

VisArts Rockville

Carol Miller Frost-Shifting light

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By Marcus Civin

I've become attached to the incremental growth of Carol Miller Frost's paintings. On one visit to the studio, the red painting leaning against the wall had a block-built border. Painted rectangles starting at the left edge of the painting seemed to conspire to create a form something like the cover of a hardbound ledger book—worn, oversized, red with a redder spine. On the right, almost turning off and out of the painting, a tall 'C' shape bumped yellow up against the red book-like shape and also cupped-in a band of gold. Looking at the painting, I thought of shiny brittle firecracker paper, delicate but volatile.

On another visit, Frost took out a pile of color samples—oranges and greens she thought she could possibly mix with greys. Frost asked me to hold up the color samples so she could see them next to browns, blues, reds. What I had seen earlier in the painting as shapes were now ghostly portals, memories under another architecture. That red painting now felt to me like a collection of open fields, colors caught changing, on the way to other colors, rectangle snippets of red-purple and rich brown. The blocky places were approaching wavy. I thought I could follow misty routes back, deep into the painting. I thought maybe I could wade in and go swimming somewhere within the expansive spaces I was starting to find in this painting.

I know Frost mostly in her studio. I started visiting her studio this summer as she was ramping up for the exhibition, *Carol Miller Frost and Rebecca Kame: Flow and Shift* at VisArts at Rockville. Though she speaks of other places—and I know she goes other places with her work, with her family and teaching—in my mind, Frost is still mostly in the studio, there in the studio with the door and windows open, with her paints.

In her studio this summer, I took pictures of her paintings-in-progress as a way of making rough notes, trying to point to something in these paintings that felt ethereal, spiritual even. Maybe I was only keeping myself busy taking snapshots when deeply I was inspired to bow and bend into the painted reds, pastel blues, and rumbling umber surfaces.

The exhibition in Rockville, scheduled for the fall, seemed far away to me, a concept, or at least yet untouchable. The studio and the exhibition felt like promises to each other separated by highways, future plans.

Frost works on the third floor of an old expansive mill building. This workspace, her painting studio, is a lab, an incubator, a flight deck. All around are strips of torn-off canvas and waxy disposable palettes—color test strips, controls for paintings to be, paintings that will be, built from afternoons' palette adjustments, under layers of cadmium red orange, ultra blue, long light brush with light yellow handle. On a day circled on the wall calendar, two art movers call up, come in, carry out ideas on stretched canvas now wrapped in plastic for the trip to the gallery.

Just three months ago Frost was wondering: did a softened pink inter-relation of rectangles approach what a friend meant when he urged: call that painting *Inside of My Cheek*.

I think I wasn't really standing in front of a painting like Frost's *Intersecting Lines* when I was standing in front of it. Instead of looking at *Intersecting Lines*—six feet by five feet, oil on canvas—I felt I was inside of it, my point of view had flipped to inside and looking out through some kind of fragile and expanding viscous film. It was like I was looking through a cutout of colored smoke, a sheet of green-brown liquid from a pond.

The intersecting lines, thin turquoise dividers, were the only hold I had, a courtesy actually the way I saw it, these shimmering stripes, almost parallel to the painting's edge, a quarter of the way in from the top and the right side. In my imagination, these intersecting lines became a gentle agent, a fine crisscross pinning me down just enough, giving me something to tie a long leash to, a marker so I could return to myself later when I could no longer stay out in the far reaches of this misty inside-the-painting trail, this unquantifiably abstract field. When I wanted to come back out of abstraction, away from this painted green-brown field—if I had to—I would find myself coming out touching something, hand first finding a snippet of an edge, an edge like the tiled edge of a pool perhaps... hand locating... hand feeling the thin turquoise lines Frost painted.