

Jean Jewer: The Ebb and Flow of Language – Essay by Petra Halks

Independent curator and art critic.

Jean Jewer comes from the edge of the world. A fisherman's daughter, she grew up in Main Brook, a remote village on the northern peninsula of Newfoundland, where she watched gigantic icebergs float by, and wind and water whip and carve the land. Her abstract paintings testify to a first-hand experience of the raw energy, violence and beauty of Eastern Canada's coastal landscape. Jewer writes that she feels "a visceral connection to the sublime drama of land and sea." (1)

In *Stir Up*, 2008, a vertical stretch of white paint partly covers a dark blue ground. The white pushes almost solidly against the right edge of the canvas, while on the left side it disintegrates into a fringe of circular squiggles that hover over the blue. Framed within Jewer's experience of the "sublime drama of land and sea," the painting brings associations of a surging tide rolling in and out; and of being on the edge of nothingness, where words are reduced to mere matter and gesture, mute marks.

The eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote that a sublime experience (upon seeing "the dark tempestuous ocean," for instance) evokes "a momentary check to the vital forces," an intuition of limitlessness that can never be adequately expressed in words or visual representations.(2) Jewer's abstractions draw us close to such stunned awe, where language fails to grasp our experience, but the awing high tide always retreats for a low ebb that reveals a *ground* (however unstable) in the tangibility of paint.

Jewer's insistence on paint's materiality links her to a post-war abstraction in which emphasis shifted from the spiritual to "the immediacy of present-tense engagement with the *stuff* of what is in front of us," as the late art historian Kirk Varnedoe has noted.(3) But thought and metaphor are not kept at bay for very long. Her titles and suggestive imagery are like the flotsam and jetsam found on shore at low tide. We pick them up and ponder them, they let us make cultural and historical associations. We see raindrops in the short, staccato lines of *Coming Rain* (2007). Swirls and dark masses become wind and thunder in *Summer Storm* (2009), shimmering flecks and drips of white paint begin to look like *Sea Ice Melting* (2010) There is even, perhaps, an outline of a boat in *Fog Lifting* (2007). Things emerge, words form, narratives begin to be constructed.

Though they are a far cry from the majestic icebergs that Lawren Harris etched into Canadian consciousness, the dribbling blobs in three panels of *Drift* (2010) can be read as icebergs drifting by. These pieces of ice (there are too many, they are melting too fast!) take on the yellows and greys of the water into which they have almost disappeared. The fourth panel, toward which they seem to be floating, acts as a red-hot alarm, announcing a disturbance of unknown forms and proportions. Jewer's words and images reveal concepts that allow us to think: concepts of time, of place, of dimensions, of tangible objects. They allow us to *think* about global warming as we *feel* our connection to vital natural forces.

After ebb tide, high tide floods back in, and knowing is undone; she paints a *Whoosh* (2008) a sudden gust of wind, in which we lose our footing. In forceful gestures, flowing fields and violent marks, the artist creates a zone of wordless, formless intuition, in which we sense that we are *of* nature. In Jewer's own words: "This splattering liquid [of paint] resembles nature's elements in the way that it flows, gushes, drips, and pours. These same features seem to parallel the way I make art. My paintings emerge like an act of nature: in an emotionally charged moment, I pick, I scrape, I slash, I mark my surfaces."

Keeping body and spirit together, Jewer retains us in an intertidal zone, where a high tide of feeling fluctuates with an ebb that brings us back to concrete environmental concerns. She concentrates on

the *visceral connection* to the sublime, on the mute matter of paint, and on atavistic gestures that reach down, underneath words, to mimic vital forces. Words and things are salvaged as necessary tools in which to express concerns about the ocean's health, but Jewer suggests that such tools can only be meaningful in an environmental discourse if they are connected to a feeling in our bones, a feeling that nature is us.

Jean Jewer (www.jeanjewer.com) currently lives and works in Ottawa, but she returns often to her native Newfoundland. She received a BFA from the University of Manitoba in 1990 and continued her studies at the Ottawa School of Art, and at the Visual Arts Centre in Montreal, where she painted with Harold Klunder. Jewer has exhibited her work in many group and solo exhibitions in Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba and England. Her art can be found in corporate and private collections throughout North America and abroad. She is a member of Blink Gallery Cooperative and is represented by Cube gallery, Ottawa.

Petra Halkes (www.petrahalkes.ca) is an Ottawa painter, independent curator and art critic. She is the author of *Aspiring to the Landscape: On Painting and the Subject of Nature* (University of Toronto Press, 2006). She has written many catalogue essays and is a regular contributor to Canadian art magazines. Most recently she curated *Melting the True North: Susan Feindel, Paul Walde, Gita Laidler*, at the Ottawa City Hall Art Gallery (2010).

1. Jean Jewer, Proposal Statement 2010
2. Immanuel Kant, *Philosophical Writings*, Ed. Ernst Behler (New York: Continuum 1986) p 213, 202.
3. Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing, Abstract art Since Pollock* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2006)p 253