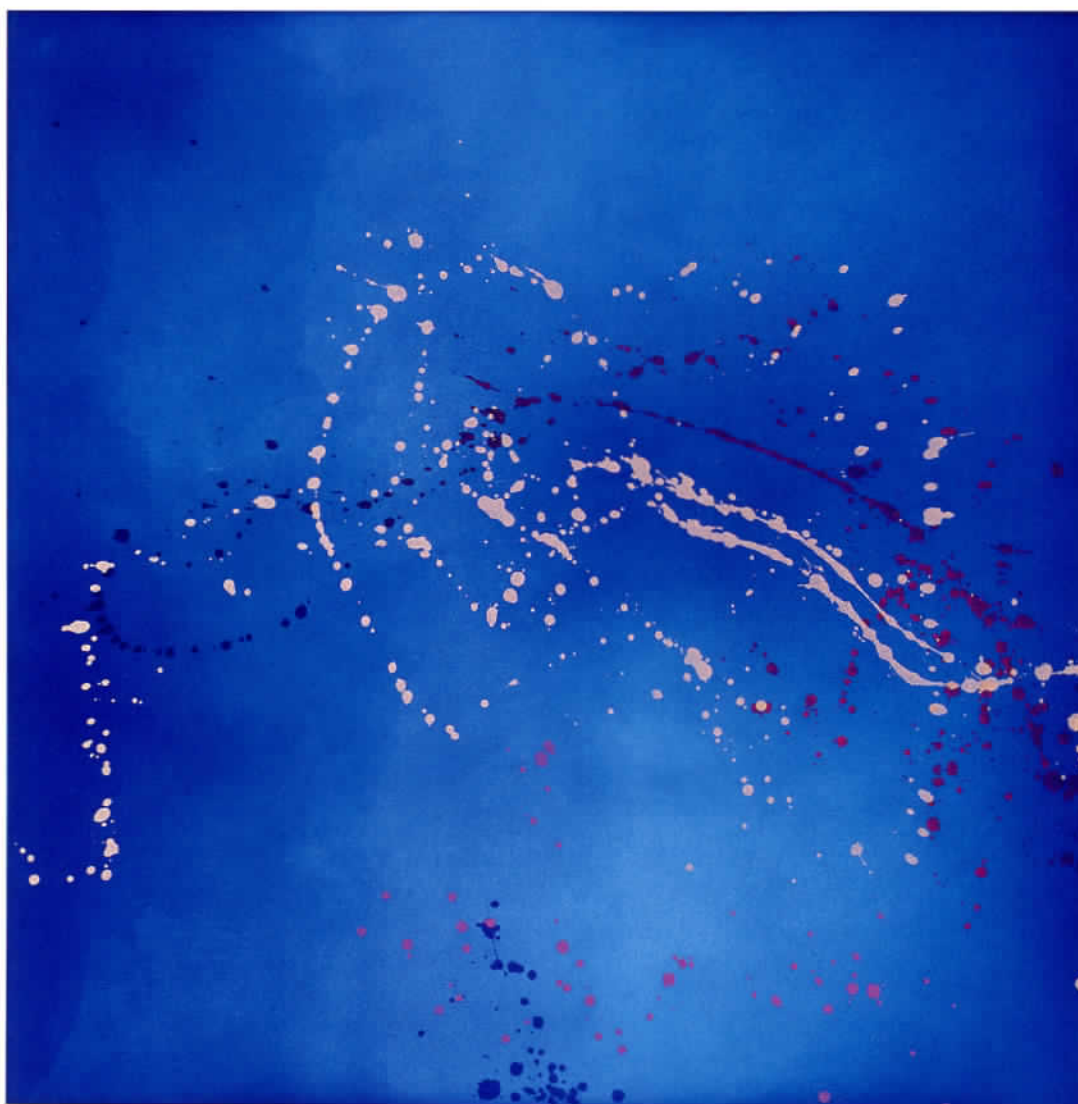


# Overview



Pat Steir, *Milky Way*, 2000. Color water bite aquatint with sugar lift and spit bite aquatints. Paper size: 40-1/2 x 39-3/4"; image size: 29-3/4 x 29-3/4", edition 25. Printed by Daria Sywulak.

## Pat Steir

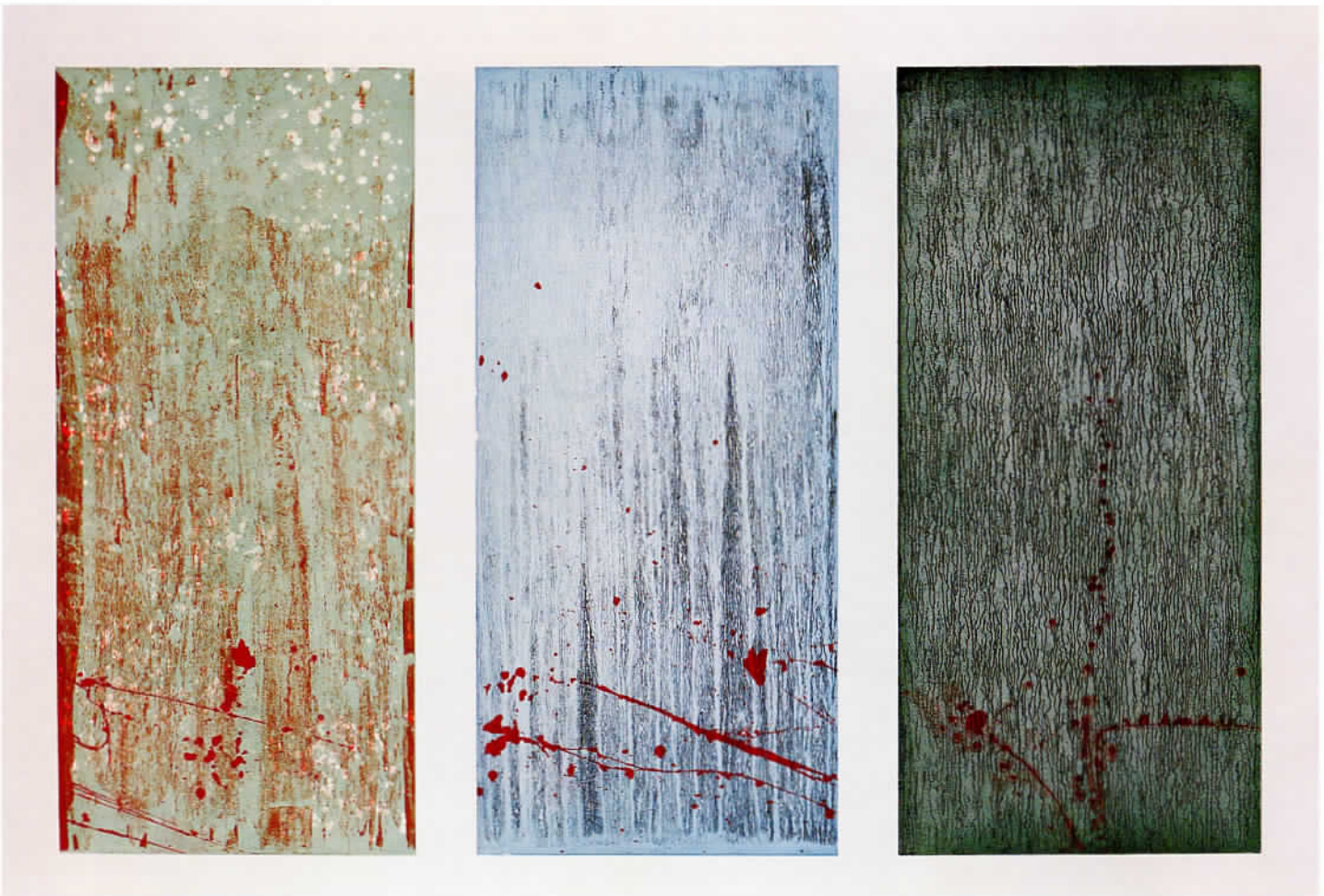
*The self is like a bug. Every time you smack it, it moves to another place.* —Pat Steir, 1989

When Pat Steir was in art school, she tried to look into herself. "I was the researcher and the researched, the mystery and the one destined to unravel the mystery," she recalls. Now, her approach to her work is just the opposite.

Steir was born in 1940, and in 1956 when she enrolled at the Pratt Institute in New York, she was only sixteen. Abstract Expressionism was dominating the art scene, but she painted what she called "dream-symbols" using drawing skills that were already assured.

Now, she flings paint at her canvases. She has said she would like to tell the Abstract Expressionists they didn't go far enough. They stopped at abstraction, but there was something more to be done. "I've taken the drip and tried to do something with it that the Modernists denied—the image," she says.

By using the word "Modernists" to describe the Abstract Expressionists, she is pushing the line between Modern and post-Modern forward from the end of World War II, where it is often placed, and leaving the Abstract Expressionists on the far side. In a recent monograph about Steir's work, the essayist said that Steir is "practicing a very modified type of Modernism with heavy influ-



Pat Steir, *A Walk In the Woods*, 2000. Color soap ground and sugar lift aquatints with aquatint. Paper size: 35- $\frac{1}{2}$  x 48- $\frac{3}{4}$ ''; image size: 25- $\frac{3}{4}$  x 39- $\frac{3}{4}$ '', edition 25. Printed by Daria Sywulak.

ences of post-Modernism." What does that mean?

Art and other cultural pursuits can't be made to fit neatly into categories. As Steir has said about the self, "Every time you smack it, it moves to another place." We find it useful to keep on smacking, however, even though we don't believe in categories the way our grandparents did. We comfortably make definitions and connections, not expecting them to permanently hold.

Modernism, we say, was concerned with the whole, was searching for some kind of lasting truth, and therefore it excluded what didn't fit. Post-Modernism, on the other hand, is fragmented. It includes everything on principle, glitter along with classical forms, eclectic references along with objects from everyday life.

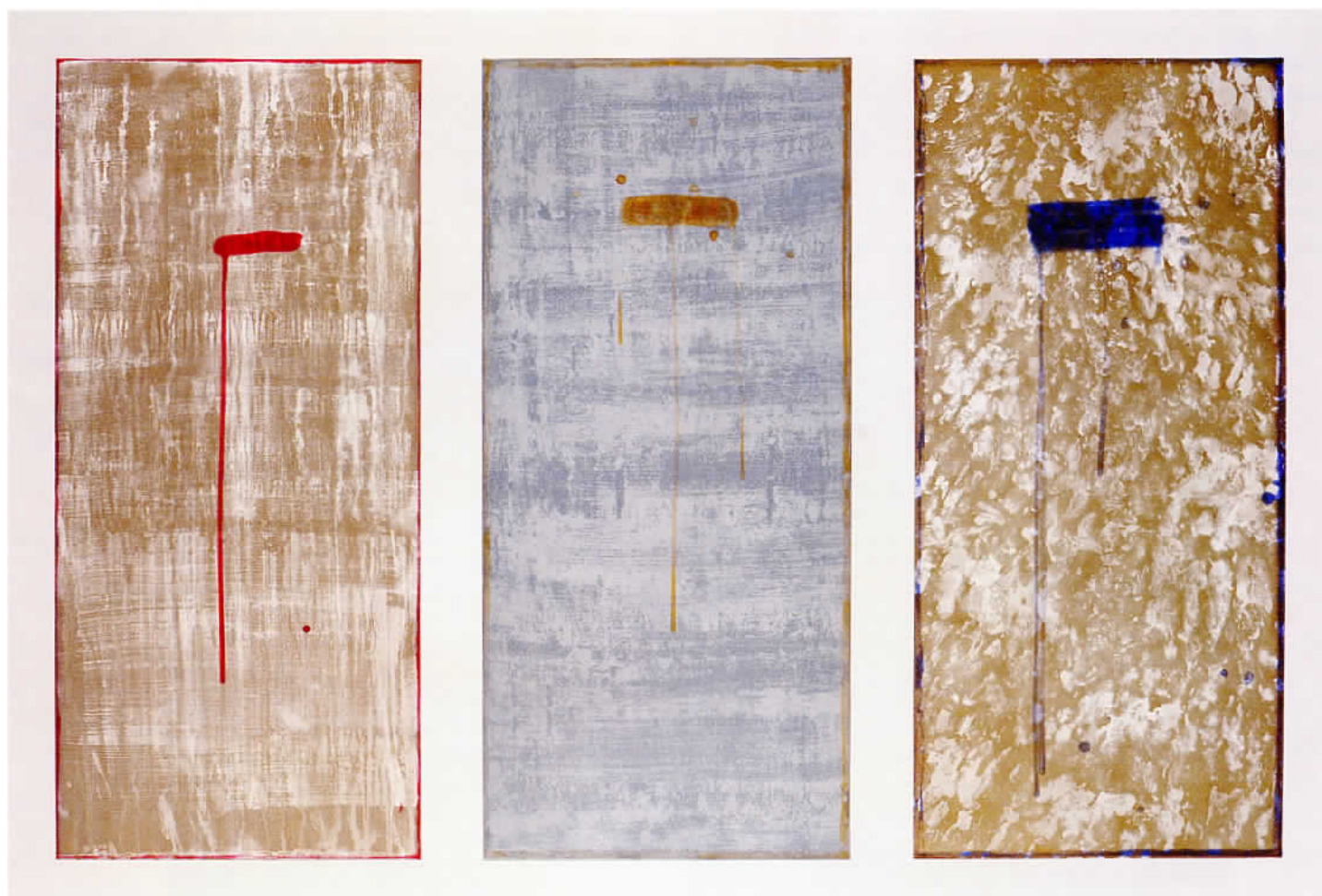
Steir's current work is perhaps closer to Modernism than to Post-Modernism, because it cannot be described as fragmented. It is radiantly whole, sometimes to the point of seeming to reveal an almost mystical truth. But at the same time, the work (like Post-Modernism) seems transitory, as if it will not make permanent claims for the truth it shows. Paradoxically, Steir arrived at this

truth, this wholeness, working for decades with concepts of fragmentation.

In 1970 many painters talked about paintings being simply about painting. At the same time Sol LeWitt and others were developing Conceptual Art. "This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless," wrote LeWitt in 1967.

Purposeless. That is a good word to describe the paintings Steir is doing now, but—as she says with a laugh—it took a long time to sink in. Between 1968 and 1980 she exhibited work in which she developed a trademark iconography: short, sometimes dripping brushstrokes isolated or in groups; birds, flowers, clouds, and mountains; a pale grid; color charts, squares, and typographic elements including an X to cross out some images; meaningful words scattered about.

She still uses some of those elements in some works, especially her newest ones, but her relationship to them is different now. Back in the 1970's, she was thinking about marks as signs and



Pat Steir, *Memory*, 2000. Color spit bite and soap ground aquatints. Paper size: 35-1/2 x 48-3/4"; image size: 26 x 39-3/4", edition 25. Printed by Daria Sywulak.

symbols. She even briefly was an editor for *Semiotext* magazine.

Steir was one of many artists in the 1970's who pursued an impulse toward stillness in their work, not developing forms in space, not expecting the viewer to track movement within parts of the artwork. Minimal artists were the most visible ones doing this, though it applies also to most of the early Conceptual artists. Steir's work didn't fit either category exactly, but in its lack of movement from one form to another, it became like a chant, and in that way evoked stillness.

At the end of the 1970's Steir began thinking about art history, and in doing this she isolated aspects of it rather than approaching it as a continuing stream. Showing her delight at being part of a community of artists who have lived over the centuries, she did some self-portraits, painting herself in other artists' styles. "I'm making a joke of my own vanity," she explained. "So there, I'm Rembrandt!"

Then, in the early 1980's she painted three paintings called "The Brueghel Series" in which she overlaid a grid pattern on an

image of flowers in a vase painted in 1599 by Jan Brueghel. With the Brueghel flowers and vase as a model, she painted each of the squares of the grid (64 in the largest work) in the style of a different painter, mostly from the past but using a few styles from our present time. When that large project was completed, she turned her attention to Japanese and Chinese painting as part of her study of art history.

The Chinese believe that the spirit of an artist flows into his hand as he works. Steir made several trips to Asia in the 1980's. She also began to spend a lot of time in the Asian art galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, where she has lived most of her life.

From the early days of her career, she had talked of being influenced by composer and artist John Cage whose work was influenced by Zen Buddhism. The combination of looking at Chinese paintings and having contact with Cage, whom she met in 1980, affected her.

Cage spoke of work as a meditation and advocated concentrat-

ing on the saying or the doing rather than on what is being said or done. "I have nothing to say and I am saying it" is one of his often-quoted remarks.

Steir shifted gradually from intending to investigate mark-making as symbol or sign to intending to do something that evoked an image but involved concentrating simply on the activity of marking. Images of water resulted naturally from this approach, and usually she has made them on a very large scale.

Most of her works are paintings on canvas. But she also has done large installation works directly on the walls of a room, and outdoor installations painted on semi-transparent scrims. Her prints and drawings are scaled to be contemplated in smaller spaces where engulfing the viewer isn't practical.



Pat Steir working on a plate for the print *Memory* in the Crown Point studio, 1999.

As Steir developed the idea of concentrating on the activity of mark making, the stillness always underlying her work became denser. For a while it turned in on itself to form images of waves, then it lengthened into waterfalls.

For the past ten years Steir's large paintings have been nothing but marks made by pouring, flinging, and dripping paint, and many have evoked the waterfall image.

Steir says that making each mark "is like what a gymnast does—first the meditation, then the leap." In some of her newest work she is inserting drawn elements again, and these also seem to be embodiments of the spirit flowing through her hand.

Over her long career as an artist, Steir's path to a meditative approach to her work has been full of twists and turns. But looking back, we can see something meditative in almost everything she has done. Even she did not recognize it, however, until it was suddenly, purely, inevitably, there.

—Kathan Brown

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