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"Paradoxes of the Visible" Arden Reed, catalog essay

...To admit that to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink of it
desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living.
—Samuel Beckett

Recently, the novelist Don DeLillo diagnosed the cultural malaise that Raphaëlle Goethals addresses. Invoking the "drama of white-hot consumption and instant waste", he observed that "the microwave, the VCR remote, the telephone redial button and other time collapsing devices may make us feel that our ordinary household technology reflects something that flows through the deep mind of the culture, an impatient craving for time itself to move faster." Goethals responds by applying the brakes. The process of her work is slow- we sense her patient layering of wax and pigment- and the result is so seductive that we forget for a time our impatient cravings. Serendipity, for instance, moves at the pace of geological time. But our artist takes up the challenge of hot cultural consumption in an unexpected and nervy fashion. In two significant ways Goethals is a gambler. First, before commencing the works represented in this catalogue, she had produced a body of small-scale encaustics. They were beautiful- actually they were gorgeous, serene, and commercially successful. But after moving to a spacious new studio, Goethals began to rethink her work. She literally and figuratively pushed the envelope and began to produce paintings many times their earlier size. They expanded so far, in fact, as to attempt something like Richard Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk, or "total work of art". The result is arresting, with surfaces so vast that you enter, lose yourself, and succumb to a gravitational pull powerful enough to anchor your attention.

Goethals' second great gamble was an attempt at making less out of more, and to arrive at stillness through action. The "more" signifies her working practice. The artist begins with birch panels, attracted to the wood's clear white surface. Certain marks she inscribes directly onto the wood; other marks will come later. Over the birch she then spreads layers of encaustic- a mix of damar resin and beeswax, melted separately then blended together. (The resin hardens the medium, lending clarity and sheen.) She either mixes pigment into the wax or applies it directly by grinding the color onto the surface. Elsewhere Goethals incises lines into the encaustic, then applies pigment and rubs it off, so that the color remains within the lines. In this process of building up, a certain amount of information gets laid down on each layer and then obscured, as some areas remain transparent while other turn opaque.

But how can all this action—abrading, scraping, rubbing, scratching, effacing—repeated and multiplied both across the surface and at different levels- how can this overload of information lead to quiet and meditation? How can excess turn into emptiness? The answer has to do, I think, with an effect common to Goethals' various kinds of marking. They all serve to create space around them and so provide us places to wander, paradoxically creating penumbra of emptiness, and all the more effectively given her grand scale. While there is nothing representational in Goethals' work, she thereby manages to suggest something of the open spaces of Northern New Mexico. Furthermore, she offers much to engage the eye. Her build up of information encourages us to linger, to register at our leisure likeness and difference, marks of presence and of absence as they merge and fade. Our investigation proceeds in both two dimensions as we establish relations across the plane and in three, as we retrace her processes, ferreting out what got recorded where, marks of presence and of absence as they emerge and fade. Our investigation proceeds in both two dimensions as we establish relations across the plane and in three, as we retrace her processes, ferreting out what got recorded where, or how different levels interlace, tracing genealogies of gesture. We become voyeurs of abstraction.

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By occupying space so richly, Goethals occupies our attention. We observe how hours of thought and execution gets telescoped onto the tabula rasa, the clean birch surface. But to analyze and spell out in detail this dialectic of motion and stillness distorts our actual encounter with the works, for the painter's gift is to make it look simple.

In addition to her turning more into less, three other paradoxes mark Goethals' work.

Accident/design. At first glance Goethals compositions appear to be free of hierarchies or organizing principles. Her remarks do not look as if deposited by nature or by chance. The surfaces are what linguists would call paratactic rather than hypotactic. As a result, Goethals' paintings are radically democratic, inviting the eye to travel where it will. Using the edges to create a sense that her spaces are not contained but fields that might expand indefinitely reinforces this impression. Amidst this seeming disorganization, however, the patient eye uncovers another sort of mark entirely, a regular pattern that answers the mobility and flux. It turns out that that old staple of modernism, the grid, underlies Goethals' compositions, whether implicitly or explicitly. While the size of the dots varies and tends to vanish and reappear, the grid provides a skeleton on which the artist embodies her intuition. Which is perhaps the point: what finally composes these pieces is an intuitive sense of rightness, the accident morphing into the trouvaille.

Body/Text. As various senses are involved in composing Goethals' paintings, so their appeal extends beyond the visual. ("We receive Beauty with our entire body", she says.)

Goethals medium is strongly sensual, invoking particularly the sense of touch: the smooth, waxy, tactile surfaces call out "touch me". And then, the material substance harmonizes with the subject matter, so that the organic signifier (beeswax) joins the signified organic. By contrast, her material already refers to Nature. Moreover, the way Goethals builds up layers of encaustic resembles the way skin grows. At the same time, her surfaces appear to have aged like skin, showing scars and abrasions inscribed over the years. Underneath the surface we sometimes perceive faint blue lines that recall human veins and suggest an uncomfortable intimacy with another body.

But juxtaposed to the flesh is the word. In these paintings, the organic encounters the artificial, for intermixed with bodily elements you discover glyphs or other primitives forms of writing reminiscent of Arabic characters, Chinese or Greek. Elsewhere Goethals inscribes Brice Marden-like loops, or doodles and swirls that resemble Formica patterns. In reds or blacks or browns, these glyphs can float and swirl to the surface to look sharp, or recede and go fuzzy. Certain figures are whole, while others run off the edge. They testify to Goethals' interest in the point at which language originates, at which random marks start to take on signs of human intentionality, demonstrating the way culture grows out of primordial soup. But the apparent contradiction between culture and nature finally resolves itself: body and text are related, intimately related- in Goethals' work as in life itself. Without intending to, these works illustrate the fact that cells are made of codes, the ur-writing of genetics and DNA. It is characteristic of Goethals intuition that her work should demonstrate that keen kinship.

Object/Surface. We have seen how Goethals' surfaces lead us to slow down, show up, and pay attention. But as the absence of frames implies, her works are also three-dimensional objects. They jut out from the wall to become colored boxes, and as often as not, the sides comment on the fronts. We see, for instance, traces of compositional history where the last layers of wax drip down- as if we stood before Keats's cider press and watched the last oozings hours by hours. Granted, the larger the works the more surfaces predominate. But even the biggest piece retains the hint of an object, quietly reminding us of its boxy character. While the sides emerge into our world, the surfaces retreat into elusiveness, which together creates the impression of glimpsing

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something far off but right under our nose. Activity is sealed away forever, and however tactile, the content remains tantalizingly out of reach.

Goethals' compositions thus complicate the beholder's point of view on the work: do we look out at her paintings, into them, or down at them? In fact, we simultaneously hover over the surfaces and peer into its depths; and such a mobile viewing position, coupled with a medium at once fluid and solid, reiterates those questions about distance and scale: we are microscopically close up or galactically far off? And yet, this unsettling character serves to still the beholder; undecidability issues in meditation.

The dialectic I have traced is emblemized by Goethals' favorite format. Characteristically, she begins with a square and then pulls it off slightly out of equilibrium into a subtle vertical rectangle. As a result, we repose in the squareness and we are energized by its displacement. Goethals' entire project is constructed out of these dichotomies: surface/depth, randomness/design, flesh/word, motion/stillness. Her paintings both enliven and compose us, enliven through composure and compose through action, the two together. Contemplating the images in this catalogue confirms the handsome rewards of Goethals' risk taking. Her gamble has paid off.

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