

The background is a complex abstract composition. It features a network of thin, intersecting lines in grey, red, yellow, and blue. Overlaid on these are larger, more fluid, and gestural grey shapes that resemble calligraphic strokes or perhaps stylized bird forms. The overall effect is one of layered, organic complexity.

CATHERINE COURTENAYE

Avian Witness



FOREWORD

Gallatin River Gallery is pleased to debut Catherine Courtenaye's *Avian Witness* series, the artist's third solo exhibition with the gallery. Building on her preceding bodies of work, the paintings display an evolution of style and content. Courtenaye's new series represents a notable contribution to abstract painting with ecological undercurrents.

Julie Gustafson, Gallatin River Gallery

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introductory quotes appear in J. A. Baker's *The Peregrine*, 50th Anniversary edition, 2017, published by William Collins, London.

Essay by Susan Floyd Barnett.

Photography by Rob Wilke.

Design by Catherine Courtenaye.

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cover: detail, *Transcription*, 2018, oil on three panels, 24 x 72 inches

CATHERINE COURTENAYE

Avian Witness

GALLATIN RIVER GALLERY



*“The calmness, the solitude of horizons lures me
towards them, through them, and on to others.
They layer the memory like strata.”*

*“The peregrine sees and remembers patterns we do not
know exist: the neat squares of orchard and woodland,
the endlessly varying quadrilateral shapes of fields.
He finds his way across the land by a succession
of remembered symmetries.”*

—J. A. Baker, *The Peregrine*



Edgeland of the Sora Rail 2020, oil on panel, 30 x 30 inches

TOPOGRAPHIES OF FLIGHT

SUSAN FLOYD BARNETT

THE SKY WAS CRYSTALLINE BLUE, the air brittle with cold but hushed by new snow. I waxed my skis and took a few strides into the deep white. Looking down, I noticed tiny footprints, meandering, crossing and recrossing. And then, with increasing space, they found direction, a straight line dotted toward infinity... and ended in a finite, crimson blot. On either side, a perfect imprint of feathers traced the edge of outspread wings.

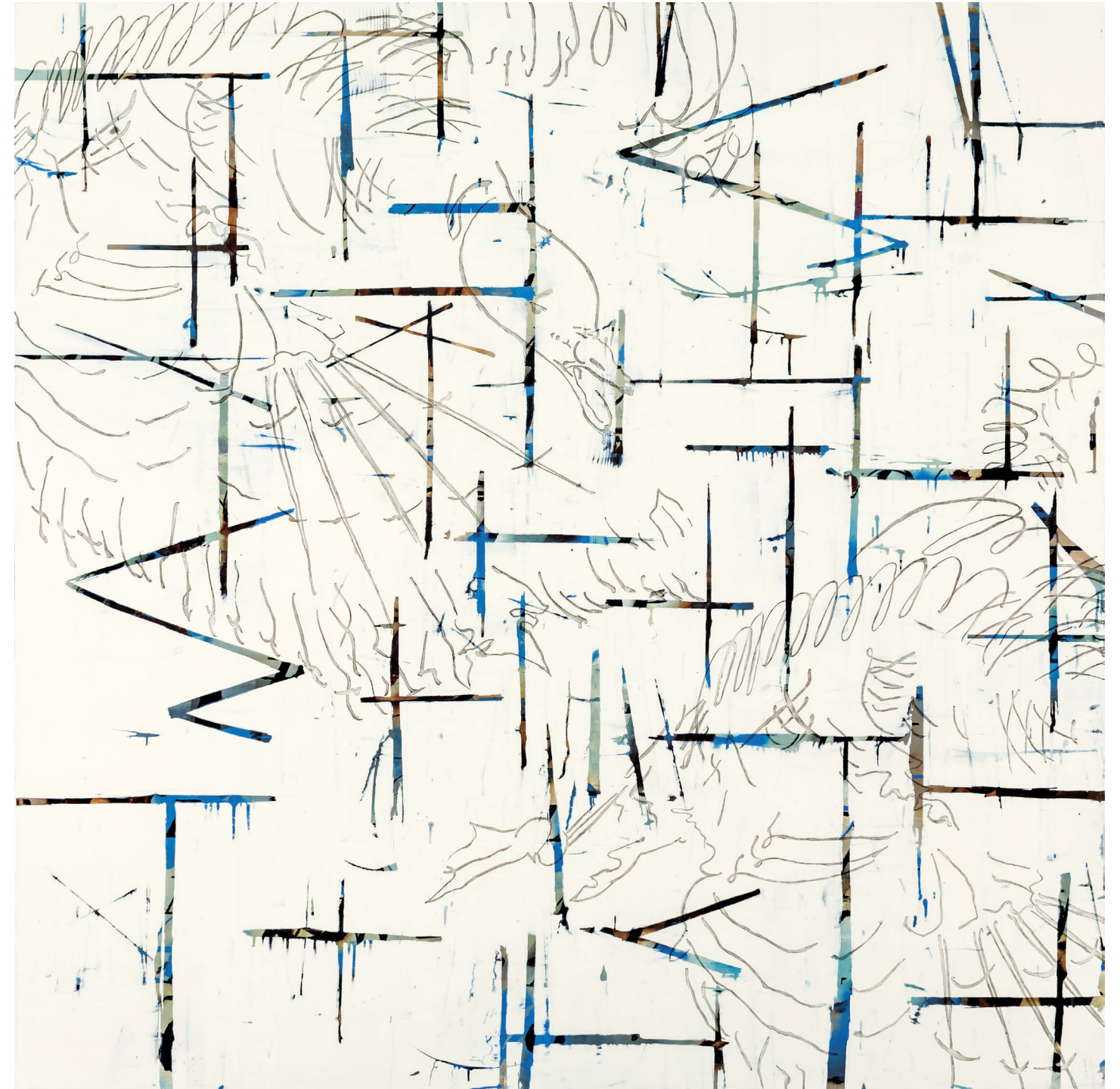
Catherine Courtenaye's inky marks rest as lightly on the surface of a painting as the brush of feathers on snow. Calligraphic birds skim across layers of ciphers and fissures, over loose grids of intersecting lines. Brightly colored underpaintings drip into the tinted white surface. Fore and background flutter and reverse. Now the cracks appear as chasms, suggesting layers of time. The picture plane is emphatically flat, despite depth in the strata and shifting illusions of perspective.

Courtenaye thinks of these paintings as aerial landscapes, fully aware that any nod to landscape painting today is complicated by the fraught relationship between natural and human habitat.

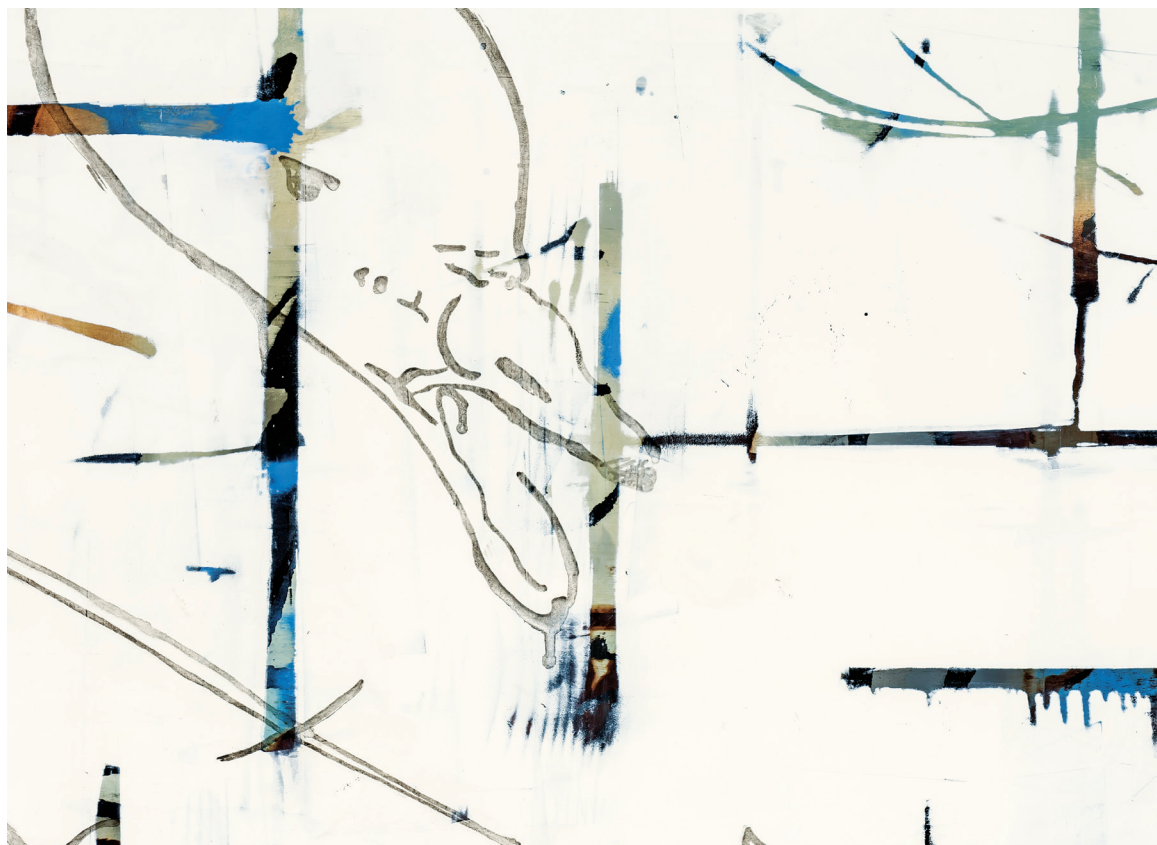
In her recent work, elements of nature and culture intersect without melding. The smooth, not-quite-white surface, like bright, cloudy skies or sun-bleached wood, is broken by a loose grid of demarcations. These “shards” reveal underpaintings of vivid color, curves, edges, symbols—and text. She points out that many of our letterforms have their origin in natural patterns and animal forms. For her, written language can connect nature and culture. The human urge to communicate through the written word, maps, and diagrams of movement is glimpsed through slivers in the otherwise all-over surfaces of her paintings.

Fluid tracers of birds flit across each painting, interacting with and yet maintaining separation from deeper layers. Birds—ancient symbols of nature, freedom, fertility, and flight—are abstracted into loose ink lines on the surface. Linear forms without volume, they resemble flourishes of penmanship from the Age of Exploration, with curlicues and bony spikes for wings.

The paintings' surfaces break into vertical and horizontal openings, rhythmic and insistent, fading



Articulation of Geese 2019, oil on canvas, 60 x 60 inches



detail, *Articulation of Geese*

back and pushing forward. Loose, drippy, and approximate, they evoke human interaction with the landscape: telephone poles, electrical grids, fences, roads, furrowed fields, schematic drawings, and architectural forms.

The artist feels the pain of separation, but still dreams of a world where human development and

primeval forces can coexist. She expresses “a need to incorporate natural rhythms, as well as cultural vestiges, into my studio work.” She thinks about the velocity of lines, and about landscapes as fields of motion, migration, and seasonal change. These paintings are hard-won, searching for an uneasy balance between man-made and natural ecosystems.

In *Articulation of Geese*, the partial form of a bird repeats diagonally, the head and leading wing entering from the top left, a trailing foot and looping edges suggesting an identical second bird exiting bottom right. A sense of motion, feathers, and flight is hastened by diagonals and frustrated by perpendicular lines. A pinnate fan of wing, jointed with crossings, mirrors the intersections of the underlying grid. The birds seem to float across the architecture of the underpainting, drifting over and through a maze of passages.

Transcription features a brighter palette and with open bands of color. Red, yellow, and blue bleed into neutral grays and washes of blended tints. Bits of cursive and hints of feather and beak peep through the broken, milky surface. Slivers of color ooze up from the depths, drip, narrow, and swell. A bold gesture, resembling a bird in flight, is inked across the surface of the three joined panels, and meanders downward, looping, swirling, connecting with the rhythmic, glowing verticals. The implied movement is forward as if we, the viewers, could fly, gazing through beating wings.

Similar in composition, *Skylander* sprawls across multiple panels, its horizon a broad expanse. The colors recall the golds and blue grays of autumn; geometric fields and farms marking arbitrary

boundaries under infinite skies. Beak to beak, we confront a curling representation of an avian hunter with outspread wings. A second flurry of wings to the side: companion, reflection, friend or foe? We gaze over the land, gliding on updrafts across inconsequential borders.

Verge and *Overland* are kindred in size and a shared feeling of entrapment. The dark, rigid, underpainting seems to ensnare the playful swirls skittering on the surface. In *Verge*, the swan-like ancestors of the curvilinear overpainting can barely be deciphered. The marks are disembodied, fractured, and frozen like the image of an explosion. Small drops splatter across the surface. In *Overland*, the implied left-to-right motion of an owlish form meets a barrier and its wing rush to halt forward momentum. The loose calligraphy is almost completely constrained by the hard lines and sharp points of a claustrophobic grid, communicating a sense of conflict, struggle, and defeat.

In *Peregrine over Manhattan*, nature and culture find a more positive, but still precarious balance. The warm reds, yellows, and red violets of neon sunrise verge into black, softened with thin washes of white. The eye settles into the deep color, only to be distracted by the ink drawing of a raptor on the surface. Although stylized, the bird is recognizable



Transcription 2018, oil on three panels, 24 x 72 inches

“Walking in the Big Belt Mountains, I stare down, so as not to trip, at the Pollock-like forest floor texture thick with kinnikinnick berries, moss,

leaves and branches, with just a skiff of snow. I’m constantly on alert for the unmistakable, out-of-nowhere wingbeat of grouse.”

Catherine Courtenaye

as a peregrine falcon, its feathered wings hunched in anticipation of flight. I am reminded of raptors nesting across from Central Park, adapting to the cliffs and crags of the urban environment.

Imprint is rosier and not as abstract as most of Courtenaye’s paintings, depicting a world more or less in synch. The inked overpainting outlines five mallards flying from right to left, their overlapping forms and relative sizes creating the illusion of rhythm and spatial depth. Directional lines in the underlying grid support the implied motion and subtly suggest the V formations of migratory flight. In science, “imprinting” refers to a chick’s first attachment, usually to its mother. This early experience establishes its identity as a bird and a future flock member. Can the patterns of migrations and seasonal cycles of flight also imprint on the land over time?

Unable to take in these works at a glance, the mind zooms like a camera lens, focusing between surface and depth. The paintings offer clues and concealments that allude to the limits of perception. What sliver of reality do we absorb through sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste?

Albert Einstein said, “It is entirely possible that behind the perception of our senses, worlds are hidden of which we are unaware.” Evolutionary science suggests that we perceive only what we need to survive and reproduce. Sight allows us to recognize food and foe, with different lenses depending on our roles as predators and prey; taste differentiates between sugar and strychnine; stereo hearing pinpoints the snake. The surfaces of these paintings reveal and conceal, their fractures suggesting land forms, boundaries, and uncharted territories and offering glimpses into the unknown.

Like seventeenth-century wunderkammer, this work bridges logic and wonder, rational order and divine mystery. Inspired by the mapping of movement, natural and cultural history, and the romantic beauty of flight, Courtenaye’s images chart the intersection of nature and culture, knowing and the unknown. Absorbing her cryptic images in stillness, over time, we are rewarded with stories as subtle and fleeting as the imprints of seeds, footprints, and feathers in new fallen snow.

*Susan Floyd Barnett
April 2020*

Susan Floyd Barnett is Curator of the Yellowstone Art Museum, Billings, Montana.



Peregrine over Manhattan 2019, oil on canvas, 20 x 18 inches



Verge 2020, oil on panel, 30 x 30 inches



Visitation 2019, oil on canvas, 44 x 36 inches

BIOGRAPHY

Born Madrid, Spain

EDUCATION

University of Iowa, Iowa City, M.A./M.F.A. in painting and drawing, 1983/1984

Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, 1980

Colby College, Waterville, Maine, B.A. magna cum laude in English, 1979

University of Bath, England, 1977

American School of Tangier, Morocco, 1973–1975

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

Gallatin River Gallery, “Avian Witness,” Big Sky, Montana, 2020

Stremmel Gallery, Reno, Nevada, 2014

Gallatin River Gallery, Big Sky, Montana, 2014

Modernism, Inc., San Francisco, 2012

Gallatin River Gallery, Big Sky, Montana, 2012

Boise Art Museum, Boise, Idaho, 2011

Modernism West, San Francisco, 2011

Modernism, San Francisco, 2009

Bentley Gallery, Scottsdale, 2008

Stremmel Gallery, Reno, 2007

Cheryl Pelavin Fine Arts, “Ghostwriters,” New York, 2007

Bentley Projects, Phoenix, 2005

Stremmel Gallery, Reno, 2004

Lobby Gallery at 455 Market, San Francisco, 2003

Latham Square Building, “Sampler,” organized by Oakland Museum of California, Oakland, 2002

Hunsaker/Schlesinger Fine Art, Santa Monica, 2000

Shaker Museum, South Union, Kentucky, 2000

LIMN, “Paintings of Shaker Objects,” San Francisco, 1999

Grover/Thurston Gallery, “The Colors of the Soul: Paintings of Shaker Objects,” Seattle, 1997

Andrew Shire Gallery, Los Angeles, 1994

Hartnell College, Salinas, California, 1994

Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, 1992

Bank of America World Headquarters, San Francisco, 1990

Kouros Gallery, New York, 1989

Iannetti-Lanzone Gallery, San Francisco, 1988

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Bedford Gallery, Leshner Center for the Arts, “Bird, Nest, Nature,” Walnut Creek, California, 2020

Michelle Bello Fine Art, “Tending Our Fragile Earth,” San Francisco, 2019

Telluride Gallery of Fine Art, “Winter Selections,” Telluride, Colorado, 2019

Gallatin River Gallery, “Earth and Sky,” Big Sky, Montana, 2018

ArtMiami 2018. Presented by Zolla Lieberman Gallery

Yellowstone Art Museum, “Boundless Visions,” Billings, Montana, 2018

Yellowstone Art Museum, “Montana Triennial 2018,” Billings, Montana, 2018

The Durden Gallery, “Natural Bent,” Billings, Montana, 2018

Telluride Gallery of Fine Art, “Summer Highlights,” Colorado, 2017

Yellowstone Art Museum, “Echo: Unspoken Dialects” (four-person), Billings, Montana, 2016

Telluride Gallery of Fine Art (three-person), Colorado, 2016

Telluride Gallery of Fine Art, 30th Anniversary, Telluride, Colorado, 2015, catalogue

Slate Contemporary, “The Spring Collection,” Oakland, California 2014

Turman Larison Contemporary, “A Conversation,” Helena, Montana, 2014

Telluride Gallery of Fine Art, “White,” Telluride, Colorado, 2014

Stremmel Gallery, Reno, Nevada, 2012, 2013, 2014

Crocker Art Museum, “Minimal and Optical Qualities,” Sacramento, California, 2013

The Emerson Center for the Arts and Culture, Bozeman, Montana, 2011

ArtMiami 2010, 2011. Presented by Modernism, Inc.



Skylander 2019, oil on four panels, 12 x 48 inches, private collection

Bentley Gallery, Scottsdale, 2010

Cheryl Pelavin Fine Arts, New York, 2009 (two-person)

Chandra Cerrito Contemporary, “Inscribere,” Oakland, 2007

Gensler, “Chroma,” curated by Chandra Cerrito, San Francisco, 2007

San Francisco State University Fine Arts Gallery, “Cali/Graffi,” A California Calligraphy Summit, San Francisco, 2006

Anne Reed Gallery, Sun Valley, Idaho, 2006

Roshambo Gallery, “Firecrackers: Artists to Watch,” Healdsburg, California, 2006

LIMN Gallery, San Francisco, 2006

“Freefall: Contemporary Painting in the ‘00s,” online exhibition curated by Chandra Cerrito, 2005

The Contemporary Museum, Honolulu, Hawai’i, “Contemporarities,” 2006

Michelle Bello Fine Art, “Handpicked,” San Francisco, 2003

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Artists Gallery, 25th Anniversary Exhibition, San Francisco, 2003

Stremmel Gallery, “30 Years/30 Artists,” Reno, 2003

Kala Art Institute, “Solos: The Contemporary Monoprint,” Berkeley, 2002

LIMN Gallery, “Wrap Up,” San Francisco, 2001

Sloan Miyasato, “Black and White and Read All Over,” San Francisco, 2001

Bedford Gallery, Leshner Center for the Arts, “Abstraction: From Raucous to Refined,” Walnut Creek, California, 2000

Hunsaker/Schlesinger Fine Art, Gallery Artists Summer Show, Santa Monica, 2000

Missoula Art Museum, Regional Drawing Exhibition, Missoula, Montana, 2000

Jeffrey Coploff Gallery, New York, 1999

Jan Baum Gallery, “Precious,” Los Angeles, 1998

Patricia Sweetow Gallery, “Pharmacopoeia,” San Francisco, 1998

The Jewish Museum, “L’Chaim: A Kiddush Cup Invitational,” San Francisco, 1997

Sherry Frumkin Gallery, Santa Monica, California, 1996

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Rental Gallery, “Refound,” San Francisco, 1996

Richmond Art Center, “Anonymous Arrangement,” Richmond, California, 1995

Gallery Concord, “What’s in a Word?” Concord, California, 1995

Schneider Museum of Art, Art Faculty Exhibition, Southern Oregon State University, Ashland, 1993

Asher/Faure Gallery, Los Angeles, 1991

Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland, Oregon, 1991

“Art: the Other Industry,” Emeryville, California; John Caldwell, juror, 1990

Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco, 1990

Galleria San Benigno, “America, Italia, Spagna,” Genoa, Italy, 1989

The Fourth International LA Art Fair, Los Angeles, 1989

ProArts Annual, Oakland, Graham Beale, juror, 1988

San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery, “Chain Reaction,” San Francisco, 1988

Los Medanos College, “Ten Women Artists of the Bay Area,” Pittsburg, California, 1987

Richmond Art Center, “Bay Area Drawing,” Richmond, California, 1987

Oakland Museum Collectors’ Gallery, “Small Treasures,” Oakland, 1987

ProArts Annual, Oakland; David Ireland, juror, 1987

“Art: The Other Industry,” Emeryville, California; Sidra Stich, curator, 1987

University of Iowa Museum of Art, M.F.A. exhibition, Iowa City, 1984

AWARDS AND HONORS

Artist’s Innovation Award 2018, Montana Arts Council

TEDx speaker, University of Montana, 2015

National Endowment for the Arts Individual Artist Grant, 1989

Ford Foundation Grants, 1982, 1983, 1984

Phi Beta Kappa, 1979

RESIDENCIES

Experimental Workshop, monotypes, Emeryville, California, 2001

Ucross Foundation, Clearmont, Wyoming, 1991

Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Sweet Briar, Virginia, 1985

PRESS

“Catherine Courtenaye: Exploring Parallels,” Michele Corriel, Big Sky Journal, Summer 2018

The Cumberland River Review, Issue 6-4, October 2017

“Ones to Watch: Spotlighting the Works of Catherine Courtenaye,” Michele Corriel, Western Art & Architecture, Winter 2013

“Don’t Miss,” Kenneth Baker, The San Francisco Chronicle Sunday Datebook, September 23–29, 2012

“Lines and layers,” Michele Corriel, Big Sky Magazine, Winter 2011

“Flexibility brings pressure for Courtenaye,” Kenneth Baker, San Francisco Chronicle, November 14, 2009

“Ghostly Cursive on Jay,” Arts Advocate, Battery Park City Broadsheet, March 2007

“Catherine Courtenaye at Hunsaker/Schlesinger Fine Art,” Charlene Roth, Artweek, January 2001

“Abstraction: From Raucoux to Refined at the Bedford Gallery,” Juan Rodriguez, Artweek, October 2000

“Driven to Abstraction,” Sarah Lavender Smith, Diablo Magazine, August 2000

“Nostalgic,” Rick Deragon, Monterey County Herald, November 1994

“Art as a Civic Virtue,” Jennifer Crohn, The East Bay Guardian, November 1991

“A Promising Quartet,” Kenneth Baker, The San Francisco Chronicle, May 10, 1990

“Drawn to Richmond,” Jim Jordan, East Bay Express, July 10, 1987

“Richmond’s B.A.D. Show is g-o-o-d,” Charles Shere, Oakland Tribune, July 7, 1987

“Drawing Conclusions,” Phyllis Bragdon, Marin Independent Journal, July 6, 1987

“Direct Marks and Layers of Mystery,” Dan Nadaner, Artweek, May 30, 1987

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Bank of America

Boise Art Museum

City of Reno, Nevada

City of Walnut Creek, California

Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, California

Deloitte LLP

Frontier Adjusters of America

Farmers and Merchants Bank, Lodi, California

Folger, Levin & Kahn, LLP

Hyatt Hotels

Lehman Brothers

Matsushita Investment & Development Co., Osaka, Japan

Oakland Museum of California

National Endowment for the Arts Loan Collection

Pillsbury Winthrop, LLP

Renown Health Center, Nevada

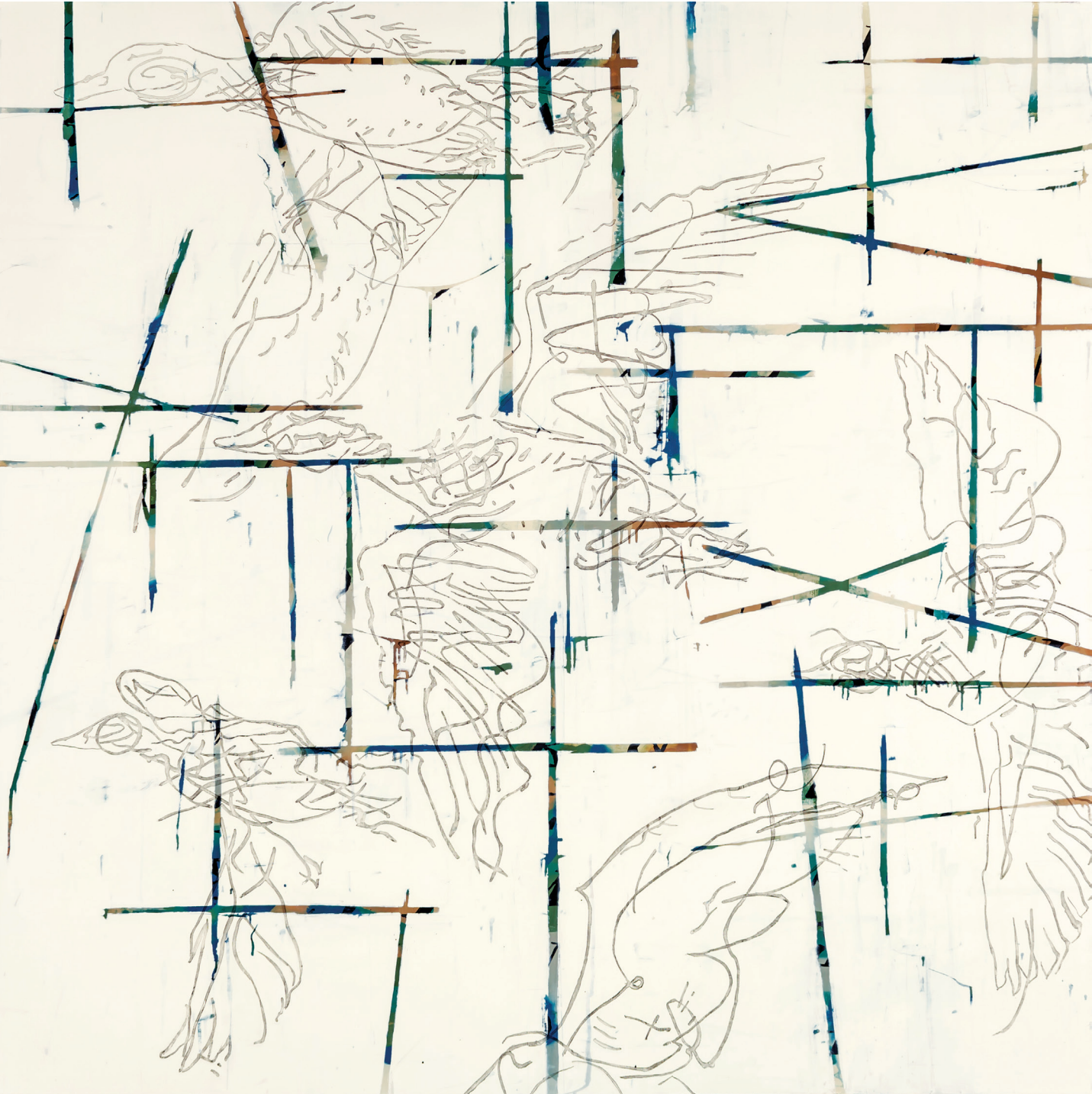
Silk, Adler & Colvin

Tucson Museum of Art

Westin Verasa Hotel, Napa



photo: G. B. Carson



Imprint 2019, oil on canvas, 60 x 60 inches



GALLATIN RIVER GALLERY

