

## Stern and Adams at SF MoMA Artists Gallery (1)

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Pia Stern. The Promise  
courtesy of the artist, photographer Ian  
Cummings

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Stern didn't start out to be a painter; in college she studied social sciences, language, city planning, anthropology - the grab bag of a student unsure of her direction and lacking discipline and focus. That's an observation, not a criticism. I think most of us were in the same place in the less financially stressed college atmosphere of the 1960's and 1970's. But she spent her junior year in Aix-en-Provence, signed up for a painting class which changed her life:

"I felt at home with the people teaching that class...They were all devoted to Cezanne and lived in the shadow of Monte Saint-Victoire. I felt at home with how they looked at things, philosophically speaking, as well as their way of perceiving things visually."

" I remember the first stroke; cobalt blue, a diagonal stroke on a rectangular three-by-five our canvas. I burst into tears when I made it. It was a Zen experience."

When she returned to California, she began to study painting in earnest. She was fortunate in her teachers for the art world here was still infused with the unique artists that came out of the post-war generation - Diebenkorn, Park, Thiebaud. They distrusted too much verbalization and taught in a direct, personal manner. One of her most influential teacher, Elmer Bischoff addressed the work

on "what was going on, or not, in inner terms." (1)

Out of this she developed a lyrical style, based on intuitive gestures and spontaneous marks, a cryptic language that almost seemed understandable if the viewer looked long enough. Her current work at the Artists Gallery at Ft. Mason is still lyrical but is edging closer to abstraction. The pieces are larger than the ones last shown here in the lobby of 555 Market Street but they still pull the viewer in. Stern describes her current oils on canvas as a cross between optimism at Obama's election but concern over the dismal decade that we had just survived and where we, as a country and the world, might be going. The canvas is large, rectangular, layered with a palimpsest of oil and oil pastels. She retains the poetic feeling of her earlier work but the gestural shapes and quasi-writing float in the luminous field, asking questions that only the viewer can answer.

Stern's concerns with what she describes as "...existential nature of her work...the tension between light and dark" comes to the fore in the series "Earth Abides." These charcoal pieces were done just before the US entered the war in Iraq and prefigure the devastating conflict to come. Nevertheless, her work retains what Sister Wendy Beckett wrote

about in her 1988 publication, Contemporary Women Artists:

"When art is personal and private, we can feel an irritating sense of exclusion. The artist has therefore to win our trust, and lure us into his "private dreams" in a way that we can understand. Pia Stern ..has an unusual power of transforming her "dreams" into our own. They remain hers; she does not share them..But we are not asked to riddle out Stern's private meanings." (2)

What I find fascinating is that Stern, while continuing to develop as a painter, has avoided the pull to make work that is completely insular and self-referential. Her work speaks to me beyond her biography - her parents escaped Nazi Germany - or even (sometimes) her intent. Like all good work, it allows the viewer to make their own assumptions and associations.

Pia Stern at SF MoMa Artists Gallery- through April 23rd.

(1) Charles Shere. Impulse, Depth and Poetry: The Art of Pia Stern. Imagio, Vol 21, February 1999, pp 31-41.

(2) Sister Wendy Beckett. Contemporary Women Artists. 1988

SFMOMA Artists Gallery at Fort Mason