ULRICH PROJECT SERIES:

ANNE APPLEBY

ESSENCE BEYOND IMAGE

SEPTEMBER 10–NOVEMBER 27, 2011
ANNE APPLEBY’S luminous paintings grow out of and reward sustained attention. While at a glance they appear simply monochrome—flat planes of rich, single colors—with longer looking, one discovers their myriad variations. Each ostensibly distinct color reveals multiple infusions of other hues. Each seemingly uniform surface slowly gives the impression that its center radiates light and its edges pulse. Out of apparent simplicity emerges complexity, nuance—a subtle sort of mystery.

Appleby’s paintings meditate on nature, wedding objective observation and subjective experience. The artist is a committed student of her surroundings—ever attentive to the overall tenor of a place, but also cognizant of its finite details. Often titled with the names of specific plants—Sweet Pea, Salmon Pea, Wichita Elm—her paintings participate in the artistic and scientific traditions of carefully studying and recording one’s landscape and its constituent elements over time. Appleby compares her artwork “to time-lapse films in which plants break through the frozen ground.”1 She also speaks of her interest in the beadwork on sacred Ojibwe bandolier bags, which frequently depicts the entire life cycle of a plant. In her multi-part paintings, each surface distills a different part of a plant—stem, leaf, petal—or moment of seasonal change to a saturated field of color.

Writing about the triptych Wichita Elm, commissioned in 2011 by the Ulrich Museum of Art, the artist described its first panel as “the unfurling of the spring leaves, a little red with a green coming over the top,” its second panel as “the bark . . . which seems a dark gray but it is a complex blend of greens and reds and it sometimes even looks sort of violet” and the third panel as “the summer giving way to fall and a deep yellow.”
Appleby and the Ulrich, together, arrived at the idea of an elm as the subject of her painting in order that it would have a meaningful connection to its location. Elms are among the oldest trees planted on the Wichita State University campus and can be found in frequented and special spaces—including one in Andy Goldsworthy’s site-specific sculpture, *Wichita Arch*, near Wilner Auditorium. Photographs of that elm offered a starting point for Appleby’s thinking about the commission. She then turned to the elms near her home in Montana as direct inspiration for the painting.

The artist’s paintings result, however, not only from looking, but also from physical presence. Appleby’s holistic attention to her physiological and psychological experiences in nature plays an equally important role in her process. Rather than work only empirically from what she sees, the artist allows subjective, remembered experiences in the landscape to guide her. She describes the approach as “interior,” a practice that acknowledges her very personal relationship to nature.³

The 17th-century German master of artistic realism, Albrecht Dürer, admonished painters to “Study nature diligently. Be guided by nature and do not depart from it, thinking that you can do better yourself. You will be misguided, for truly art is hidden in nature and he who can draw it out possesses it.” Four centuries later, when asked if he painted from nature, the abstract expressionist artist Jackson Pollock responded simply: “I am nature.”⁵ Appleby strikes a balance between these two perspectives. Her lyrical portraits of the life cycles of plants, the tenors of seasons and the moods of skies are the result of careful observation of nature and a deliberate openness to experiencing the natural world and understanding herself as part of it.
As she unites objective and subjective experiences, so too Appleby brings together two distinct types of artistic training and contextual thinking. She received an MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute, and the luminous, flawless surfaces of her paintings attest to the discipline of her training. In the fine art world in which they circulate, these paintings are often grouped within the tradition of minimalism—with its hallmark grid arrangements and reductive forms—and discussed in relationship to the works of Brice Marden, Robert Ryman and Agnes Martin. However, in addition to her art school training, Appleby also apprenticed for fifteen years with respected Native American tribal artist and holy man Ed Barbeau. His lessons on being present in the world and attentive to the essence, rather than the image, of nature inform the philosophical imperative of her work. Over the years, the artist has come to embrace her own Native American heritage and elected to live “very close to nature . . . in a community where we practice traditional ceremonies.” She sees her work as part of that existence, a part that expands to take on additional lives in galleries and museums.

Appleby’s process is aggregate. Working on multiple panels simultaneously, she uses a brush to build up thin layer upon thin layer of oil paint. Sometimes comprising as many as thirty layers of different colors, her large paintings can take three to four months to complete. The final surface owes its transparency to a wax paste that the artist mixes into her last layers of color. She selects her hues based on both observation and intuition. Appleby does not, for instance, cut a sweet pea bloom, place it in a jar and then mimic the exact greens and pinks of that particular sample. Rather, her process acknowledges the active life of the plant and its changes through the seasons as she understands these transitions from past and present experiences.
In a moment when ecological issues increasingly come to the fore of public focus, Appleby’s paintings resonate with calls to re-examine our human relationship to the natural world and its resources. In his publications and presentations, Kansas-based geneticist and sustainable agriculture advocate Wes Jackson has argued for a respect of the unknown, of the mysterious in nature. Rather than act confidently upon our present scientific knowledge of ecosystems, he suggests that we should proceed in all our industrial and agricultural endeavors with caution; he encourages us to acknowledge that there is still so much about nature that we cannot explain with the precision of scientific data.

Imagine if in the 21st century we could see the end of the idea that knowledge is adequate to run the world. This would cause us to feature questions that go beyond the available answers. We would learn patience, and we would enjoy a kind of yeastiness for thought . . . We would be fundamentally respectful of our original relationship with the universe. There might even be a more joyful participation in our engagement with the world.  

Appleby’s artwork echoes this type of thinking. Her paintings, though often described as depictions of natural elements, are not mere records. Anchored in patience, attention, and an open embrace of experience, her artworks eloquently explore and pose “questions that go beyond the available answers.” Using abstraction to capture the essence of the surrounding flora, Appleby compels viewers to pause and consider their own experience of nature and rejoice in the moment.

— Emily Stamey, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art
ON THE COVER
Salmon Sweet Pea, 2008
Oil and wax on panel
37 x 37 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Summer, 2005
Oil and wax on canvas
72 x 106 in.
Courtesy Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco

MUSEUM HOURS
Tuesday – Friday, 11 a.m.–5 p.m.
Saturday – Sunday, 1–5 p.m.
Closed Mondays and major/university holidays

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ANNE APPLEBY
Born 1954, Harrisburg, PA
Lives and works in Clancy, MT

EDUCATION
1989   MFA, Painting, San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, CA
1977   BFA, University of Montana, Missoula, MT

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS
2010   Museum Ritter, Waldenbuck, Germany
2009   Missoula Art Museum, Missoula, MT
2002   Jacob Lawrence Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, WA
2001   Sassuolo Ducal Palace, Camera di Fetonte, Sassuolo, Italy
2000   Boise Art Museum, Boise, ID
1998   Holter Museum of Art, Helena, MT
1996   SECA Award Show, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA

SELECTED COLLECTIONS
Albright-Knox Museum, Buffalo, NY
Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, CA
The Capitol Group, Los Angeles, CA
Daimler Art Collection, Stuttgart, Germany
General Mills Corporation, Minneapolis, MN
Hewlett-Packard Corporation, Palo Alto, CA
Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, WA
Museo d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto, Rovereto, Italy
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA
Panza Collection, Lugano, Switzerland
Panza Collection, Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, NY
San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, CA
Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA
Tacoma Art Museum, Tacoma, WA
Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, Wichita, KS
New Sweet Pea, 2007
Oil and wax on canvas
37 x 37 in.
Collection of the artist

1 Appleby, in email to the author, May 13, 2011.
2 Appleby, in email to the author, May 13, 2011.
3 Appleby, in conversation with the author, May 12, 2011.
6 Appleby, in “Career Narrative,” statement emailed to the author April 13, 2011.