

## Squeak Carnwath

The color palette and the visual vocabulary—images of records, tree stumps, and stacked boxes, among other motifs, in combination with the artist’s diaristic text—are repeatedly reconfigured from one painting to the next in Squeak Carnwath’s work. Repetition, in and of itself, is essential to the artist’s process. “Some people deal with trauma by repetition. Remaking the same thing over and over. The repetition is a comfort,” reads a section of text from one painting. In many ways, understanding this aspect of the work is more important than a voyeuristic deconstruction of the iconography, tempting though it may be to decipher the codes therein. “If there is a specific trauma, there isn’t any point in knowing what it was. All women are traumatized. I have simply refigured out ways to use that anger,” Carnwath explains. “Repetition orients us to a place of well-being. I like to see what the possibilities look like and feel like. And I have to paint it. I can’t make a sketch or a smaller version of the larger idea. I am trying to get something right. I have to do it over and over again in full to make it feel right, to absorb it and own it.” Originally from Pennsylvania, Carnwath studied at Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont before receiving her MFA from California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, California in 1977. Though widely recognized as a Bay Area painter, her work does not lend itself to any of the prescribed regional movements that specialize in figuration or landscape. Her paintings combine stylized realism and abstraction with figurative references and gestural marks. She began painting with oils as a young child and adheres to the theory, made popular by Malcolm Gladwell’s 2008 book “Outliers,” that 10,000 hours of dedication to a task yields mastery. (By her calculation, she has worked well beyond this time frame.) One might casually question her ability to paint with the skill of a master painter—after all her style of painting does not summon the work of the highly realist painters that we traditionally regard as masters. Or does it? Look closely at what appears to be collaged paper with hand-written text in so many of her compositions. There is no paper: it is all paint, even what appears to be graphite is paint. This small point of departure, between the skills she possesses and how she employs them, begs a closer consideration of the repetition from throughout her decades long career. The seriality gives visual form to the experience of meditation, the repetitive nature of the work providing the visual equivalent of a mantra. Carnwath often works on ten large-scale paintings at a time in her Oakland studio, working back and forth between the paintings to realize their completion. Titles, denoted in block lettering along the left-hand side of each canvas, highlight the edges and suggest a sidelong consideration of the work in much the same way that one would peer through a doorway. “Enter here,” reads text writ large in one painting, inviting the viewer in. “Painting preserves ephemerality and the fragile,” reads much smaller text from the same composition. The images of boxes and urns are like repositories for memories, grief, and guilt: the things that plague us. Whatever may be the personal experiences embedded into the paint, the work remains subjective. Their meaning is left open for interpretation. An irregular dashed linedemarks a “guilt free zone” in several of the works and by the artist’s own admission, this space is as much for her as it is for the viewer. But, she explains, “If I am painting, nothing is going wrong. Everything is going right.”

—CHRISTIAN L. FROCK

Squeak Carnwath's exhibition, "Was Am," was on view at John Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco, from March 5 – 28, 2009. "Squeak Carnwath: Painting is No Ordinary Object," a retrospective exhibition of more than 40 paintings from 1994 to the present, is currently on view at Oakland Museum of Art from April 25 – August 23, 2009. under the radar may 2009 "The Whole Truth," 2006 Squeak Carnwath Oil and alkyd on canvas over panel, 90" x 80" Collection of the artist, courtesy James Harris Gallery, Seattle ©Squeak Carnwath/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: M. Lee Fatherree Photo of Squeak Carwath by M. Lee Fatherree [www.artltdmag.com](http://www.artltdmag.com) Copyright ©2009 Lifescapes Publishing, Inc. All rights reserved.