



SANDRA
MENDELSON RUBIN

WATER WORKS



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By its very nature, representational painting conjures a magical sphere; the artist's sleight of hand produces a visually convincing three-dimensional scene on a portable, two-dimensional surface. A consummate illusionist in this regard, Sandra Mendelsohn Rubin paints meticulous and haunting observations in carefully curated portions. She has been an exhibiting artist since the early 1980s. As a recent M.F.A. graduate of the University of California Los Angeles in 1981, she won the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's prestigious "Young Talent Award," and has been represented by the highly regarded L.A. Louver Gallery since that time. Nearly forty years on—and well after the receipt of two National Endowment for the Arts grants in 1981 and 1991—she was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2012. Only an especially gifted artist can sustain this quality of excellence and the attention of a fickle art world over the span of four decades. One look at Rubin's body of work makes it clear that she is such an artist.

A Los Angeles native, Rubin spent the first ten years of her career there. From the start she was interested in scale, and leaned towards unconventional perspectives and compressed compositional spaces, making unusually slim horizontal paintings with extended horizons. "Small work addresses the mind and imagination directly, while large-scale adds physicality and drama," she notes. A couple of her early paintings reach a monumental twelve and a half or thirteen feet in the horizontal dimension, while others from the same period

are miniscule by comparison, at ten by twelve inches. In 1990 Rubin moved out of Los Angeles to live in rural Northern California. Transitioning from her familiar hometown environment to a fundamentally different setting precipitated a dramatic change in her working habits, and over the next decade she focused on a series of brilliantly imaginative still lifes. But with time and familiarity the landscape again beckoned, and she began working with the views outside her studio. The resplendent *Valley in Early Summer* (2008) is a culmination of several smaller seasonal studies of a similar scene. Rubin chose a favored long, narrow format for the green and gold panorama spread out below her window. Her distinctive compositional focus includes neither hilltop nor sky, but zeros in on the moment of a single bird's eye glance. Encompassed by surrounding woods, three alternating plots of cultivated and fallow fields carry mauve tree-shadows, while silvery phone lines materialize just above the valley like spider web. The hushed afternoon light falls across the land and glimmers in the treetops; the pale lavender luminescence of that light suffuses the scene. This atmospheric presence—as tangible as any object—seems the actual subject of her painting.

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island of light surrounded by barely visible rural terrain. The scene ignited her imagination and she determined to paint her own home this way. To realize her plan Rubin referenced digital images gathered with the help of a friend's micro-copter. After many years of working strictly from observation she discovered that photography granted her access to a broad range of new material, and in fact, spurred her reengagement with landscape.

Again, in *Portrait of Home* (2011), Rubin neither composes nor arranges her scene for a conventional rectangular canvas. She does not intend to replicate the traditional "god's eye" view, and in any case says, "You can never duplicate what you see on the scale that it is." Instead she hones in on a meticulously orchestrated view that concentrates her residence and the surrounding woodland into an exquisitely detailed four by fifteen inch rectangle. The fading light suffuses every feature in a muted glow. A particular kind of mystery confronts us, as we feel the authenticity of a distant view that we cannot normally perceive, let alone linger over. Yet in the magical contrivances of this intimate work, it becomes accessible because of Rubin's unerring use of reflected color and light.

Rubin's fascination with aerial perspective convinced her to go up in a small plane to photograph the terrain herself. The subject of water and its activation of the landscape particularly engaged her. As with all her aerial paintings, she

combs through hundreds of images to draw out the material needed to craft her compositions. Northern California's Navarro River became the subject for two singular works. In *Mouth of the Navarro* (2013), the river, partly shadowed by a tree-covered spur of land, wends its way into the Pacific Ocean. The confluence of land, river and curving shore makes a powerful axis around which this gem-like painting (a mere five and a half by seven and a half inches) coalesces. Each individual element, from small shrub to miniature enclave of humanity on the beach below is exactly picked out. Yet equally compelling is the overarching, water-laden blue and gold aura in which everything is bathed.

In *Bridge over the Navarro* (2013), Rubin maintains the elevated vantage point. The toy-sized scale of the bridge and tiny vehicle traveling on the blacktop, plus the arc of hair-thin electric line makes the distance resonate. A startlingly intense lapis blue ribbon, signifying a deep, contained body of water, bisects the canvas and draws our eye into its center. Here again, every tree and bush is sensitively and painstakingly represented. Rubin acknowledges, "I paint with a relentless conviction to make tangible every aspect of my subject." Her level of engagement includes—and even centers on—the palpability of atmospheric light. Here, we sense cool water vapor rising from the sides of a steep, forested hillside to permeate the silvery air. Again, the choice to use a very small support (five and a half by seven and a quarter inches) for a grandeur-filled scene reflects her



conviction that the small size "... is an even more powerful way to touch deeper and deeper space."

Throughout her career Rubin has consistently alternated between large- and small-scale works. Two of her most recent landscapes called for the more powerful physicality of large canvases. After painting a small aerial view of Southern California's Quail Lake in 2012, she was traveling in the vicinity and decided to visit the spot. Captivated by the flowing water at the aqueduct, she returned again to photograph it, and out of these visits came the painting *Aqueduct at Quail Lake* (2012-2015). The bulldozed banks of arid rock-and scrub-strewn dirt make a stark, otherworldly contrast to the broad expanse of pale blue water flowing between them—like a precious diamond set in a jewel of clay. In a wide-angled view one rare, lone figure stands fishing amid the rocky debris, a witness to this incongruous body of luxuriant water shimmering in the breeze with reflected light. Rubin's virtuosity with infinitesimal gradations of color and form in a seemingly bi-chromatic landscape of blue and brown convinces us completely.

Still not quite finished with the site, Rubin decided to revisit the aerial perspective again, this time for a large painting. More ambitious than many of her aerial views due to its sheer size and scope, *Quail Lake* (2015-2016), is comparable to a biographical study of human impact on the land. Rubin has likened landscape painting to painting portraits: just as an

artist studies facial features to derive a person's character and personality, so she might approach a landscape. Her "portrait" of Quail Lake depicts the aqueduct and artificial lake itself, bordered by freeways and roads, with circular cultivated fields to the north. All sit incongruously amidst the dry and folded forms of raw Southern California land. The variations of pattern generated by the contrasting textures and colors of water, concrete, steel, barren and cultivated earth, flat and undulating landforms drives the composition and becomes its defining component.

Artists have always engaged with what holds meaning for them, and for many it is the vast and continuously evolving physical world. Sandra Mendelsohn Rubin's artwork certainly arises from this source, but holds something more rare and ephemeral as well. Her immense pictorial power lies in what can only be an empathic comprehension of the synergistic relationship of color and light, which enables her to evoke the very air. One cannot help but be struck with the reality of her love affair with the immersive process of recording the seen world as well. As she says, "I do believe there is something sacred and enduring in this disciplined act of truthfulness." Rubin makes believers of us all.

Helaine Glick, Independent Curator



Cover:

Mouth of the Navarros River, 2013, Oil on polyester, 5 1/2 x 7 1/2 inches

Inside Flap:

Quail Lake, 2015-2016, Oil on polyester, 48 x 32 inches

Inside Panels:

Portrait of Home, 2011, Oil on polyester, 4 x 15 inches

Aqueduct at Quail Lake, 2012-2015, Oil on polyester, 9 x 54 inches

Valley in the Early Summer, 2008, Oil on polyester, 9 x 54 inches

Back Cover:

Bridge Over the Navarro, 2013, Oil on polyester, 6 1/2 x 7 1/4 inches

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