
“I Am Nature, She Said”
Leslie Luebbers, PhD

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Designed by Christine Virost

Cover image:
“Tiepolo’s Dream” 2002
oil on linen and Richloom © fabric on canvas
66 x 38 inches
In his 1936 catalog for *Cubism and Abstract Art*, the first major exhibition of abstract art in America, Alfred Barr, founder of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, wrote:

At the grave risk of oversimplification the impulse towards abstract art during the past fifty years may be divided historically into two main currents….The first...may be described as intellectual, structural, architectonic, geometrical, rectilinear and classical in its austerity and dependence upon logic and calculation. The second...is intuitional and emotional rather than intellectual; organic or biomorphic rather than geometrical in its forms; curvilinear rather than rectilinear, decorative rather than structural, and romantic rather than classical in its exaltation of the mystical, the spontaneous and the irrational.¹

Barr was writing about European abstraction of the early 20th century, and although since that time a strong spiritual motivation has been recognized in some geometric abstraction, his description of “intuitional” abstraction remains valid. In mid-century America, the formalist critic and theorist Clement Greenberg proposed that art forms are most powerful when restricted to their essential components, in the case of painting to a mark-making substance, most commonly paint, and a support, most commonly canvas. A painting, therefore, wasn’t “about” something; it was a real physical object with inherent expressive potentials that did not include representation, illusionism and above all storytelling, purposes better served by other art forms. Abstract expressionist painting, the art of the moment, met Greenberg’s prescription, and he and other writers focused attention on its artists, including those who years later became Alison Weld’s idols at a time when the art world had moved on to minimalism and conceptualism, which pared physical art objects to primary forms and then eliminated them altogether except as evidence of ideas.

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Art Is My Natural World, Alison Weld’s mid-career retrospective, offers the opportunity to study an artistic evolution in progress. Thirty years separate the earliest piece in the exhibition, “Two Turtles,” one of a series begun in 1980, from the latest, a series entitled “Ordinary Lives,” completed in 2009. Differences in scale, composition, material and emotional temperature are startling, but Weld’s allegiance to the spiritual aspect of abstraction and to the physical reality of her compositions links first to last.

After completing graduate school in Chicago in 1979, Alison Weld moved to New York to follow the path of her artistic and spiritual heroes, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Clyfford Still. Despite her schooling in minimalism and conceptualism, Weld remained firmly attached to the emotional, mystical and romantic branch of abstraction embodied in abstract expressionism. Jackson Pollock’s famous quip, “I am nature,” compressed philosophical ideas from, among other sources, 19th century romanticism and symbolism, Native American religion and American transcendentalism concerning the unity of nature and the human spirit. In a posthumous letter to de Kooning, Weld writes, “I imagine Emerson’s Over Soul to be imbued into significant art, whether your monumental painting, your peers’ works or I believe my own. I call the over soul the life force.”

A profound observer of nature and a collector of its remnants and fragments, Weld found a day job in the vertebrate paleontology department of the American Museum of Natural History, where the tasks entailed working with fossils of dinosaurs and ancient turtles. Her relationship with vestiges of evolutionary biology was more comfortable than with New York, where she faced daily trials of physical and financial survival amidst the city’s frenzy and clamor. Weld’s first New York works, the “Turtle” series (1981-95) painted on cheap shower curtains with disposable chopsticks, combined the crush, crash and clash of her New York experience, the fury of her alienation, and the attack aesthetic and edge to edge composition of AbEx with turtles as cryptograms for an ancient life force persisting in the madness of the present. The “Striation” series (1985-90) is architectural rather than emotional, an experiment in modulating depth in an edge-to-edge abstract painting. Within this series, Weld for the first time introduces multiple panels in a single piece, a practice that continues to be a primary characteristic of her work.
For an artist emerging in the 1980s, abstract expressionism might provide inspiration and guidance, but it could not simply be emulated after the political, social and intellectual turbulence of the late 1960s and 1970s; postmodern life precluded an authentic modernist sensibility. Weld’s work, from the beginning, contemplates the present’s relationship with the past, not only the continuity of life force, but in its critical relationship to late 20th century art. Part of the evolution of painting since Greenberg acknowledges its material facts while expanding the potential for making meaning. One of the most effective avenues proved to be assemblage, an early modernist practice of transposing everyday things into art works. “Ocean Scan” (1994), one of a small transitional group of installation paintings, experiments with an assemblage style that emerged in Weld’s subsequent work: precise compositions of discrete objects, including her abstractions, natural specimens, flea market finds, and home decorating supplies brought together in dialogue.

Weld is best known for the eye-popping juxtapositions of the “Home Economics” series, gestural abstractions abutted to one or more panels of upholstery fabric—brocade, cut velvet, flower prints, vinyl or fake fur, like “Hot Zone” (1995) and “Extinction” (1997). The painterly equivalent of combining tartan trousers with a Hawaiian shirt, these orchestrated collisions of muscular abstract paintings and yardage coexist in a dynamic tension of attraction and repulsion. The abstract expressionist painters included women, but the aggressive wing known as “action painting” that Weld admires and emulates, like most aspects of the art establishment, was the territory of men. By the mid-1970s, women artists reacted to the imbalance by focusing aggressively on gender issues and on themes that put “female” concerns in the foreground. Weld, who had chosen to follow the most swashbuckling of American male artists, whose work was routinely discussed in Wyatt Earp terms—brave, courageous and bold—presented her audacious gestural abstractions with home decorating fabrics to suit every taste and purse.
Beyond their feminist implications, the yard goods are real, familiar and tangible pieces of consumer culture brought into the realm of art. The role of real objects in art is one of the important stories of 20th and 21st century painting and sculpture, and it is a significant consideration in Weld’s work. Her fabrics are “found” only in the sense that she shops for and purchases them in likely places, an activity not dissimilar to the domestic occupation they imply in the completed artworks, and their passivity relative to the energetic abstract painting is similarly apt.

During the late 1990s, the elements of Weld’s compositions changed. Solid planes of brushstrokes opened to admit air and light. Gestures hovered over loosely painted grounds or clustered into amorphous figures levitated above immaculate white grounds. “Neurology” (1999) demonstrates both parts of this development. In the “Flower Juxtaposition” series (2003-06), represented in the show by “Vertebrae Memorial # 6” (2004-05), the figure takes on various guises, some nearly recognizable as assemblies of creatures, disembodied organs, skeletal carapaces or fervid dancers, and in these paintings the pristine and passive fabric panels are replaced by wood panels besieged by frenzied gestures and storms of plastic flowers resembling those that with poems, prayers and photographs spontaneously covered walls and construction fences throughout New York after 9/11. Gone is the emotional balance offered by combining action painting and velvet in the “Home Economics” series. The furies are unleashed.

The “Perched Painting” series, including “Millennium” (2000), “Bared Heart” (2006), “Be Gone Long” (2007) and “Coifed Sisterhood” (2008) in this exhibition, encompasses the years 1999 to 2008, a period that brackets the “Vertebrate Memorial” series. The “Perched Painting” series reintroduces the program of Weld’s early installation works, combining painted panels with found and purchased natural and commercial objects. Over these eight years, Weld also increased her attention to drawing on paper with paint, ink and pencil, an activity that brought her closer to the surface and reduced the scope of gestures from choreographic to calligraphic and the breadth of concerns from...
worldly to personal. Influenced by the drawings, Weld’s painted compositions became smaller and lighter in palette and incorporated techniques discovered while working on paper, including monotype and frottage, which transfer ghost images to another sheet or lift paint to create reticulated surfaces. “Vertebrae Continuo” (2004), a small series of single canvas paintings, employs lessons from the drawings that create a new generation of gestural avian figures in warm light-filled prismatic hues.

Calligraphy suggests messages of unusual importance to others and to oneself. The series of “Ghost Letters” diptychs (2006-07) consists of five paintings addressed to admired artists, Willem de Kooning, Miriam Beerman, Stella Waitzkin, Joan Mitchell and the self-taught artists Bill Traylor and Hawkins Bolden. With the exception of Beerman, these are a few of the many artists to whom Weld has written posthumous letters that discuss their influence on her as a young and maturing artist, her philosophy of art, personal philosophy, spiritual beliefs, intellectual pursuits and career frustrations. Included in this exhibit are “My Biology, de Kooning” and “Ghost Letter to Stella,” from 2007. Each combines a pastel panel with an excerpt partly obscured by feathery gestures and a panel of fabric painted with a loopy abstract figure. De Kooning, whom Weld never met, is perhaps best known for colorful abstract paintings of pulchritudinous females. While these works were routinely criticized for portraying women as sex objects, Weld admired their lusty embodiment of life force. Stella Waitzkin, a highly original sculptor of the abstract expressionist generation, pursued her career with single-minded dedication and, like most women artists of the time, with few other resources or noticeable encouragement. Her major accomplishment was an installation in her apartment in New York’s Chelsea Hotel, which she gradually filled with a wordless, but not mute, library of cast resin books and bookshelf decorations. Waitzkin and Weld became close friends, and Weld regards her as a mentor and second mother.

While she was engaged with the later “Perched Paintings,” Weld made drawings that were experiments with marks and color, the fundamentals of art-making. These led to small, opulent works combining paint and pencil on maple panels, each with a single abstract action figure that recalls an ethnic dancer in an exotic costume of jewel toned silks and gossamer. The six panel work “Mineral Sweetness” (2007), included in this exhibition, like all pieces in the series contains no assemblage elements. Despite the absence of identifiable objects from the real world, the maple
panels with their beautiful honey grain complement the figures but are clearly solid, independent objects—cousins of floors, doors and furniture. Like the shower curtains, these supports insist on representing the domestic present in the same way as upholstery fabric mounted beside paintings, or, as in the “Ghost Letters,” their substrate.

Alison Weld’s floor assemblages, “Sculptural Juxtapositions” (2005-08), summarize the methods, materials and themes of her career to 2008. Created during the time when her paintings were increasingly contemplative and focused on the expressive potential of the medium itself, these works relocate most of the real world attributes—stones, bones, textiles, found paintings (Weld’s own), as well as photographs and pelts—to a low horizontal plane and limit the artistic gesture to the arrangement of physical objects. Among these are several pieces that include standard 12 inch kitchen floor tiles painted in the manic, chop stick style of the turtle paintings. The floor tiles allude in miniature to Jackson Pollock’s practice of spreading canvases on the studio floor and covering them with dripped, flung and dripped paint as he paced its perimeter. These pieces dated 1980-2005 consist of the tiles and rocks arranged with exquisite aesthetic sensitivity. “Song of a Song,” “Beth” and “Introspect” memorialize Weld’s youthful attraction to action painting as a vehicle for channeling the vastness of nature and the human spirit and her despair that, as a woman artist, the acceptable scope of her work was limited by gender conventions. As a body of work, however, the “Sculptural Juxtapositions” reveal in the objects and in the domestic artistry of tabletop decoration. Unlike the “Home Economics” series and the earlier “Perched Paintings,” which they materially resemble, the floor pieces are serene.

The fervent, intuitive artistic gesture that asserts the oneness of humans and nature is no longer required to express this unity. The juxtaposed bits of planetary and biological time, consumer culture, family heritage, Weld’s career and the emphatically physical plinth collapse natural and human history into the present moment and the act of contemplation that the artist offers and the viewer completes.
“Ordinary Lives” (2009), Weld’s most recent body of work, is a series of very small, intensely colored embryonic forms centered in brilliantly white flat backgrounds that are the front surface of maple boxes. Emphatically dimensional, the boxes project from the wall and cast shadows proclaiming their physicality. The figures, informed by techniques developed in the works on paper and the evolution of the isolated abstract life force in the paintings, wiggle, mutate and divide into not-quite duplicate creatures. A related series of drawings done in 2005-06 entitled, “Fossil Baby la te do,” resemble comic sequences of ova in action. The expression of life force that early in Weld’s career seemed to demand the grand sweep and intensity of the masculine abstract expressionist gesture is now accomplished in intimate artistic handwriting. Feminist irony is replaced by a genial but still serious regard for women’s metaphysical and physical generative agency. Weld’s biology, as she frequently asserts, is art.

In the three decades of her career, Alison Weld’s work has held fast to fundamental ideas about the importance of art as an expression and transmitter of consciousness and the process of making art as the gestation of self-knowledge. Simultaneously, she has valued the art work as the embodiment of this struggle but one required to stand on its own as an aesthetic object that engages the viewer in a poetic experience. It is trite to suggest that the changes that are observable over these years are attributable to maturity, but that is undoubtedly an important part of the explanation, and it is also true that those transformations highlight the constants—the integral relationship between art and nature.

Art is My Natural World occurs just as Alison Weld is making a permanent move from the urban environment where she has lived since the beginning of her professional career to the country home in the Adirondacks. Surely, the title of this exhibition will take on new meaning by the time of her next retrospective.

Leslie Luebbers, PhD

2 Alison Weld, “Ghost Letter: Letters to artists from the last century from an under known woman artist, Letter 1: Willem de Kooning.”
AMUM Exhibition checklist
Art is My Natural World: Alison Weld, 1980-2009
March 6 – April 17, 2010

“Song of a Song” 1980/2005. Acrylic on tiles with rocks, 27 x 27 x 4”
“Beth” 1980/2005 Acrylic on tile and rock, 24 x 24 x 4”
“Introspect #3” 1980/2006. Fabric, acrylic on tile, rock, 21 x 21 x 3”
“Two Turtles” 1982. Acrylic on plastic shower curtain, 66.5 x 64”
“Inward Weight V” 1988. Oil on canvas, 63 x 36”
“Ocean Scan” 1994. Acrylic on canvas with plastic, rock, ribbons, 94 x 97”
“Hot Zone” 1995. Oil and vinyl on canvas, 72 x 89”
“Tender Buttons” 1995. Oil on canvas and fabric on canvas, 91 x 89”
“Extinction” 1997. Oil on canvas and upholstery, 90 x 90”
“Neurology” 1999. Oil on linen, 2 stretchers, 72 x 96”
“Millennium” 2000. Mixed media, 100 x 84”
“Tiepolo’s Dream” 2002. Oil on linen and Richloom © fabric on canvas, 66 x 38”
“Vertebrae Continuo #2” 2004. Oil on linen, 50 x 38”
“Vertebrae Memorial #6” 2004 – 2005. Oil on linen, artificial flowers and acrylic on panel, 72 x 78”
“Bared Heart” 2006. Acrylic on upholstery and found painting, 68 x 49”
“Mortal Erosion” 2007. Mixed media, 5 x 21 x 34”
“Ghost Letter to Stella” 2007. Acrylic on panel and upholstery, 48 x 29”
“All but Death Can Be Adjusted” 2007. Mixed media, 12 x 46 x 33”
“Shadows of History” 2007. Mixed media, 4 x 28 x 26”
“Be Gone Long” 2007. Acrylic and pencil on panel with found objects, 60 x 46”
“My Biology, deKooning” 2007. Acrylic on panel and upholstery, 48 x 29”
“Mineral Sweetness” 2007. Acrylic and pencil on panel, 48 ½ x 37”
“Coiffed Sisterhood” 2008. Acrylic on panel with found objects, 65 x 30”
“God is Japanese” 2008. Mixed media, 5 x 32 x 25”
“Cartes des Visites in Heaven” 2008. Mixed media, 5 x 32 x 24”
“Ordinary Lives” 2009. Acrylic on gessobord (35 individual paintings), installation 62 x 106”