

*Invisible Instruments: On Sigrid Burton's "Making Light Visible"*

Tufenkian Fine Arts, September 6-October 29, 2022

How is it that an artist can dedicate one, five, seven, ten years to a distinct work of art? So many iterations of burnt umber, rabbit skin glue, and oil stick; so many intimate encounters with the same piece of linen, stretched to the brink, inundated with paint strokes applied in every state of mind, temperature, and pressure, on every kind of day —from the suffocating, particulate heat of Los Angeles to the blindingly bright snow days of New York City. And still, a visitor to Burton's Pasadena studio won't be told, but instead, asked; what do *you* think?

Sigrid Burton's practice, while introspective and intimate, continues to propose painting as a question, a possibility, always with the specter of rawness. Not as an intellectual question, per se, not theoretical, but something inviting, empowering. Almost in defiance of her close encounters with Clement Greenberg's strict Modernism during her student years at Bennington College in the early 1970s, Burton's work doesn't resort to aesthetic taste or judgment. It's a proposition in and of itself, indicative of an unaffected position whose modesty veils its complexity: What do *you* think?

A frenetic and dedicated painter, passionate student of art history, and museum fanatic, Burton has always worked long hours, long years at her paintings, which begin as fluctuating, single-color surfaces applied over white oil ground and emerge, over time, as wild constellations in a chromatic universe. Flowers, netting, weeds, G's and Z's, a cat's tail, herringbone, all rendered as though flung from a luminous netherworld, a delicious mix of euphoria and chaos. They trap light in a fleeting, impossible way, not unlike the way a scene lingers beneath closed eyelids.

Burton's titles, also subject to change over time, offer another point of misty rumination and act as a sort of olive-branch for onlookers, tucking double meanings and points of inquiry into what can often be the austere, minimally language-ified field of abstraction. *Place of the Solitaires* (2022) is moody and dark, while a solar plexus beam of light seems to illuminate a frazzled core. Near the top of the painting, a cloud-smear of color feels like an exhalation, or one of Titian's clouds (Burton has been a Renaissance enthusiast since traveling Europe at the age of sixteen; though she practically grew up in the galleries of what is now the Norton Simon, imbibing the colorful abstractions of Kandinsky, Jawlensky, and Klee). *Solitaire* is rarely a word seen in plural, making it incongruous, uncomfortable. Completed during the pandemic,

perhaps it refers to the new normal lifestyle of “alone together”—solitaires indeed. *An Observation of This Territory* (2021) also speaks to its moment—feverish and pink, busy, energetic but nervous, more an explosion than something carefully rendered. It cannot be contained.

What you won't find in Burton's list of materials is something we all possess, but none of us own. Of course, it's time itself. Burton's paintings point to the profound impermanence of all things—even art, even meaning—that all artworks change because *we* change. There is a special word—*pentimento*—for when an artist's long-ago original painting becomes visible beneath their current work. It comes from the Italian, which means, literally, repentance. For Burton, the *pentimento* is not an accidental phenomenon, but a deliberate unfurling. To view Burton's work is to embrace the possibility of a simultaneous past and present; to let go of our rigid perceptions of time, of art, and to see our own vulnerabilities not reflected, but refracted—as only light, captured, can do.

—Georgia Lassner, August 2022