

Terremoto

Christina McPhee

by Silvia Perea

“Shut up and look out the window!” Christina McPhee’s parents would urge their children while driving them around the US in the family’s car. Mile after mile of staring at the sierras and plains stretching across the country through the rear glass prompted McPhee’s avid imagination to picture them as an unexplored territory, filled with dormant truths yearning to be unearthed. Emphasizing this childhood fantasy were the lavish depictions of the American West by 19th-century such as Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Cole that McPhee recalls admiring at the Sheldon Museum of Art at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, not far from the village where she spent her formative years. Similarly influential in shaping her childhood perception of the country’s hinterlands as a land of wonders was her foray into prairie habitats during solitary bike rides around her home.

Over time though, McPhee’s explorations of the plains, including burial sites and tipi rings, led her to grasp that the magnificent images of the American landscape that she cherished did not align with the truths that such vast territory enfolded. This realization was also at odds with the beliefs prevalent in the conservative milieu of her upbringing, an environment that included several close relatives engaged in the evangelization of Indigenous people in the upper Midwest. McPhee recognized that the certainties presented by her elders were actually ambiguous and somewhat impervious. Conversations around the dinner table justifying the irrelevance of native communities based on their presumed low demographics, for example, didn’t make sense to her.

“As a teenager, I could not understand that a culture that had been there for thousands of years could be erased so simply, or that one could pretend that it had never existed.” Discussing topics like these at home was off-limits, just as the possibility of expressing feelings or thoughts as one’s own, so McPhee grew accustomed

to sharing her concerns obliquely. As she matured, the need to come to terms with her own thinking regarding the intricate liaison between the American landscape as a settler domain and its subjective realities became a pressing call, and McPhee ventured into the realm of the visual arts to respond to it. Yet, instead of adopting an explicit artistic language to voice her thoughts, McPhee continued—and continues to this day—to express herself indirectly, using a personal non-figurative lexicon that expands the aesthetic and semantic dimensions of abstraction.

Together with greater expressive freedom, abstraction provides McPhee with a path to escape convention, a goal the artist pursues through the multiple media she masters: drawing, photography, collage, video art, performance and especially oil painting, for which she is best known. From this standpoint, abstraction also allows her to approach the subversive, yet elusive power of beauty. “Beauty is a tremendous deduction. It’s subversive because it’s constantly trying to move outside of normative standards. It’s always a little bit in drag. This wildness is the power of the beautiful,” she affirms. Furthermore, abstraction suits McPhee’s resistance to the paternalistic and sugarcoated undertones her now adult eye discerns in the settler colonial depictions of the American landscape. In this regard, abstraction stands, for her, as a tool for unrestricted engagement, comparable to the “informality” that Umberto Eco describes in *Opera aperta* (*The Open Work*): “a configuration of stimuli whose substantial indeterminacy allows for a number of possible readings.”

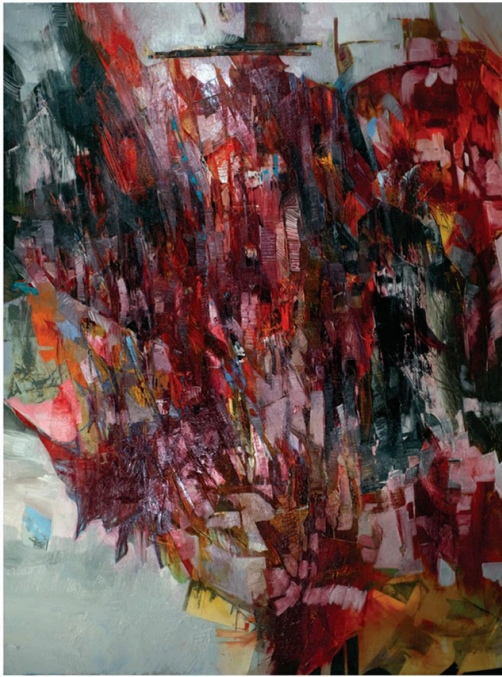
Perhaps more importantly, abstraction is a fitting way for McPhee to address diverse “resonance fields” across the sundry media she uses. These ‘fields’ encapsulate the motivations that drive her artistically, and usually symbolize a strained, or even traumatic, relationship



Christina McPhee, *Telluric Dreamtime*, 2023, oil, oil stick, collage of ink on washi and printed text, and dye on canvas



Christina McPhee, *Palm at the End of the Mind (Storm Surge)* (after Wallace Stevens), 2023, oil, oil stick, ink, marker, and dye on canvas



Christina McPhee, Red Springs Orange Shirt Day, 2023, oil, oil stick, collage of watercolor drawing, collage of digitized photographs, and dye on canvas, all images courtesy of the artist

between a natural site and its inhabitants. Such is the case, for example, of Red Springs, in Wisconsin, where her great-grandfather and grandfather taught Mohican children at a mission school during the first years of the 20th century. In her recent painting, titled precisely with the name of the Shawano County town, McPhee ponders on the ethical implications of descending from a lineage deeply rooted in the assimilation of Indigenous peoples into Western cultural paradigms. Ripped fragments of photographs taken by her grandfather in 1906 featuring Mohican individuals, speckle the canvas, some buried under layers of paint, others crossed out with ink and colored pencil. Preserving the identity of those stripped of their original ethos from any exposure that might be perceived as lucrative is an ethical imperative as crucial for McPhee as safeguarding their story from oblivion. But what is this story? What does Red Springs mean? Can one truly comprehend the depth of what happened there or anywhere else with a similar human context? Along with representing the subject matters that drive her work, the concept of 'resonance field' evokes a flickering, trembling surface that conceals such profound realities—an image the artist borrows from Brazilian psychoanalyst Suely Rolnik. Indeed, the resonance between the fathomable and unfathomable effects of colonialism on sectors of society and the environment centers McPhee's intellectual approach to her artistic

output. "My work," she acknowledges, "reflects what it is like to be in the world today from an epistemological perspective. It operates at the edge of what we know and areas that we don't fully understand."

Visually speaking, McPhee's fields of resonance transcend any evocative association with a geomorphological feature, embodying the reciprocal influence between a tectonic substrate and its atmospheric canopy, to suit a comparison with a seismological event of significant proportions. In her paintings, in particular, energetic brushstrokes, scratches and doodles coalesce amid storms of color suggesting scenes in the process of disintegration. Juxtaposed and overlapped, layers of paint imbue her compositions with a topographic quality that evinces the inspiration they draw from natural landscapes. Rugged and shattered, these strata appear galvanized by telluric forces.

Beyond illustrating the crises of contemporary life, especially fueled by economic liberalism, the reigning chaos in McPhee's canvases admits, at least, two interpretations. One, related to chaos's turbulent appearance, hints at the artist's yearning for the collapse of the system of values within which she was raised, a system that largely persists to this day. The jagged scribbles that populate her paintings mimic gestures of erasure, possibly reflecting the artist's rejection of colonial and canonical stipulations. From this standpoint, her work aligns with the concept of the right to opacity—the non-Western world's right to resist the Western's imposition of a hierarchical relationship with it, allowing the former to subvert such system of domination—advocated by the French writer from Martinique, Édouard Glissant. The other interpretation of chaos contemplates the word's etymological origin: *khaos*, from Ancient Greek, vast chasm, void. In this sense, the turmoil pervading McPhee's paintings alludes to the ongoing cultural depletion that ensues neocolonial and globalizing processes worldwide. Along the same lines, it evokes the contemporary widening of ideological schisms regarding the other and the environment.

Even though all of McPhee's artistic practice "is about a place," as she admits, these considerations elevate its significance to a global level. Indeed, places and their critical realities intermingle in her work, but the ripples created by the latter extend beyond any particular geographical context. Emphasizing that truths are relative, uncertain, and endure in non-fixed scenarios, McPhee's art concretizes what Glissant calls "trembling thinking": "The world trembles physiologically, the world trembles in its becoming, the world trembles in its pains, in its oppositions, in its massacres, in its genocides (...). The world trembles and our thinking must adapt to this trembling. We must try to follow these tremors and perhaps we will discover more truths than we do today."