

*Place is a pause in movement.*

Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place*

Artists have long aspired to describe landscape and to translate the experience of a place through their art. Jill Lear is no exception to this desire. She begins with the assumption that a place is learned and known by looking. Through the systematic retelling of what she has witnessed, Lear is able to share not only the geometry and geography of place but also a passion for the act of looking.

Lear describes her approach to her subject, which for the last twelve years has been trees, as making a topographic study. Using her eyes to measure, assess and absorb, Lear spends time surveying the features of a tree and its site. She examines both form and light and the placement of the tree within its location, where lines intersect and shapes emerge. While it is essential for her to witness the trees, to stand in front of them, it is also important to note their physical place on the planet— their latitude and longitude. And curiously, while she chooses each of the Texas trees she depicts in part because of the social or historical story attached to it, Lear does not incorporate those stories into her renderings. The paintings are not laden with emotion but instead contain Lear's memory of her experience looking.

While Lear makes paintings of trees, her influences—from her formalist training to poetry, mathematics and architecture—leak out into her work, lending it a complexity that requires time to fully appreciate. Her paintings are neither embedded in realism nor are they committed abstractions. Defining herself as a painter, she makes works that are more drawing and collage in their makeup. She is committed to her subject matter—particular trees in specific locations—and yet the images are more considerations of space, form and line than the trees' specific details. It is precisely this complexity and ambiguity that makes the pieces so compelling.

*Spontaneity within structure* is written in pencil on a structural beam in Lear's studio. Other notes and drawings, palettes of color and scraps of paper are tacked up in the studio, but this note stands out as both a summary of and guiding principle for Lear's art. The duality contained within the statement is at the heart of the work and her success. Lear is simultaneously intensely formal in her approach to art making and intuitive in her execution. Before she begins to make a mark, she is secure in her approach and her knowledge of the subject matter. The grid-like mapping system she uses to translate her subject onto the plane of the paper is familiar and practiced; she is able to let the process unfold, building structure through lines and then placing bits of color and scraps of paper to accentuate an element of form or indicate perspective.

Lear's background reinforces the duality evident in her paintings. A student of Medieval French and English literature, Lear's education includes time in Western Europe and on both the East and West Coasts of the United States. Her professional experience has ranged from stints as a bookkeeper to work as a fashion designer. Curious about the arts as young person, she applied to the Rhode Island School of Design for college but wasn't accepted. Lear says she was reluctant to commit to art because she was suspicious that it was "too fluffy" and not serious enough. It wasn't until she was tempted by the rigor of a program at the New York Studio School that she dedicated herself to art. Invigorated by a very structured program that reinforced the basics of composition and line, the distinctions between materials and the discipline of looking, Lear recognized that art could be challenging work and chose to move to Orcas Island to focus on her work and develop a practice.

The discipline Lear has cultivated has resulted in works that fundamentally all begin at the same place. She defines her process as one of mapping. The systematic approach, which involves separating the picture into parts and then laying down key points of directional line, underscores Lear's interest in telling her experience of place truthfully, even objectively. The rich charcoal lines and graphite marks serve not only as outlines of form but as a map delineating the tracks of trunks and branches and serving as descriptors of volume. She speaks of the desire to make us look and not just see tree but see thickness, areas of light

and the energy where lines intersect. She asks us to see form but also the spaces between forms.

Lear describes herself as a painter, but it is actually paper that has become her foundation of choice. Asked about the distinction between canvas and paper, she responds that paper feels cleaner and she is able to apply her materials to it with more clarity. For Lear, white, open spaces are as much an element of composition as the marks she makes with charcoal or graphite. One of her teachers engrained in her the importance of filling in the entire space. Another spoke to the need for pictures to have light. This balance between open structure and delineated form is one that Lear masters in her best pieces.

At first glance Lear's paintings have an architectural feel. But architectural drawing imposes form and Lear sees her task as drawing form out—chipping away at space to reveal it. She takes a reductive approach, using the fewest number of accurate marks possible to define space without describing it. She speaks of carving out rather than adding on. Clarity is a goal. She adds color and texture with the same reserve—bits of paper and watercolor used sparingly to suggest what she saw, rather than to offer it to us whole, complete.

It is this restraint that is at the heart of Lear's works. Rather than precisely transcribing the thing seen, she builds an impression that she invites you to take in slowly—in increments. By not offering it up fully, she [makes the viewer participate in her act of looking. And in so doing encourages us to look further. This encouragement to investigate, to really look to fully understand the landscape we move in, is the gift of Lear's art.

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