

From Surface to Surface: The New Paintings of Dixie Hoggan

by

Paul Bernard Ryan

*The sea
isn't a place
but a fact, and
a mystery*

*under its green and black
cobble coat that never
stops moving.*

--Mary Oliver, from *The Waves*

Earlier this year I had the pleasure of visiting the home and studio of Richmond artist Dixie Hoggan. Among the stacks of images, papers, and objects-scattered banks of inspiration--that characterize many artists' studios, an unassuming photograph caught my attention. A modest 4" x 6" color print recently shot by the artist, the image embodies many of the visual characteristics and suggests the emotional essence of Hoggan's new paintings. A close-up view of flowing shore water near her second home on the Chesapeake Bay at Deltaville, the photograph displays an array of halcyon waves, their arching liquid edges dispersing into planes of ripples-undulating surfaces that, simultaneously translucent and opaque, collaborate with sunlight to create a liquid chiaroscuro: rhythmic highlights and astonishing gradations of blue-green-gray. This ever-recurring yet always new orchestration is a tiny fraction of an infinite expanse known to many around our precious planet. Earth's streams, rivers, pools, lakes, and oceans are venues for this sight-a visual experience where a complex, playful physical surface/teriority is commonly transformed by the observer's imagination into an interiority of visceral associations and desires.

For Hoggan, this intersection of nature, experience, and creativity is the central subject of her painting, the impetus for her poetic transformations of the sea's surface to constructed surfaces of oil paint and canvas. This surface-to-surface transaction construes the first surface as noun--a liquid planar expanse, Mary Oliver's sea as "fact." The second surface, though also an object (a painting), is more aligned with the concept of action and the artist's emotional searchings, functioning more closely as a verb with double meanings of hiding and revealing--interior happenings aligned with Oliver's sense of the sea as "mystery."

Within Hoggan's new series of paintings, there is often a striking similarity of surface texture, color, and shape, despite the subjects often being different bodies of water--for example, various locations in the Indian Ocean (the Maldives Islands, Madagascar, the Seychelles Islands), the Chesapeake Bay, and St. Bart's in the Caribbean Sea. This chain of resemblance signals an artistic approach that is not concerned with exacting visual depiction, but one reliant upon deep emotional responses to the sea as experiential fact and the artist's practice in constructing equivalent visual metaphors that explore interiority. The aesthetic of Hoggan's series of turquoise panels is located between concrete representation and a lush expressionism that embraces ambiguity--a position that echoes the interstices between Hoggan's love of the sea, her participation in the human proclivity towards cycles of experience, feeling, and interpretation, and Nature's adamant indifference, a characteristic referenced by Mary Oliver in the poem, *Ocean*, as its "sorrowless, salt self." Through their surface-to-surface equivalency and contrast, the triumph of Hoggan's paintings is their equally adamant declaration of romanticist, human longing.

Paul Ryan is an artist and art critic living and working in Staunton, Virginia. He is Professor Emeritus of Art at Mary Baldwin University. His writing has appeared in *Art Papers Magazine*, *Sculpture Magazine*, and *Art in America*. His paintings are represented by Reynolds Gallery in Richmond; and, he is the recipient of two Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Professional Fellowships in Painting: 2009-2010 and 2016-2017.