

Gretl Bauer: Stringed Instruments of Sonorous Silence

Gretl Bauer does more with strings than the New York Philharmonic. Stretched taut across her compositions or flowing loosely off of them, contrasting exquisitely with the ruggedness of her other materials, graceful strings or gossamer threads strike a lyrical note in Bauer's mixed media constructions.

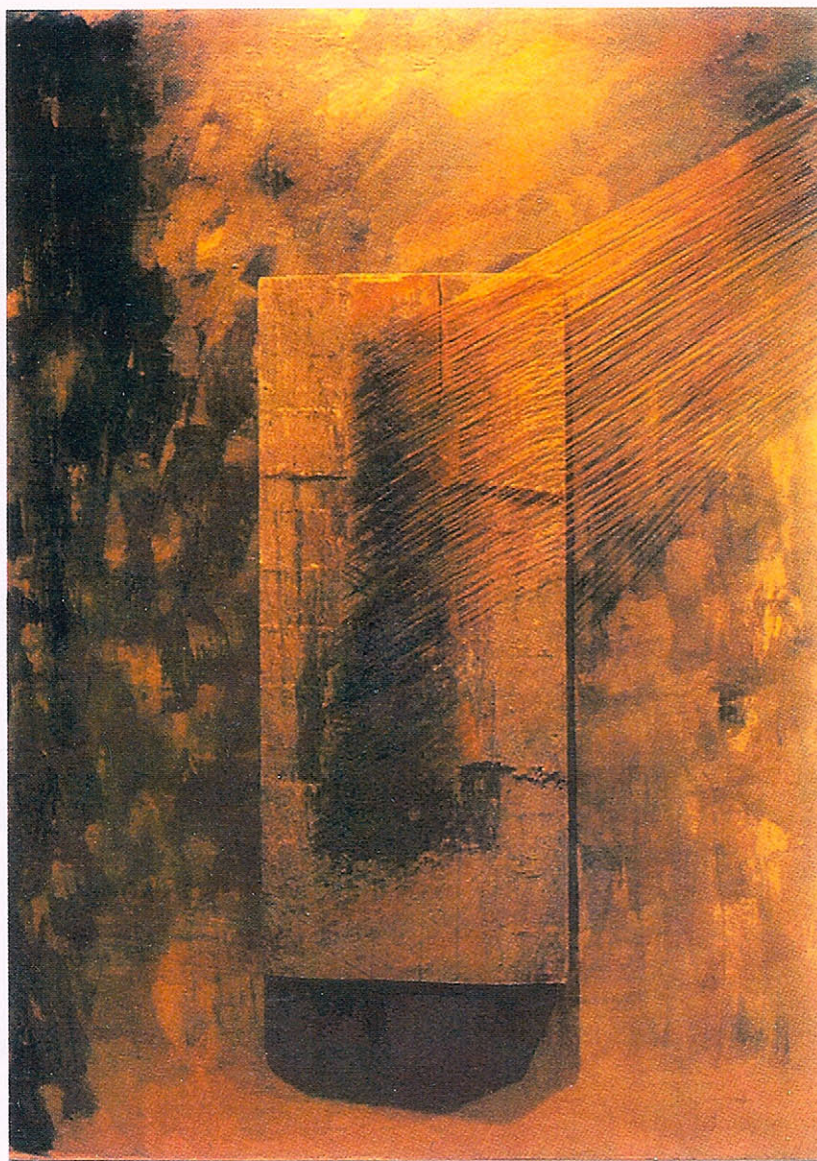
In some works, with the weathered shards of found wood that Bauer often affixes to her canvases or panels serving as frets, threads are arranged in fine rows slightly above the painted surface. Often they, too, are painstakingly painted in luminous hues that make them suggest beams of light streaming into the painting from some unseen source. Only, these light beams, when viewed up close from certain angles, cast their own shadows—a metaphysical paradox peculiar to the art of Gretl Bauer.

Golden threads, stretched across a rough wooden board with the stately presence of an ancient tablet, stream into the upper right side of the composition as though from on high in "Late October" (For My Mother), one of the works in "Shimmer," Bauer's new solo exhibition, at Phoenix Gallery, 568 Broadway, from April 28 through May 22.

This piece is an elegy, occasioned by the death of the artist's mother last year. Yet for all its sonorous somberness, it also projects a sense of transcendence, reflecting Bauer's statement "It seems that our first task is to maintain hope in the face of all that is so precarious."

Bauer's use of found materials is so sculpturally imposing and prominent in her compositions that one can almost overlook what a fine painter she is. But to do so is to miss one of the major pleasures of her work: the deep and resonant contrasts she achieves through both her subtle use of color, as well as through the subtle interplay between her tactile collage elements and her succulent paint surfaces.

In "Late October," Bauer employs juicy gestural strokes of golden ochre pigment to



"Late October" (For my Mother)

envelop the entire composition in an autumnal glow that poignantly enhances its elegiac mood. By contrast, in a larger work called "Bayou," Bauer orchestrates a subtle range of grays, laid down in staccato strokes, to create a surface with a drier, more mat quality akin to Jasper Johns's classic early monochromatic canvases.

The main part of "Bayou" is painted on a large oval-shaped board that Bauer took a liking to and combined with a long pole-like shard of wood, to the bottom of which she affixed a thick mop of silver threads. In keeping with the title of the work, this second object, much of its surface also covered by painted strokes, leans against the big oval form like a mojo stick or some other mysterious voodoo object, its tangled silver threads forming a swampy morass at the bottom of the two-part composition. Although here there are no strings attached

(if one will pardon a bad pun that seems irresistible in context), the juxtaposition of incongruous elements to create a fine balance between the material and the ethereal, the enduring and the ephemeral, is wholly in keeping with the mixed media aesthetic that Bauer makes so singularly and evocatively her own.

Gretl Bauer's painterly abilities, in particular, come to the forefront in recent works on canvas: "Ondine" is a very large composition in subdued, subtly harmonized hues, in which a profusion of threads, painted a luminous cobalt blue, flow from the bottom of the canvas like a waterfall, creating a glimmering effect that can also be seen in another powerful combine painting called "Baltic," inspired by a recent trip North of the Arctic Circle.

In "Andean," threaded elements and a large chunk of wood strike a sublime balance between ruggedness and delicacy. Here, too, Bauer pulls out all the chromatic stops, expanding her generally restrained palette of hues with brilliant reds applied in a bold gestural strokes that would do any Abstract Expressionist proud.

Freestanding works such as the show's title piece "Shimmer," and "Svolvaer"

veer in a more sculptural direction, the former with a furled wire-mesh form sprouting dangling golden strings, the latter with fine rows of white thread stretched tightly over a found wood form with thick white paint scumbled down its craggy surface.

Then, demonstrating an ability to conjure up her characteristic magic with unexpected materials, Gretl Bauer unveils an awesome triptych called "Starlight." In this Minimalist tour de force, layered grids composed of mosquito netting, metal mesh, and other silvery elements have been utterly transformed by the artist in a manner that belies their mundane origins. The combined effect of the three large panels can only be likened to gazing into the intricate workings of a celestial grand piano, causing one viewer to remark, "You can almost hear the silence!"

—Ed McCormack