

Introduction by John Yau

I think the word “multiple” is the best way to characterize Barbara Grad’s discordant abstract paintings. Multiple entry points, vocabularies, palettes, and perspectives coexist on a single surface. We feel as if we are exploring a fractured landscape while suspended above it. The duality is disorienting and engaging. It is a world in which we must strive to regain our bearings — a condition that might strike us as comparable to our navigation of everyday life.

Visual cacophony is hardly all that Grad brings into play. Her vocabularies range across the geometric and the organic, from solid forms to transparent planes, short strokes to large shapes. Her patterns and striations evoke watery reflections and geological strata, tilled land and strip mines, without shedding their identity as abstract, painterly marks. What unites these disparate elements is the artist’s long interest in landscape, as actual place and as fiction. She evokes a world undergoing myriad changes, from the incremental and unavoidable to the deliberate and cataclysmic. These transformations resonate with what is constantly happening around us, whether it’s urban development or our deleterious impact on the ecosystem, as well as what infiltrates our dreams and becomes the stuff of video games and movies.

When Grad was a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the artist and teacher Ray Yoshida introduced her to the work of Joseph

Yoakum, a self-taught African American artist whose paintings had influenced the Chicago Imagist Roger Brown, among others of his generation. Since that inceptive moment, Grad has absorbed Yoakum's striations, sinuously outlined forms, and high horizon lines, but has set them to very different purposes. Whereas Yoakum's landscapes are stable and unified, Grad carefully develops a splintered pictorial space, where multiple domains are in collision. In this regard, her work shares an unlikely affinity with the abstract landscapes of Richard Diebenkorn, particularly his *Ocean Park* series, which he began working on in 1967.

What links Grad to Diebenkorn is her ability to establish a continuous tension between the paintings' distinctly defined sections and the overall image. However, in contrast to the cool classicism of Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park* paintings, which merge landscape, the architectonic, and a sensitivity to the smallest changes in light — in what the curator Sarah C. Bancroft characterized as a “riotous calm”ⁱ — Grad's clashing spaces and colliding forms might best be described in opposite terms, as calmly riotous. There is an underlying harmony to the way Diebenkorn wedged his shapes together, even as his use of tonality and color quietly challenges and undermines it. By comparison, in paintings such as *Lion's Den* and *Transitions* (both 2017), Grad's color combinations and mark making abruptly change from one section to another.

In *Rock Bottom* (2017), we seem to be looking at the ocean's roiling surface as well as below it. The color, which defines distinct areas, each

marked by its own linear vocabulary, runs from a mostly dark blue band at the bottom to streaks of pink and pale blue along the top. A lilac section, which occupies much of the upper third of the painting, seems to be reflecting light; at the same time, light appears to pass through the green and blue areas beneath it. The band of lilac, with its slightly darker striations rippling from an unseen point beyond the canvas's right edge, presses itself against the painting's flat surface, while the green section directly beneath, crisscrossed by lines evoking fishing nets, suggests an indefinite aqueous space.

The shift between the flat forms occupying the painting's upper reaches and the areas of unfixed space occupying its lower depths is essential to Grad's vision of a liquid domain in constant motion. Her vision of a world in slow turmoil stirs up a wide range of associations, from the acidification of the ocean to painting as a contested field, in which aspects of abstraction and representation bump against each other.

In *Lion's Den* (2017), which I mentioned earlier, Grad fits together sections of yellow, green, brown, black, and blue, each evoking very different climates and landscapes, into a jigsaw whirlwind. The swiftly changing colors and patterns of the tightly fitted sections, whose edges vary from rounded to jagged to straight, contribute to the visual cacophony. It is as if we are looking at tectonic plates on the verge of a calamitous shift.

One of the most powerful currents running through American painting has to do with artists who maintain a passionate engagement with a rugged, not always welcoming landscape. We see it in the paintings of Maine by Marsden Hartley, and in those by Yoakum of the various places he claimed to have visited. Through her fracturing of pictorial space, and her incorporation of free-floating elements evocative of digital space, Grad has brought that engagement well into the 21st century.

ⁱ *Richard Diebenkorn, A Riotous Calm* was the title of a lecture given by Sarah Bancroft at the Royal Academy of Arts, London (March 1, 2015), which was podcast on March 13, 2015. <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/podcast-richard-diebenkorn-a-riotous-calm>