Jill Lear: Painting the Experience of Being There

By John Seed

At first glance it is tempting to think of the subject matter of Jill Lear's recent paintings as being rather straightforward: Lear paints trees, especially gnarly ancient ones. Spreading across expanses of white canvas, and depicted in a hybrid style that combines careful drawing with Cezannesque patches of brushwork Lear's trees are have a striking aesthetic appeal. For that reason they might be seen as simply being formalist exercises in painting involving rather traditional subject matter. Seeing them that way would miss the point entirely—actually a lot of points—and bypass the complex fusion of artistic process and intuition that underlies their making and meanings. Lear sees her trees as existing in a kind of matrix of concerns that takes some time to analyze and appreciate.

What Lear has been attempting to do in her most recent series—*Witness: Trees of Texas*—is to use her leafy subject matter as the starting point for a deep dive into all kinds contexts. She begins with an inspection of visual elements, but is also interested in history, a sense of place and the mapping of experience. To put it another way, her images begin with perception but also have conceptual underpinnings. The white spaces in her paintings are the traces of a subtractive process, led forward by the artist's concerns and intuitions, that ultimately produces works that are distillations, not representations. Each painting is, in Lear's words, "A transcription of the way in which we process the world around us, literally."

In some respects, Lear's explorations are continuations of the modernist tendency to see nature as an abstraction: "Don't copy nature too much," Paul Gauguin once advised, "Art is an abstraction." Lear's fascination with the idea of trees as formal systems of lines and forms brings to mind a famous anecdote about the Armenian American artist Arshile Gorky, whose mother-in-law once found him drawing semi-abstractly in her garden and asked: "How on earth could you make a drawing like that out of two such beautiful trees as these?" Gorky answered: "I'm not drawing the trees. I'm drawing the space between the trees."

In the "spaces" of Lear's trees the color white predominates, often suggesting what art historian Kirk Varnedoe called "the white light of mysticism." Lear, like Gorky, is interested in the spaces between things and as she explores the "twists and turns" of tree branches she comes looks for "the secret spaces the negative forms the hidden subjects within the tree itself: the heart-shape in the center." By indicating these spaces in white, Lear does her best to work without what she

thinks of as the "crutch of color" and reduce her image towards an essence: a personal visual haiku.

Lear's earliest use of trees as subject matter started with her attempts to find subjects other than the human figure. She liked the structure of trees and also the fact that they were easily available "models" that didn't have to be paid to stand still. The more that Lear drew and painted them, the more she began to encounter stories about various trees that linked them to regions and moments in time. Her fascination with context soon led to a 1,300 mile road trip, taken in the Spring of 2014, to seek out some 20 historic Texas trees. As she encountered and rendered each tree Lear's way of thinking and working caused each tree to "become its surroundings" as the image progressed. Lear's artistic process relies both on formal aspects abstracted from the appearance of the trees and on an intuitive process that works towards a personal sense of contextual "rightness."

Rio Frio Landmark Oak II / mixed media on 9 panels / 90 x 66 in.

For example, in order to paint the Rio Frio Oak–the second largest Oak in Texas–Lear had to deal with some obstacles. She found the tree encircled by a fence and there were also "No Trespassing" signs on the site. Undeterred, she waited until nobody was watching and jumped the fence to take a series of reference photos. Back in the studio, working from her memory and from

the photos, Lear developed a nine-panel painting of the tree, struggling to "place" the image and endow it with a sense of history and personality. Intuitively, Lear incorporated a winding blue pathway that she initially thought resembled a snake. When a friend told her that she had managed to incorporate the Rio Frio River—the tree's namesake—Lear was both surprised and pleased. "These are the things I find as I work with the tree images," Lear comments, "the essence of each one."

Getting to the essence of her subject matter also involves another personal process that Lear thinks of as "mapping." Lear regards mapping as a form of investigation that begins with letting her eyes—and her mind's eye—creep over the entire surface of the subject. In turn, this process then connects to the idea of sensing and exploring the surrounding spaces and areas. "It is rather like treating the tree and surrounding area as if it were an entire mountain range rather than a single object in space," Lear notes.

Jill Lear's trees are the product of a mind balanced between rigor and contemplation. Looking at her work mindfully requires her viewers to slow down—just as she does while working—and consider the paradoxes that emanate from her trees. They are ancient living things, witnesses in their own passive way to the passage of time and events. They are also symbols of perseverance and living examples of the wisdom of nature itself, embodied in complex organic forms. The harder you look at them, the harder you think about life itself. Is it possible—one wonders—that in a single tree there could be so so many emanations of life nature and history surrounding it?

For Jill Lear the answer is clear and simple: "Yes." Lear has learned that to get to the essence of her subject matter she has needed to take in everything around it, engaging herself—and ultimately her viewers— in an infinite and rewarding process of perception and revelation.