Alison Ferris, ‘Susan Hartnett’s Maine Grasses’. Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine (US), 15 June - 29 August 1999.

SUSAN HARTNETT'S MAINE GRASSES

This brochure accompanies an exhibition of the same name at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine from June 15 through August 29, 1999.

COVER ILLUSTRATION: *Early October "B" 1995* (Chairmaker's Rush, *Scirpus americanus* and Spartina, *Spartina sp.* in Wiscasset)

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"To evoke a fragmentary image with freshness and pungency is a mystery beyond the power of words to explain." Shih-T'ao [1]

That depictions of grass can be truly remarkable is a refreshing surprise in 1999. Using charcoal, Susan Hartnett, who has been a practicing artist for 35 years, makes the simplest marks to generate drawings of grasses found in Maine, a subject matter that one might consider mundane in this fast-paced, highly technological era. However, one glance at Hartnett's work reveals that these are not simple but rather visually exquisite and complex drawings.

Hartnett's drawings of grass are very much about what she sees in front of her. Driving around mid-coast Maine in an old turquoise station wagon—her "metal vessel," as she fondly refers to it, and which she likens to Monet's boat/studio—Hartnett simply pulls over and draws wherever she spots a clump of grass that has formal possibilities. As a child, she spent hours in meadows and woods by her house where she took it upon herself to identify and memorize the names of all the grasses and flowers that grew there. This knowledge, combined with adamant views on ecology and conservation that she acquired as a young adult—Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and John Muir are just a few of the nature writers in whom she is well-versed—inspired her to find part-time jobs off and on over the years at the New York Botanical Gardens and Wave Hill in the Bronx.

Hartnett began visiting Maine regularly and staying for months at a time in 1991. Like many artists before her, she finds the landscape and coast of Maine magnificent, a place where she renews deep childhood memories of coastal Massachusetts from the 1940s and 1950s. Unlike her predecessors, however, she does not attempt to "capture" the landscape through her art. She explains that she "feels" the work of Martin Johnson Heade, Fitz Hugh Lane, and Marsden Hartley, but she does not herself "see" those kinds of landscapes. Hartnett's "Maine landscapes" manifest themselves instead in two different forms: charcoal drawings of grasses and large (4' x 5') pastels that represent specific memories of her encounters with nature. For the pastels, Hartnett walks and she looks, experiencing the weather, the light, and the air in addition to the flora and fauna. She returns to her studio to recreate the overall experience of her walk. Details are important and, if asked, Hartnett can point to various components of her works and identify different bits of plants or trees. More important, however, are the gestures of the lines, the integration of color, and the overall atmosphere and expression of a particular day and time (to the hour). Rather than regurgitating the styles and subject matter of American painters who influenced her, Hartnett "plows" back into her pastel drawings the impact the older works have had on her mind and heart.

As Hartnett has been working on her drawings of Maine grasses, one nineteenth-century botanist, Charles H. Fernald, has been of particular significance to her. Fernald was a professor at what was then called the Maine State College in Orono and wrote a book in 1885 for his students and the farmers of Maine titled *The Grasses of Maine*. Not only does the book carefully describe 90 species of grass that grow in Maine but it also includes 42 beautiful line drawings of a selection of these grasses. Fernald's book has aided Hartnett in her own identification of grasses at the same time that his writing points to the significance of grass, which many of us overlook in the late twentieth century. "The grass family," writes Fernald, "is without doubt of far greater importance to mankind than all other families of plants combined. . . .When we remember that all our bread-stuffs come directly from this family, and that our meat comes from animals which feed directly or indirectly on the grasses, we can appreciate the profound utterance of the inspired writer when he says, 'All flesh is grass.'" [2]

Each grass is identifiable in Hartnett's drawings and in this exhibition there are primarily two grass species: blue-joint grass and reed canary grass. Blue-joint is distinguishable for its height and long, slender leaves. Reed canary grass is a more robust, dense grass that has a yellow sheen even in the winter snow. In a manner similar to Fernald, Hartnett finds distinct ways to represent plant forms that to our untrained late twentieth-century eyes may look indistinguishable. She does this not only by studying these grass species closely during all four seasons but by also studying other species of grass not represented in her drawings. Finally, Hartnett does not simply illustrate the grasses' various properties, she translates the grasses' characteristics into distinct emotions and energies so that they become, if you will, portraits.

Hartnett's work gives the appearance of being drawn quickly when in fact she draws quite deliberately, producing between three and five drawings in one day. Hartnett's lissome lines can be linked to those of Matisse while the extension and propulsion of her lines are akin to the Abstract Expressionists, whose work had a great effect on her. She is immensely knowledgeable and passionate about this school of art: works by DeKooning, Pollock, Rothko, and Kline were particularly significant to her early in her career. At the same time, she talks about how frustrating it was, in 1963, to work in the shadow of the Abstract Expressionists, who were considered great and unrivaled artists and, simultaneously, to contend with the ironbound rules engendered by Minimalism. Furthermore, it was impossible to locate female mentors to help her find her way beyond what was then the narrow definition of contemporary art in the United States. After a few years, Hartnett discovered traditional Chinese art, a discovery that was to help her develop her own particular visual vocabulary as an artist. She taught herself Chinese characters, studied traditional Chinese and Japanese painting and calligraphy in books, and went anywhere in New York where Chinese and Japanese art was on exhibit.

François Chen, an authority on Chinese art and poetry, provides a particularly lucid description of the interaction of Chinese landscape painters with nature. He explains that painting is one of

the highest expressions of Chinese spirituality and "through painting, the Chinese have sought to reveal the mystery of creation and to create for themselves an authentic way of life."[3] He continues:

> In China, landscape painting was not a naturalistic art in which man's presence was reduced or from which he was absent altogether; nor was it animist art through which man sought to anthropomorphize the external forms of landscape. This art was also not content with merely recording the beauty of certain places that man could contemplate at leisure. That man is not represented in a painting as an actual figure does not mean that he is not there. He is eminently present in the features of nature, which as he experiences or dreams them are nothing other than the projection of his own deeper nature, which is completely pervaded by an inner vision.[4]

Hartnett's work reveals the formal influences of Chinese landscape paintings as well as a sympathy towards the spirituality engendered in this work. She writes about watching grasses rearranging themselves in the breeze and wonders if ancient Chinese calligraphers were inspired by the lines created by grass. Hartnett's grasses are rendered in a language influenced by Chinese landscape; in fact, they are written like Chinese characters: each drawing is "thought in action" at the same time that it is a coherent whole. For example, when Hartnett draws she never erases any of her lines, explaining that "like jazz, one has to get it done right on the first go. All the knowledge is present and ready to play at show time."[5] She is also influenced by the interrelationship between human beings, the landscape, and creation in Chinese artistic practices. Since her engagement with Chinese art at the age of 33, she has struggled to achieve a similar harmony in her work. She has achieved this goal in the last fifteen years, which coincided, more or less, with the beginning of her visits to Maine.

The magic of Hartnett's drawings of grass is that they obscure the definitions of realism and abstraction. The same supple lines can and do read as either. The few critics who have written about Hartnett's work to date—she has just recently garnered their attention—have all marveled at this aspect of her charcoal drawings. In a 1998 review, Mark Daniel Cohen states that "her precision is so exacting as to be scientific. . . . At the same time, there is an aesthetic evocativeness to the renderings, a lyrical aspect that moves in the lines and in the apprehension of the viewer."[6] One way to understand how Hartnett unites abstraction and realism is to recognize her influences: traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy, Abstract Expressionism, and nature itself. In the end, however, they are Hartnett's lines, through which she expertly and emotionally conveys the forces that are at the root of life.

Alison Ferris

Curator
Bowdoin College Museum of Art

1. Shih-T'ao, *Enlightening Remarks on Painting*, (Pasadena, California: Pacific Asia Museum, 1989), 79.
2. Charles H. Fernald, *The Grasses of Maine*, (Augusta, Maine: Sprague and Sons, 1885), 3.
3. François Chen, *Empty and Full: The Language of Chinese Painting*, (Boston: Shambhala Publishers, 1994), viii.
4. Chen, 135.
5. Susan Hartnett, 1998, unpublished artist's statement.
6. Mark Daniel Cohen, "Susan Hartnett: Works on Paper" *Review* (November 15, 1998), 11.