THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

March/April 2012

Sylvia Plimack Mangold

For 25 years Sylvia Plimack Mangold's ostensible subject has been trees: oaks, maples, elms, and pines that she draws and paints on-site near her home in upstate New York. Viewers who respond to subject matter more than to the painting in front of them may find such repetitiveness limited, even obsessive. Big mistake. That work as straight-forward as Plimack Mangold's can be so inadequately seen says something about how we commonly experience an image as an instantaneous photographic rather than as the consequence of a process-oriented, painterly approach.

To put it simply, Plimack Mangold does not draw and paint trees. Her work is a matter of drawing and painting *looking-at-trees*. It is the mutual interdependency of seeing and painting that animates her art. To understand this you must move in close, as each painting invites you to do, and observe the interaction between the marks, scrapings, over-painting, and strokes indicating not the *thing*, but the space abutting a leaf or branch that defines that form. There is the paradox common to all painting from life; the artist spends whatever time it takes to articulate the reality of, as Cézanne put it, a single "moment in the history of the world." Working within a tradition that goes back to that master's groundbreaking achievement, Plimack Mangold's every move is simultaneously descriptive and an element in the orchestration of the whole. She will typically produce a number of pictures from a single vantage point, each version disclosing fresh perceptions of the same motif. Her recent exhibtion featured clumps of maple leaves in one series and bare trees in another. By working in physical proximity to the maples--leafy greens in a specific light, with bits of branch and trunk and very small patches of sky peeping through--she makes near all-over compositions. There is no conventional figure/ground relationship between tree and sky. The structure of these paintings feels more emergent, even discovered, than imposed. Because Plimack Mangold's technique is entirely without bravura, there is no particular highlighting of her process, which is slow and deliberative, comprising reassessments and revisions as she proceeds.

Sylvia Plimack Mangold, "Winter Maple", 2010. Oil on linen, 44 x 44 inches. Photo: Joerg Lohse

By contrast, her recent paintings of bare trees--cropped and centrally positiond--have a heraldic quality. In some, a pine tree is seen behind the large, leafless tree in the lower portion of the picture, reinforcing the upward view and providing a counterpoint to the linearity of the limbs. These paintings also evince successive revisions as the composition is established. The reworking of the medium, without complete obliteration of earlier stages, produces a somewhat atmospheric surface. The bare tree paintings sugges a mild winter day, contrasting with what I take to be the late spring or early summer season of the maples.

Although always based on a perceptual realism, Plimack Mangold's work of the 1960s and 1970s was bolstered by self-referential conceptual conceits that identified the work as of its time. A ruler painted actual size along the bottom of the canvas and seeming to lie on a hardwood floor literally measures the painting's width, while the representation of the receding floorboards plays off such facticity against perspectival illusion. In later work, hyperrealist depictions of masking tape demarcate the area containing a painted landscape image within the larger picture plane. Plimack Mangold used this device to refer to common studio practice, again encouraging an interaction between illusion and literalism. (These strategies, of course, call to mind the shallow space and *trompe l'oeil* tradition of the 19th century master John F. Peto.)

Plimack Mangold has always been a strong painter, even when engaging with such deliberately conceptual strategies. Yet by removing from her work the guarantee of theoretical, structuralist interest, she began, in effect, performing without a net. Because of the inveterate historicism through which art is often considered--our Hegelian/Marxian habits of thought, along with the never-ending echo of Pound's enjoiner to "make it new' -- some may deem her recent work irrelevant. From a phenomenological point of view, or that of many other painters, such thinking is inadequate. Plimack Mangold is immersed in the practice of working from life; her paintings and drawings thus feel insistently of the present moment, as new as any novel invention.

By Robert Berlind