looser images. Her time in Japan as a National Endowment for the Arts (Japan-United States Friendship Commission) fellow reinforced a movement toward more fluid and dynamic compositions—still utilizing an overall stratified and linear quality that contrasts nicely with areas of loose, painterly color.

In the work done since Japan one sees a back and forth between the more balanced geometry of *Seadrift* #15, *Limefield* #17, or *Delta* #4 and the graceful fluidity of *Himiko* and *Izumo* #2 whose diagonal shafts of light were suggested by the dramatically sunlit walls of Buddhist monasteries with their horizontal bands indicating levels of patronage. Over a period of time the works reflect an evocation of places experienced. A more recent trip to Spain interjected the colorful Seville and Evora images which reflect the contrast of the patterned tiles and borders and the simple whitewashed walls as well as the rich Moorish colors and patterns of Spain. These works exude a flamboyant energy which speaks of sunlight and flowers and the colorful Spanish culture. *Shoals* suggests the intensity of light as in sun through fog or mist, and a daring open composition suggesting an experience so intense as to be nearly shocking. The Tundra images have returned to the grid, now softened by fluid, painterly color behind white frothy bars.

Clearly for Nancy Genn the development of her technique of working with handmade paper was a timely means to combine many contrasting qualities and capabilities: ancient time honored processes and technical innovation; additive sculptural process and painterly color and effects; naturalistic landscape and abstraction; collaboration with craftsmen and complete control over her own process and materials, rational intellectualization and intuition; and subtle painterly colors and textured three-dimensionality. It is the deft combination of these contrasting qualities which makes Genn's images so successful. For Genn, as for many artists, handmade paper is a medium of tremendous flexibility and contrasts as well as being a perfect bridge between painting and sculpture and printmaking. Nancy Genn was among the first artists to work extensively with handmade paper, she was shown in the 1976 Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Works on Handmade Paper*. At the time Village Voice writer David Bourden wrote, "In choosing to work with a simple recyclable material like paper, today's artists affirm their desire to maintain total control over their art." This first assertion of paper as a material which con-

trasted the minimalists emphasis on anonymous commercial materials and processes, has now matured into a material which offers many unique possibilities on many levels. Genn has been selected for major museum collections and exhibitions focusing on artists who work in paper, including *New American Paperworks* which traveled in the U.S., toured Asia, and now is traveling in the United States. Her work continues to refine and develop her process and in turn her own expression. The fellowship to Japan enhanced this refinement. Over the past ten years Genn has made the medium of paper her own. The new works in this exhibition are poetic, mysterious, and evocative images whose look is "beyond the form," and whose voice is "beyond the sound." Clearly now Nancy Genn's own form and sound have emerged.

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