

Tomkins Calvin, 'Nature Poet; Susan Hartnett'. The New Yorker, 9 November 1998.



Susan Hartnett | Press

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#### Nature Poet

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Nature Poet - Susan Hartnett knew when she was twelve that she was going to be an artist. She got no encouragement from her family and, until recently, very little from anyone else. Now at the age of fifty-eight, she is suddenly facing the improbable trauma of late recognition. The word on Hartnett spread in advance of her first solo New York show since 1985, which recently opened at the Danese gallery, and a number of her drawings and pastels, which nobody was interested in showing before, have been snapped up by museums and collectors.

For Hartnett, the prime mover was the sculptor Richard Serra, who visited her studio last spring, bought several drawings, and told Renato Danese to look at the work. What Serra and Danese saw were images of wild grasses – hundreds of charcoal drawings – and a group of large pastels (four feet by five) on colored paper. The charcoals were done from life, quickly, during Hartnett's drives up and down the Maine coast in her ancient Plymouth sedan. She'll drive for hours to find a remembered clump of bluejoint or *Spartina*, with its rhythmic interplay of curves and straight lines, and in some miraculous way her drawings catch the wind that animates them. Her pastels combine that sort of close observation with an abstract reordering and a rush of vibrant saturated color that relates especially to the season and the time of day.

Hartnett is a Manhattan country person who for years supported herself with part-time jobs at the Bronx Botanical Garden. She worshipped Pollock and de Kooning and Rothko but also fell in love with traditional Chinese landscape painting and with the works of Burchfield, Hartley, and earlier American landscapists. Her goal was to adapt the pictorial language of abstraction to the natural world as she saw it, and somehow she has pulled that off. "I'm just lucky," she said last week, "that I lived long enough to combine these streams which to other people seemed antithetical.