

RAPHAËLLE GOETHALS

ANAMNESIS

by William Peterson



Photographs by Eric Swanson & Wendy McEarhen

“With its immobile, bordered presence, painting asks us for time, humility, patience, and reflection. In the vast space in front of us, in the field of consciousness drawing us in and yet staring back at us, we succumb to a powerful gravitational pull where we can recognize ourselves.”

—Raphaëlle Goethals

Invoking the Greek term “*anamnesis*” to characterize her recent work, Raphaëlle Goethals has produced a profound meditation on the interplay between mind and memory and the art of painting. The luminous and textured surfaces of her magisterial paintings seem to have come from somewhere in the depths of time, and they have arrived with traces of their history, perhaps even the imprint of the whole history of their medium, embedded deep within.

Memory attended at the birth of the art of painting. Its origins can be traced to our ancestors’ discovery that marks and scratches on a rock or a cave wall would remain in place. And since they held on a surface existing within the shared world, they could be more than just a lasting record. Made with intent and invested with meaning, marks could serve as both expression and communication. Hence it seems likely that meaningful mark making evolved in concert with the emergence of spoken language. Each of Goethals’ paintings begins with random marks, and both mark making and the roots of language are some of her central concerns.

Anamnesis refers to recollection, recalling to mind and countering forgetfulness (amnesia). In her commitment to abstract painting, Goethals acknowledges that painting can only grow from a firm basis in its tradition and the nature of its being, which must not be forgotten. But our present culture seems to have lost track of how it is that paintings have meaning. As the philosopher Stanley Cavell noted, “To speak now of modernism as an activity of an avant-garde...implies a conflict between a coherent culture and a declared and massed enemy, when in fact the case is more like an effort, along blocked paths and hysterical turnings, to hang onto a thread that leads from a lost center to a world lost.”

Goethals had called an earlier series “Mnemosyne,” after the goddess of memory, known to the Greeks as mother

of the Muses. Before the advent of writing, the arts of poetry, epic, music, dance and drama all had to be transmitted by committing them to memory. There was no muse for painting. Perhaps the Greeks thought that sculpture and painting simply were, at base, commemorative in function, since they were intended to stand in physically for an absent original that they only mechanically imitated. (This would be more or less the way the nineteenth century regarded photography.) The kind of *mimesis* employed by Greek painters and sculptors was considered especially suspect by Plato, who felt that they trafficked in mere appearances and offered a false memory, twice removed from the soul’s innate memory of the eternal forms.



Plato used the term *anamnesis* to refer to the recovery of knowledge that is retained within the soul and is eternal, which was the basis of Socrates’ claim that what one perceives to be learning is actually the recovery of what one has forgotten. For the medieval and Renaissance Neo-Platonists, *anamnesis* was as close as the human mind could come to

experiencing the freedom of the soul prior to its being encumbered by matter as a body bound into the physical world. The shock of incarnation, the Neo-Platonists believed, causes the soul to forget its divine origins. “Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting,” wrote Wordsworth, “But trailing clouds of glory do we come.”

Modern research suggests these are clouds of the unconscious. Much of Goethals’ sense of *anamnesis* has been informed by Julia Kristeva’s theories about the evolution of consciousness and the acquisition of language. Probing beyond Freud’s work on the emergence of subconscious drives, Kristeva posited a pre-conscious phase that she called the “semiotic.” A volatile generative phase of psychic and physiological development within the evolving body, the semiotic occurs before any form of decisive distinction of separateness can be made. It operates within a mobile space that is ephemeral,



unstable, rhythmic and irreducible to any intelligible verbal translation, but it produces the threshold of mind and language and remains beyond any possibility of conscious recollection. Amniotic, perhaps, as much as it is semiotic, this originating space seems to be operating in Goethals' paintings.

"I have a deep conviction about the power of painting to realign one's brain cells and to connect us with our core," Goethals has said. "I believe we have in our cellular memory an inner awareness of a universal language. And our artistic mind is made up of a mosaic of thoughts and images collected over the years, which can then be forgotten or put aside to reach the emptiness from which new work can manifest itself. But, in opposition to the 'tabula rasa' necessary to the early modernists, my work is about integration and distillation, and reinvesting the constituents of painting as a space of contemplation."

Goethals has revived the ancient medium of encaustic to produce her muted and masterful panels. A technique known to the Egyptians, encaustic employs ground pigments mixed with heated beeswax and resin, and Goethals' paintings always retain a memory of the earth through the presence of these natural materials. Wax is an especially sensuous and receptive substance. Worked in a semi-molten state, it can be poured or brushed onto the smooth wood surface, scraped back and reapplied in multiple layers, scratched and etched or flooded with brush strokes, rubbed off and built back again. And as the layers accumulate, traces of earlier events are buried and yet still visible in the translucent wax, which wears its history on its delicate skin. Cloudy or clear, the surface sometimes congeals into tiny ripples here and there, like water or windblown sand. Occasionally, Goethals gently brands the skin of hardened wax with a heated tool, leaving a rhythmic



mark like ritual scarification that joins the ripples to reestablish the surface plane.

An atmosphere of archeology hovers around Goethals' recent work. In part, this can be a factor of the range of earth pigments she uses, the ochres and siennas, beiges, grays, and sun-bleached whites, and her richly textured surfaces suggest faded frescoes and dusty mosaics. But many of her titles also call to mind ancient Mediterranean cultures. *Thera* is an island near Crete where archeologists discovered fragments of beautiful wall paintings in a city destroyed by a volcanic eruption that may have wiped out the entire Minoan civilization, spawning the legend of Atlantis. *Marinka* is a place on Corsica. And Goethals' brooding black *Bosphorus* identifies the straits separating Asia from Europe. Although nothing is illustrated, Goethals has steeped *Bosphorus* in the tragic history of that critical crossing,

from the ox that swam it and gave it its name, to today's massive oil tankers passing through, dripping with the dangers of the devastating political and environmental consequences of their contested cargo.

History, politics, memory, and the language of paint all fold together. Goethals is able to pour a wide range of feeling into her wax surfaces. While remaining resolutely abstract, *Flag, Scrambled* can be seen to contain another charged political commentary. The old red, white, and blue of the American flag have been dispersed in a field of chalky white. Painted in 2008 after the financial debacle, it may also be a delayed reaction to the distress and confusion of the events of 9/11, the choking cloud of plaster dust, and the government's unhinged global reaction. But Goethals' practice also confronts issues in the history of painting. If Jasper Johns famously countered Jackson Pollock's heroic and expansive abstractions by condensing all that was dispersed in them into a solid emblem of Old Glory, Goethals has given Johns' waxy *Flag* a Pollock treatment, scattering it over the field.

At the intersection of the expressive and the minimal, these paintings celebrate uncertainty and flux.

The internalized landscape is reduced to its minimal resonance: the sound of the wind, the dust on a windshield, and the further abstracted notion of nature.

— Raphaëlle Goethals

While excavating, archeologists often stretch a grid of string over their dig site. Goethals also incorporates a grid, although it is often so subtle that it can escape notice until it flashes almost subliminally into your awareness. Composed mostly of small widely spaced dots in sparse rows, and suspended over the unstable indeterminacy of her formative surfaces, the grid is almost more implied than present. If you blink, it might disappear. Like pinpoints of light pulsing in deep space, it hovers on the edge of perception.

But Goethals' grid does not function in the expected manner. Instead of flattening and unifying the space, it often does the opposite. Instead of harmonizing, it adds a note of modernist dissonance. Sometimes she will introduce slight aberrations, selecting a seemingly

random dot and enlarging it or giving it a bright color. Enlarged and spaced at irregular intervals, these dots destabilize the grid. Seemingly fleeing away from the eye, or coming unexpectedly forward, the dots can actually increase the sensation of deep empty space. It's an almost acoustic effect, like intermittent water drops echoing in a cave.

Usually the grid appears to float over the surface. Like the screen coordinates on a monitoring device for some high-tech weapon or deep-space probe, the grid superimposes an alien presence over the field surveyed. It is Goethals' reminder of the ever-present rational order of the western mind, imposing itself on the external chaos of the unknown.

By slowly applying and reworking multiple layers, Goethals makes paintings that contain evidence of their long evolution, like strata of the earth's surface. Deep within, there is a sense of both accumulation and loss. Memory wants to hold on, but along with the impulsive bodying forth of innovation and intention, there is also the effect of its remorse, of purposeful rubbing out, and of time's indifferent and ineluctable erasure. "From dust to dust," with an errant narrative in between, sums up a life. "Dust Stories" is the title of Goethals' current ongoing series of paintings, whose surfaces seem swept by an archeologist's broom. Dust is partly cleared away, but remains undispeled. And through its diffuse blur can be glimpsed all the evidence of ages, of culture's distracted forgetfulness, and of nature's idle reclaiming.

But there is also undeniable evidence of renewal, seeds and flashes of regeneration. And throughout the milky matrix you also feel the brilliant creative energy of Goethals' innovation, her successful redemption of the modernist project of *anamnesis*. She has been able to seize the soul of painting and give it new life.

"Maybe my practice was informed just as much by the Flemish masters or by the Romanticism of



Detail of *Thera*

Turner and Caspar David Friedrich from my early European upbringing as it was by Clyfford Still, Brice Marden, or Richard Serra," she said, taking stock in her new studio in Santa Fe. "I am at long last able to reconnect those two worlds; yet perhaps, a vague sense of longing and rootlessness defines me. (Which is why the unfinished openness of the American West suits me, I am *not there yet*). My practice is what gives me boundaries—without it I float, dissolve in the landscape. Sometimes I think that the vast, anonymous desert is not meant for us, not in the long run. After the initial euphoria of such physical and emotional space, we obscurely long for structure—thus the compulsion to make a mark, an underlying grid or matrix."

William Peterson is an adjunct professor of art history at the University of New Mexico and former editor of *Artspace* magazine.