

Sweet Spontaneous Earth: Recent Works of Christine Neill

By Dominique Nahas ©2011

Christine Neill's luminous drawings of plants and flowers and rocks depict nature as something numinous yet strangely mystifying. The artist, while describing herself as a botanist manqué, has keenly developed her observational skills; she keeps her plant and rock specimens, her collected source material, at close range near her drawing table in order to confirm and match at first hand for size, configuration, color and texture. Yet her artwork is hardly dedicated purely to the aims of mimetic transcription or taxonomic certitude. Neill's practice is the looking and perceiving of nature with increasing acuity as a bridge to a world of intensified reality through what one might call acculturated mindfulness.

In *Balance of Herma* (2010) her gravity deprived rocks normatively inferring materiality, weight, duration, opacity and the inanimate are dematerialized and re-animated through Neill's (un) canny use of watercolors that as a process traditionally infers transparency, lightness, ephemerality and fragility. The artist's formations are rendered presumably with what appears to be exact mimetic fidelity to the rock specimens Neill has collected. Or at least this is what is implied. Yet these particular rocks shape shift before our eyes: levitating black clouds one minute they become Rorschach blots of the petrology world the minute after. Illusionistically inhabiting space bounded by the physical and the metaphysical, these entities hang poetically in the balance, so to speak, between the real, the symbolic and the imaginary.

The artist's works depicting stacked rocks are virtuosic in their optical sumptuousness. These haptic wonders are phenomenological visual riddles that enchant the eyes and seduce the mind. Neill destabilizes the implication of stability and groundedness that is inherent to rock formations ("prima materia") by leaving negative space between the rocks to imply that we are now leaving reality and entering the world of illusion and of the metaphoric, the world of connotation not denotation. Indicating that somehow her depicted forms are no longer tethered to natural law Neill further intimates that her ambition is to transport us into the realm of poetic visual legerdemain.

Neill's watercolors of plant and flower forms rest between the subjective and the indexical worlds as she will print a photograph of spectral forms and spaces directly onto the hand-colored imagery. Her photo-shopped superimpositions have a luminous intensity that induces a gossamer retinal after-effect. A palimpsest quality suggestive of diverse layers or aspects apparent beneath the surface comes alive, as overlays of meanings becoming manifest the longer one experiences the art. Neill's works on paper seem to embody an almost preternatural connection to the experiencing of the ways and shapes of the natural world. These visual formulations, embodying an essence and rightness of plant life, are evident carriers of emotional truth. While indebted in a certain measure to the taxonomic truth of nature Neill's intentionalities reside outside purely documentary concerns. Properly speaking, Christine Neill's subject matter, while ostensibly the plant or flower form in question, is actually her *relation* to the ostensible subject matter. Neill doesn't consider her depictions as autonomous one-dimensional ahistorical entities. Instead, her plant or flower shapes take on the role as instigators for her of discourse as

the natural forms becomes dimensionalized through the shape of thought.

For the artist visually re-presenting the natural world through her art is a means of engaging with each named plant --- through genus and species --- as a signifier of clusters of referential relationships and associative content. In so doing ideational, metaphoric, psychic, symbolic, intellectual, and affective dimensions come alive. Such content is driven by the artist's personally speculative insights into the intellectual, historical, scientific dimensions of the plant.

Neill is aware of the language of flowers, that is the tradition that assigns specific meanings or sentiments to botanical specimens. She uses these cultural references and inferences to get closer to the "spirit" of her forms and to create stories about them. Titles such as *Toxic Beauty Queen Emma* (2011) , *The Architects' Acanthus* (2010) , and *Stephanotis Split* (2010) are richly suggestive. They offer often-witty sub-plots to the main story lines. The result is imagistic and intellectual play of a high order.

"... I am neither a realistic flower painter, nor a botanical illustrator..." the artist writes in her notes. She continues: " ... I am interested in those places where human and natural life intersects. " Christine Neill's sensual paintings are visual "intersections" that allow the viewer to take in what ee cummings called our "sweet spontaneous earth" in ways that makes us deeply aware of how we are connected to our planet and the natural order.