

Sky Power

BEYOND THE HORIZON

By Susan Rand Brown



PASSAGE, 2006, OIL ON CANVAS, 57 BY 76 INCHES

BECKONING LIKE ripe summer peaches, Sky Power's seductive, luminous canvases—"dreamscapes," she calls them—are of the moment. Absent obvious narrative, Power's recent works—*Secluded* (2005) in the permanent collection of the Provincetown Art Association and Museum or *Sea Roses* (2008), where violet surrenders to the pull of orangey pink, and needle-size red zips pierce a winding ribbon of pale yellow—reach to the idea of a painting as metaphor. "The subject of art is aesthetic perception," a Zen-like pronouncement attributed to West Coast Expressionist Robert Irwin, perfectly captures the surrender Power's work invites.

Looking at Power's work over the last half-decade, we are aware that here is someone at the top of her game. Confident yet always questing, she has consistently simplified her means of working the canvas until what leaves her studio is immediately identifiable as her own: we respond to the purity of the visual language, the absence of gimmickry and easy resolution.

Hers is a deep connection to the lyricism of abstraction, a fellowship extending across time and space. We see in her work a conversation with twentieth-century artists. There's Matisse, of course; and those closely associated with Provincetown, who likewise made aesthetic perception a primary concern: early twentieth-century modernist E. Ambrose Webster ("for his

colors"), who lived and taught in Provincetown; Mark Rothko, Hans Hofmann, Robert Motherwell ("for his mark-making"), Helen Frankenthaler, James Lechay, and Selina Trieff. Asked about major influences, she cites the Fauves for bold tonal juxtapositions—orange, violet, cerulean—that in her hands mark the sensations of a spacious interior world.

Reared first on the Texas plains, and then in Wyoming "watching tornadoes come across," Power jokingly admits to being preternaturally sensitive to weather; in this way, her work also echoes the roiling, atmospheric cloudscapes and skyscapes of eighteenth-century English painter J. M. W. Turner—for their fascination with what lies beyond the horizon line, but, more so, as a record of the search for an understated, elemental language, an eloquence pared to essentials.

Would anyone who named herself "Sky" when she was twenty, to signal a coming-of-age into the promise of the 1970s, not be attuned to weather? Her most recent works, the large paintings that can be read as guides to universal truths rooted in particular emotions, are "very free, like the weather." In a musical voice tracing the many places she has lived, she adds, "All my work makes you think of the weather," plucking the thought from a bright afternoon light. "And while you think of the physical weather out there, there's also the emotional weather in here." She places her hand to her chest.

"The connection always, for me, is the link between the inner and the outer."

During the summer, the fifty-eight-year-old Power spends much of her time in the Berta Walker Gallery, on Bradford Street in the East End of town, where she shows her work and serves as gallery manager. Her home and studio are nestled in the woods of North Truro. A few years ago, as a reminder of her Native American heritage (she is one-sixteenth Cherokee), she built a fire pit, sheltered by rustic birdhouses and a thatch of ten-foot stalks whose yellow daisy-like blooms swayed in the breeze. Although such a comparison would embarrass the modest Power, this outdoor shrine, paradoxically rugged and domestic, suggests the two sides of Power's self-sufficient ingenuity: there is her ease in nature with its potential for wildness; there is her pleasure in a sheltering place, close to sea and dunes.

Power was born in Post, Texas, a small town in Garza County, founded by her great-grandfather, who arrived there by covered wagon. One grandfather was a sheriff; the other, a county judge. Her mother, who lived in Provincetown at the end of her life, was a musician and a painter. Power and her sisters had private art lessons: there was that first experience doing a portrait which, like tea leaves floating in the bottom of a cup, told her fortune. "The high school teacher thought I copied it from a book, so I know I must have had something in me," Power says, savoring the irony. She went to Casper College in Wyoming (a visual reference for her big skies), and found her way to Ed Gothberg, who had known Willem de Kooning in Manhattan, and "excelled in figure drawing." For years after, Power did figurative portraits, of herself, and her lovers.

By her late teens, she was in Seattle, going to art school; she transferred to the Massachusetts College of Art after a year, where her tenure was equally brief: "All I could see was I would be teaching art, which I did not want to do." She remained in Boston, living with a partner, painting, exploring the woman she would become. Stonewall happened, a defining moment: for Power, it meant meeting other young, gay women, and forming a commune she refers to as Feather's Farm, on a hundred-acre plot in Kingston, Massachusetts (near Plymouth). Using salvaged wood and old nails, Power built her own house; she dug and dried rock to construct a fireplace. The women started an organic cranberry business, hand-raking and sorting. They trucked the berries to Cambridge food co-ops. It was still the early 1970s.

By mid-decade Sky Power was in Provincetown, part of a charismatic circle including musician and business owner Laurel Brooke (a founder of Gabriel's Guest House), and Molly Benjamin, who would become well-known as a fisherman and newspaper columnist. Power and Brooke established the first horse-and-buggy business in the center of town: she tells humorous anecdotes about doing carpentry at Taves Boat Yard to retrofit her pickup with an oak rack, then driving to Pennsylvania for a horse trained to pull a surrey (there was much controversy in town about mingling horses with auto traffic



SEA ROSES, 2008, OIL ON CANVAS, 24 BY 30 INCHES, COURTESY PROVINCETOWN ART ASSOCIATION AND MUSEUM

after one hapless hoofed creature, spooked by a car, took off down Bradford midsummer). Before long Power had returned to Texas, intending to earn money to care for the horse; her first Provincetown sojourn had ended.

Back in Provincetown four years later, Power found work at Napi's Restaurant doing kitchen cleanup. Consistently hardworking, a quick study, Power's energy impressed owners Napi and Helen Van Dereck, who shortly thereafter invited her to learn to cook. Thus it was that in the early 1980s, Power trained in the high-pressure art of restaurant food preparation, under the tutelage of watercolorist Julia Kelly, daughter of painter Nancy Whorf, and granddaughter of watercolorist John Whorf.

At Napi's she rose to head cook. When the Van Derecks took over the Flagship Restaurant in the mid-1980s, Power became sous chef ("I took to the adrenalin and creativity of the kitchen"), a position she held until 1996. Like any Provincetown narrative, this one is filled with serendipity; by the time Power met Berta Walker, both Whorf and Kelly, mother and daughter, were represented by the Walker Gallery.

During that last sojourn in Texas, Power, eager to learn, apprenticed as a piano-tuner. She already knew carpentry, and, as to ear training, played the guitar: telling this story, Power's innate modesty makes it seem so natural, so easy. For a decade, she cooked in the evening, and tuned pianos during the day: Power's small notice in local papers for her Cape-wide piano-tuning business was how many knew and identified her.

All this time—at the commune, in Provincetown, and back in Texas, the years when she was a piano-tuning chef, or in San Francisco when for a brief period she was a gourmet live-in chef at the Djerassi Foundation, meeting artists and writers

including novelist Richard McCann, a member of the Fine Arts Work Center faculty and still a friend (they traveled together in Ireland)—Power was painting, and showing work.

In the mid-1980s she had a show at the Eye of Horus Gallery, on the top floor of Napi's Restaurant; there were solo shows at the Provincetown Group Gallery when it was adjacent to the Flagship; when it became the Boathouse Gallery, Power remained a gallery artist. There were also solo shows at the Foundry Gallery at DuPont Circle, Washington, D.C., and the Infinity Gallery in Union Square, Boston. When Michael McGuire took over the Boathouse

space for his own gallery, Power showed in other galleries in town. In 2004, she started showing at the Berta Walker Gallery.

Talk to Power, and she tells you the years since have brought an accelerated rush of creativity, gallery shows, even a musical portrait.

This year especially has been a bonanza of creativity. She found herself painting feverishly after a fall 2008 cruise to port cities in France, Italy, Spain, Greece, and Turkey. Paintings influenced by the experience include *Clear Water* (2009) and *Restless Sea* (2009): gestural swirls of mauve, purple, and orange radiate urgency and energy. "I am driven by newness; I need to take my work to places that are new," she says of these pieces, whose brushwork appears looser, more distinct than what came before.

There Is a Field—Rumi (2008), in oranges, greens, and golden pinks, suggests sitting on a cloud; a perfect silence is broken by soft showers, denoted by drips marking the canvas in downward splashes. This painting was exhibited early in 2009 as part of the group show "ROYGBIV" at the Cotuit Center for the Arts on Cape Cod (initials stand for red/orange/yellow/green/blue/indigo/violet), curated by Maggie Van Sciver, president of the Arts Foundation of Cape Cod.

Energy bequeaths the same: she accepted an invitation to participate with five paintings in "L.I.F.E. in the Abstract," a group show in February 2009 at the Cahoon Museum in Cotuit. How did gallery director Robert Gambone find her? "He saw a few paintings and just loved my work," she says melodically, the sounds of "loved my work" hitting the ear as if freshly unwrapped from shiny foil. Power's *Sea Roses* (2008), an aria to spring's first breath, is featured on the museum's announcement card; she was invited to present an artist's talk. Gallery owners in Naples, Florida, have expressed interest in her work. *New Paintings: Spiritual Preference*, a selection of Power's recent work, will show at the Berta Walker Gallery in Provincetown, July 10–26, 2009.



CLEAR WATER, 2009, OIL ON MASONITE, 24 BY 36 INCHES



SKY POWER AT HER FIRE PIT

The majestic *Interior of a Landscape* (2007) was included in the Cahoon exhibit. “This painting is usually described as about the sea, the sky, the land,” Power says with a knowing smile. “But the part of me that it meant most to is the organic part, the effect nature has had in my life.” A loose cloud of cottony-pink on the upper edge of the canvas seems to float by a plane of ruddy salmons and oranges; a green primal soup cradles an orange focal point that Power connects to the clay colors and rocky landscape of the Caprock region in Texas where she grew up. Feathery yarn-like drips tumble over what looks like raw canvas but is a layer of white gesso, a technique (whose effect reminds this writer of canvas patches in color-field paintings) Power uses to balance her compact areas of intensely toned colors with this visual equivalent of a musical breath-mark.

Power mixes a vat of color so she can work on several pieces at once, letting each layer of thinned paint dry before brushing on the next. Because the resulting layers can appear flat, more Rothko stain than juicy textural stroke of an Expressionist, Power’s medium is often mistaken for acrylic.

“I start off very free,” she explains about the intuitive part of the process, “and once I have that, I

become analytical about what colors I want, what effect.” In addition to large brushes, she paints with rags. “You end up with that gorgeous soft residue.” A work in progress can be positioned on a wall, an easel, or even the floor. To make the drips, or markings, she is likely to move the canvas around, encouraging the loose medium to travel. “I want a painting that you can get close to, and it is strong, and when you

move back thirty feet, it is still strong,” she says. “Whatever I need to do, I will do it.”

A recent series of paintings on the Bardo reflects her reading of Tibetan Buddhism. The concept of Bardo is one of constant transition between states of awareness. *Staying in the Middle* (2007) expresses extreme states, or opposing unresolved feelings, through an image of suspension or separation. Layers of orangey yellow radiate over the top third of the canvas; there is a suggestion of a meandering bridge, a separation—we see an opening in the canvas, primed yet colorless—which reads as either invitation or barrier to what comes next. Orange mark-making connects through the opening to layers of violet purple; at any time we can be swept into a zone still unknown.

In her unaffected way, Power describes the process of creating these emotion-driven pieces: “I connect to what I feel inside, and what might come: it’s about me, but more than me, something bigger that I am a part of. I feel that my work bridges the gap between me and what is on the other side, the other world.”

The mark-making or iconography in her new work, those splashes, drips, feathery traces, and needle-like zips, connects Power’s recent work to

her Ikage paintings from 1999 to 2001, where rune-like signs suggest an ancient alphabet. Ikage, she explains while showing a sampling in her studio, is the Apache word for shield or protector. Native American men created these shields as their power symbols; Power completed a series of Ikage paintings (over fifty in a three-year period) to represent her own identity, as a woman, part Cherokee, from the Southwest.

She tells a story about showing the Ikage series to a Native American “old-timer” who knew her family: he immediately connected the stick-like calligraphy of the marks dancing over the surface of these paintings to sign-making on Native artifacts, a symbolism she was not aiming for intentionally. The Ikage pieces are oils on Masonite; since wood is a hard medium, Power was able to hand-sand and reapply sections of dried paint, tweaking color and texture into collage.

The lyrical *Passage* (2006) also involved reclaiming an image. She took a charcoal sketch of a woman’s torso she had set aside, and reimagined it as the basis for a landscape whose colors suggest the Southwest: a billowing blue-bird sky descends to a clay ridge; clay and peachy tones inscribe a line where shoulders might go. Feathered drips form a lacy, clay-toned veil draping one breast. Blue and peach tones play hide-and-seek, mirroring each other as opposites: the overall effect is sensuous and playful, a womanist space merging figure with land and sky.

Power’s work leads to unexpected effects. Composer and pianist Robert DeGaetano, a New York City native and graduate of the Julliard School, known for musical portraits (in the mid-1980s, Alice Tully commissioned him to compose *The Challenger* to commemorate the seven astronauts killed in the explosion of the space shuttle) was very taken by Power’s art. They met in Provincetown in the late 1990s; she was his piano-tuner. DeGaetano would go to the Walker Gallery to look at her art. He suggested composing her musical portrait, in exchange for a painting.

In the summer of 2005, DeGaetano premiered the musical portrait in front of its subject: Power and Berta Walker formed a rapt audience of two in the Unitarian Universalist Meeting House while he performed the introspective, lushly romantic sonata for solo piano before the artist who inspired it. “He understood me exactly,” Power said of the experience of listening to music whose intention was to describe her essence in sound. “I was a little nervous before hearing it. I didn’t know if I would love it. It is a deep, moving, calm piece: he tapped into my spirit,” said this visionary artist for whom tapping into the spirit is the highest of compliments.

SUSAN RAND BROWN profiled the painter Lillian Orlovsky for the 2004/05 issue of Provincetown Arts, and has since interviewed artists Ellen LeBow, Barbara E. Cohen, and Mike Wright. A native New Yorker teaching literature in Connecticut, Brown began writing about the arts in the 1970s, and is an arts correspondent for the Provincetown Banner. She has spent summers in her family’s Commercial Street home for over four decades.



RESTLESS SEA, 2009, OIL ON CANVAS, 24 BY 36 INCHES