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Joan Witek's visual vocabulary is the flattened ellipse

Her art is more than designs

By Ann Daly

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"Life is too short to just make designs," says Joan Witek, a New York artist who is currently having her first one-person museum show at Carnegie Institute Museum of Art.

Ms. Witek doesn't just aim to reach the viewer's eyes or brain, she's shooting for their guts. In that way, she's an artist very much of her time.

In accordance with one of the seeming "pre-requisites" for art today, she intends her work to be expressive — to have meaning for the person who stands with head cocked in front of her large black-and-white paintings.

The climate hasn't always been so receptive to meaning. In the last two decades, art has been

REVIEW

intentionally un-expressive. It concentrated on the purely visual or on the artistic process rather than the end product.

So when Joan Witek comes along, takes her cues from cerebral artists like Ellsworth Kelly, Richard Serra and Frank Stella (who said "what you see is what you see") and then chooses to incorporate emotion into a seemingly un-expressive art, you wonder about this thing called self-expression.

Especially because Ms. Witek doesn't use the ordinary stuff like color or imagery to communicate feeling.

Her visual vocabulary consists of black, flattened ellipse shapes arranged in bands on raw canvas. They're done in an oil and graphite "paint" that has a gritty, cavish texture.

And that's it, folks.

Her vocabulary is so minimal that the slightest inflection or the slightest grammatical variation can really resound.

She varies the size of the shape, the smooth or fuzzy outline of the shape, the amount of white space, the proportion of the shapes, as well as their pattern and direction.

So when you encounter "Gardens of the Villa Medici" there's a lightness and airiness that's refreshing. And in "Edward Teller's Dream" there's a gravity and fierceness that's oppressing. "Giving Way" has a kind of vertigo about it — the kind of disturbing but exhilarating discomfort you get when trying something new.

It might not be apparent right away that this dazzling display is about anything more than designs. It's the powerful rhythms pulsating around the room that are initially entrancing.

It is difficult to concentrate on any one painting when out of the corner of your eye these emaciated black pods are doing their best to distract.

But when you can train your eyes on a single one, like "Introductory Glyph," there can emerge more than just a visual reverie.

In this painting, one of Ms. Witek's shapes stands upright like an idol against a field of miniatures. At the monolith's center is a fuzzy break of white, and behind that fissure — which you get the urge to tear open — seems to reside a mysterious, powerful force.

Yet not all of them are so compelling. Her private intentions, so scrupulously detailed in the catalog by John Caldwell, adjunct curator of contemporary art, remain visually inscrutable in some instances.

A survey of Ms. Witek's drawings is also on display. They have an eloquent immediacy and intimacy that is diminished in the paintings.

The flattened ellipse shapes of the paintings stem from the nervous little pen strokes you see in the drawings. She executed them in rows within a square or modified square. By doubling up on them in some areas, she achieved a rhythmic kind of movement.

"Joan Witek: Paintings, 1980-83," is in the Entrance Gallery and "Joan Witek: Drawings, 1976-84" is in Gallery 1 through April 29.