

# Discursive Space

An essay to accompany the catalogue for the exhibition  
“New Works by Jennifer Boggess” which opened on March 9, 2010  
In the James David Brooks Memorial Gallery, Wallman Hall  
Fairmont State University

By Marian Hollinger

To write about Jennifer Boggess’ new works is, in part, to write about landscape, but in larger part to write about mapping. In the past two decades, at least, mapping has become a separate part of the idea of landscape, although one might argue an even earlier date for this. Landscape’s history in painting has a clear path from the seventeenth century to the present, but to give a concrete definition to that tradition is more problematic. Do we mean the actual landscape, as it stretches out before the painter? Do we mean the idealized and re-arranged view of place to make it more harmonious in colour or composition? Or, so we mean a completely imagined view? Is that, in fact, a landscape at all? Some of these questions are treated in John Brinckerhoff Jackson’s *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, a collection of essays about these ideas and others concerning specifically the American landscape, linked to and, in subtle ways, defined by a “...vernacular tradition whose spaces and structures are linked with local custom, pragmatic adaptation, and unpredictable mobility.” Jackson’s writing has had an influence on Boggess’ work, although there is no one-to-one correspondence between them. Rather, his consideration of the American landscape in an expanded way has given the artist an understanding of the many ways in which the subject may be interpreted.

Boggess has undertaken a means of expression—mapping—that allows her elegant intellect both freedom and discipline in the imagery. She combines a delicate line and startling reality with more gestural applications of the pigment in broader areas of the canvas. Viewers who are already acquainted with Boggess’ paintings will recognize the alliances between the real and the imagined—or the re-imagined---as a continued exploration of the world of spaces. The work resembles a topographical map, with the paint on the surface of the canvases forming the physicality of the land. But is it a real map? A real place? Does it matter?

The large canvases are, in texture, luscious—a generally off-limits term in art history or criticism, but apt for this work. In contrast to the large pieces are the smaller, complicating, adjuncts of flowers and leaves and forest floor detritus, briefly glimpsed. These are the contrasts to the more conceptual qualities of the work as a whole. It is an installation in the truest sense of the word: one continuous work in the gallery; one created and limited space.

There is restraint at every turn. The artist creates with a lavish brush, but she gives fewer works to observe than viewers wish. In the map-like areas of the canvas, she tantalizes us with the

possibility of a place we might actually recognize, although she never defines it that specifically, then she gives us that tiny space which we “remember” from our own experiences in the natural world. As viewers, we have the distant and the close-up; the impersonal and the very personal. Another term discouraged in contemporary criticism is nostalgia, as if a yearning for something remembered but lost renders objects, works of art and the viewers’ past obsolete, finished, passé; yet viewers will respond to Boggess’ work with that fleeting yearning for an experience so small they might not quite recall where it took place. These are fragments of memory, and who does not respond to such fragments in a very powerful way?

The work will transport the viewer and provide both an internal excitement of recollection and a meditative experience that should last for some time after the gallery visit concludes. It is not a literal map, but it is a true one, a map of memory and experience combined to capture a moment in time—of the artist and of the viewer. These may well be the most significant maps of all...