

## Mind over Matter

There is something to be said for artists who successfully combine seemingly disparate and even opposing elements harmoniously. Aaron Wexler works within a complex matrix of acrylic on paper collage on panel and paper. All at once he synthesizes abstraction and figuration, physical and psychological space, optimism and anxiety. The artist's collages have both a visual subtlety that belie their efficacy as images as well as a delicate and a deceptive complexity that requires protracted investigation. Their imagery is nuanced and layered, yet vaguely familiar and strangely enigmatic. They act as a visual inquiry into the deeper recesses of a place dominated by inherently contradictory forces. In conception and execution the work is imbued with a fragile equilibrium of opposites. It may be said that at their foundation they address the Nietzschean paradox of the struggle between the Apollonian or principle of individuation (reason, beauty, etc.) and the Dionysian notion of passion, excess, and ultimately destruction. A successful combination of these polarities lies at the heart of Aaron Wexler's work.

Seductive and yet disconcerting is *Never Die*, a disorienting descent into a swirling vortex of butterfly wings. The work recalls the spiraling and spatial growth of the Fibonacci sequence. Initially, the viewer enters the work in rapid recession toward the center amid a seemingly chaotic entanglement of dismembered arthropods. It is only after this initial glimpse that the formal complexity of the work becomes apparent. The foreground borders the work at a close proximity to the viewer and is emphasized by an intense contrast of blacks and grays on a background of fuchsia. As the coil retreats into a void of infinity, however, so does the contrast, to the point where the black slowly becomes its opposite: white. The viewer plummets downward into a space filled with wings—objects that give flight. These elements are delicate and ephemeral, yet even the title suggests an unattainable infinitude. The viewer must, therefore, reconcile the sense of rapid descent with the knowledge that the primary biological purpose of a wing is to lift a physical body into flight.

*Out of Darkness*, an elaborate tangle of flora and fauna, is perhaps the most technically ambitious work in the exhibition. It is a landscape of ominous poignancy and one in which the physical realm attains metaphysical qualities through the juxtaposition of familiar and mysterious imagery. These characteristics suggest the psychologically charged inscapes of Matta during the late 1930s and early 1940s.<sup>1</sup> *Out of Darkness* is a work in which the composition and title ultimately allude to the successful resolution of a struggle to emerge from the anxiety of a labyrinthine quandary. On the surface it is teeming with life, yet is set against what appears to be a foreboding and lugubrious background. The botanical density in the foreground creates a visual and psychological impediment to the nocturnal realm beyond. The dark background is punctuated by bodies of light, allowing for the suggestion of emergence from the obstructing foreground. It can potentially be read as a visual metaphor for the conflict between anxiety and optimism.

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<sup>1</sup> While Matta's reliance on automatism is antithetical to Wexler's obsessively detailed and highly methodical technique, Matta aimed to reconcile contradicting forces of reality with the illogical state of the subconscious. See Nancy Miller, *Matta: The First Decade* (Waltham, MA: Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, 1982), 19.

In many ways, *Out of Darkness* is similar to *Hard Drops Fall Softly*, an equally ambitious, if somewhat more fragmented and infinitely more subtle work in its depiction. Any trace of botanical reference has been replaced with a strong primordial quality that conveys at once an immediate imaginary landscape and the distant geological memory of a nascent world that no longer exists. Droplets of varying size and the splash patterns they create punctuate the composition. Upon closer examination, however, the viewer realizes that there is in fact a multitude of images within images repeated throughout the composition. Many droplets contain fragmented patterns or drops within themselves together cascading into an intricate mosaic that alludes to the frozen temporality reminiscent of strobe photography. These are two important combinations of juxtaposing elements in *Hard Drops Fall Softly*. First, the ephemeral quality of a falling droplet, underscored by its splash, is given permanence through its suspension in space. Second, this space is a fragmented and imaginary macrocosm that contains a multitude of microcosmic elements.

An enigmatic jumble of interlocking shapes, *Fighting through a Screen* requires more than a perfunctory glance. We are denied the high contrast of the competing colors in *Out of the Darkness* and *Never Die* by the work's shimmering silver monochromaticism. This predominant tonality is interspersed by small areas of warm colors and supported by a framework of delicate crimson lines. The work is a tangle of floral and abstract elements which create a strong psychological barrier that the viewer must surpass. In the process of doing so, familiar shapes begin to be revealed. The most central of these shapes combine to form a corporeal apparition of athletic character. Furthermore, there is an overall translucent quality about the work that is inherently eidetic in nature. Other works by the artist have a similar eidetic quality about them, but it is most prevalent in *Fighting through a Screen*.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, this central figure, once identified, is like an ethereal being that has physically disappeared from our view but left an indelible psychological impression. It is, perhaps, the artist's most balletic work in the exhibition.

*Almond Sands* is one of the most abstract of the group whose overlapping and interlocking curving geometry elicits anatomical deconstruction. Nevertheless, Wexler speaks with a fluent abstract vocabulary that is not entirely divorced from representation. This work recalls that monumental period of creativity for Willem de Kooning in the late 1940s when he was able to liberate himself almost entirely from the figure. Its presence, however, was very much felt in the curves and shapes of his black and white paintings from this period. De Kooning said, "Even abstract shapes must have a likeness." One major formal difference here, however, is that de Kooning's paintings are imbued with an active or kinetic movement. Wexler takes a much different tack. In *Almond Sands* and *Inner Thoughts*, the movement does not embody the aggressive dynamism of action painting, but exists as *potential* inertia, unrealized. The finely delineated shapes create a movement that is like a wound spring held in place and about to be released. It is motion held in abeyance, creating an inherent visual tension. De Kooning's proclamation of

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<sup>2</sup> The psychological notion of the eidetic image, an image from memory that appears to exist in physical space, and its relation to works of art was introduced to me in a lecture given by Michael Brenson, "David Smith: Primitivism, Magic, and Myth" given at the New York Studio School, May 3, 2006.

abstract shapes prompted Thomas Hess to respond, "Likeness is a mysterious quality."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the work's primary success is found in its formal qualities that simultaneously suggest recognizable forms and abstract shapes. It evokes something vaguely familiar that yet remains indecipherable.

The artist incorporates a much more fragmentary and angular abstract vocabulary in *Brake In*. Set against a limited range of warm colors is an array of jagged shards interrupted by what appear to be multiple points of impact. The notion of the impact is underscored by the work's title. With this reference in mind, and if we read the points as occurring over time as a repeated motion, *Brake In* can be seen to have a strong temporal dimension. Contrary to this, however, is the inherent frozen quality of the work, underscored by the crystalline forms. *Brake In* is precariously balanced on a precipice of uncertainty. If this were an actual window of glass, the integrity of the structure would have been too severely compromised to remain intact, yet it rests partially so. The title is also a pun. To "break in" would suggest a forced entry into a prohibited place. Here the title is contradictory and difficult to reconcile with the work itself. The artist has created for us, in effect, a work of visual paradox when understood in conjunction with its title.

The most representational work in the show and also the largest is *All of Them, I've Stung*. Set against a background of an enormous kaleidoscopic green eye is a group of bees perched rapaciously on a series of floating organic shapes. The eye is pulled close to the picture plane and serves as a backdrop for the activity. Wexler is able to circumvent this physical superficiality by employing varying shades of emerald green that comprise the radiating pattern of the eye and incorporate floating shapes that seem to recede into the distance. This distance is situated within a microcosmic context and is suggestive of not a physical space, but a space of great psychological depth. The eye serves not only as a delicate organ and window to the soul, but as a counter to the potential sting of the bees. Its fragility is about to be pierced by the bees' venomous points. Again, the viewer is confronted with the problematic position of entering a delicate environment that teeters on the edge of anxious and painful anticipation.

Aaron Wexler's work transcends the formal complexity of his laborious and skilled collage technique. This is, of course, employed by the artist to create images of immense ethereal beauty. The works are indeed much more than that and are products of the artist's own thoughts, ruminations of great psychological depth. The true success, however, is how skillfully he combines conception, technique, and execution with such determined conviction. The result is a masterful group of tension-filled images of subtle but present disquietude.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas B. Hess, *Willem de Kooning* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1968), 47.