



Larry Roots: On the Surface

November 3, 2012 – February 3, 2013

Larry Roots: On the Surface



1



2

Larry Roots is an artist based in Omaha, Nebraska. This exhibition brings together a sampling of his remarkable artistic output over the last couple of decades. Roots has the ability to use paint and a variety of other materials to portray things that are incapable of being expressed well through everyday verbal communication. There is in his work the sense that he is painting forces, sensations, or ideas, even if his art occasionally gives us the slightest glimpse of a landscape, a figure, or a written language.

So what are these paintings supposed to be? Can it be put into words? What is Roots trying to do?

These are some of the common questions that we, as visitors to a painting exhibition, are expected to ask ourselves. Regardless of what we see, and especially when what we see doesn't look like what we have seen before, there certainly has to be something between the lines or under the surface that is the real purpose of the artist's work. Right?

Well, maybe sometimes. There can be any number of underlying purposes for someone to pick up a paintbrush and apply pigment to a surface. Emotions, political issues, religious ideals, an appreciation of the beauty of a person, place, or thing, psychological states of mind, humor, and many, many other things can lead an artist to begin a painting. Ultimately, these reasons become secondary when the paintings are put on display in a public setting. What becomes more important is what led the artist to go through the process of making the painting.



3

In 2000, Roots wrote an artist statement that is part poetry and part attempt to put into words what lies behind his artistic efforts:

There are things about seeing
that go beyond understanding.

In special places
I have found stones,
rolled them in my hands,
pondered them,
washed them,
viewed their endless
profiles and qualities,
and even after time
I continue to revel
and am transfixed by their profound sensibility
and substantive content.

And I wonder,
will I ever be able
to truly explain *What*
I can so clearly see?

I think not.
But I believe what I see.

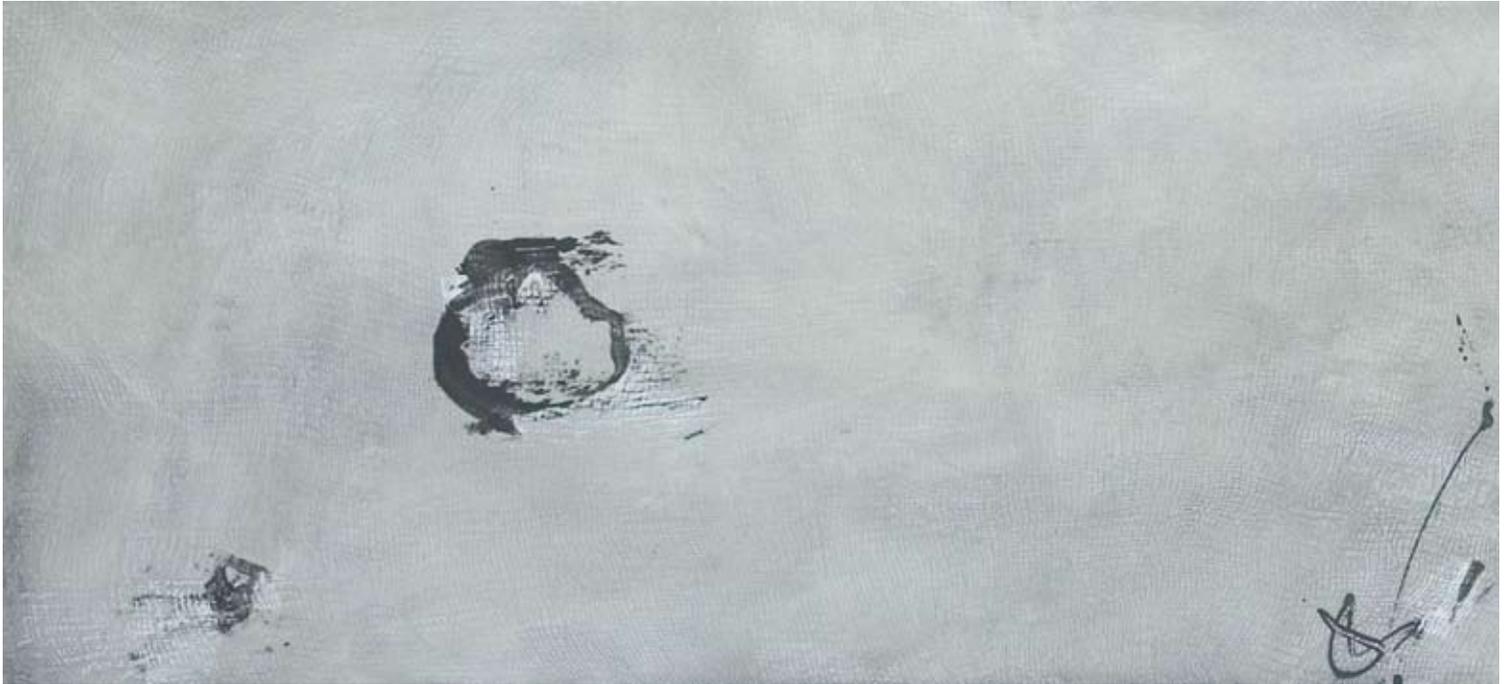
cover

Larry Roots, *Connections*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 54 inches
Courtesy of Modern Arts Midtown, Omaha

back cover

Larry Roots, *Tenacity*, 2006, acrylic and oil on canvas, 60 x 40 inches
Courtesy of Modern Arts Midtown, Omaha

1. Larry Roots, *Rite of Entry*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 66 x 67 inches
Courtesy of Modern Arts Midtown, Omaha
2. Larry Roots, *The Unfamiliar No. 2*, 2009, acrylic on canvas,
32 x 39 inches
Courtesy of Modern Arts Midtown, Omaha
3. Larry Roots, *Playthings*, 2010, oil on canvas, 40 x 60 inches
Courtesy of Modern Arts Midtown, Omaha

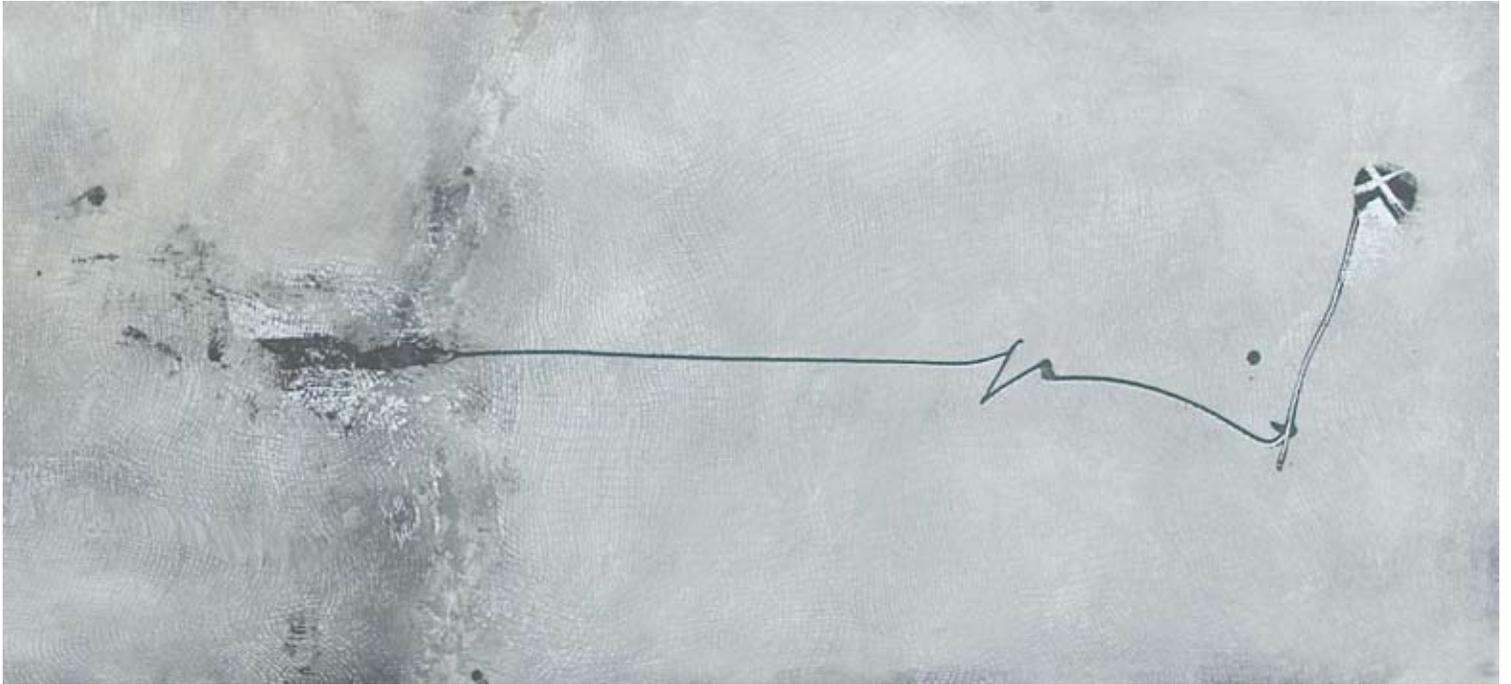


4

Rather than working in a manner in which the final goal is known clearly before the work is begun, most artists, like Roots, are experimenters and explorers. Early decisions, such as subject (if there is one), the size of the picture, and the materials to be used, might be made with comparative ease. But the art is in the process, and the process tends to lead the artist farther and farther from any preconception she or he might have had before picking up a paintbrush to begin a painting.

The odd part about the completion of a painting is that though it might be the perfect summation of the process, it might still feel oddly detached from the artist who created it. Many artists over the years have spoken of conversations they begin to have with their paintings, in which the paintings tell the artist what is needed rather than the reverse; other artists have stated that they continue to work until they have fully extracted themselves from the painting that sits in front of them. And then what? Another painting begins, because, at the end, a completed painting is just a step, and the process continues into the next painting and beyond.

Roots has been going through this process for quite a while, yet still finds himself in the middle of it. His output has been consistently staggering for the last two decades, with well over 1,000 paintings completed during that time. In his complete body of work can be found figures, landscapes, mark making that emulates written languages or acrobatics, the forms and colors of stones, and the forces of nature. While it is common for serious artists to adjust different aspects of their work



throughout lifelong careers, Roots has worked on all of these interests—in great depth—within a relatively short period of time. He continues to work in all phases of these interests, adjusting and expanding as he proceeds.

But what is the motive behind this process and all of the various artistic interests that impels Roots to paint? It is not necessarily an easy thing to put into words, which is the point, to an extent. It is usually not difficult to describe in words the facts of a particular situation. As an example, we can think about watching a sunset over the water with a loved one. We can write or talk later about the details, such as the time, the colors of the sky, the cloud formations, the reflections on the water. However, this data cannot communicate precisely what this moment meant or felt like. Art can fill the gap between the facts of a moment and how we interpret them. While a photograph of the sunset can remind us in a clear way of the feelings we had, it cannot mirror those feelings. Roots uses his painted surfaces as places to explore the murky areas between our verbal communication and our experiences. So what do we see?

Works such as *Incidence*, *Writings on the Wall*, and *Rite of Entry* do seem to bear a strong connection to written language. Large paintings with minimal color, they are defined by different uses of black lines: large and brushy in *Rite of Entry*; thin, spare, and unpredictable in *Incidence*; and congested, sketchy, and fading in *Writings on the Wall*. They hint in varying ways at language, emulating to a degree things like shorthand, schematic drawing, or calligraphy. But

4. Larry Roots, *Incidence*, 2008, pigment on fresco and mounted linen, 16 x 72 inches
From the Collection of Jeff Baldus



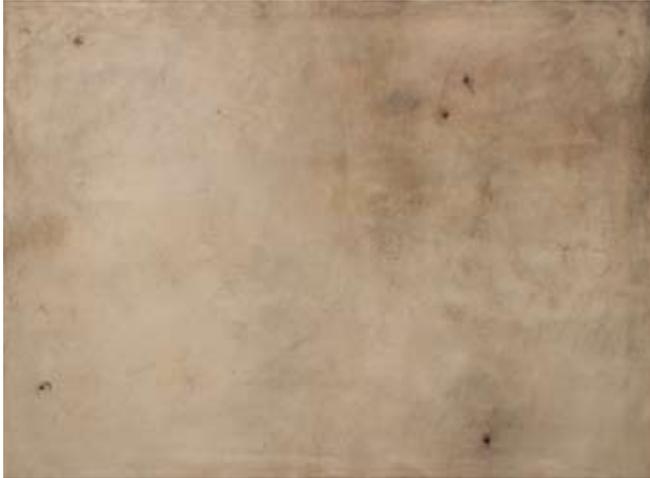
5

there is no actual verbal meaning in what they portray. In each case there is a sense of movement along the surface.

These works can be contrasted with paintings such as *Reading the Surface No. 2*, *Tenacity*, and *More or Less*, which grab our attention immediately through the artist's use of color. *Reading the Surface No. 2* and *Tenacity* have a glow, while *More or Less* presents a feeling of lightness and a sense of atmosphere. If we are accustomed to having black marks on a light background serve as basis of written communication, we are also ready to let colors, both soft and bold, to impact our feelings, as they do when we choose clothes, cars, and furniture. But these are paintings that were not created to decorate a functional object, but to exist as their own objects.

Roots also has created many works that are defined equally by line and color. Works such as *Playthings*, *The Unfamiliar No. 2*, and *Connections* present variations on both the format of the line-based works and the atmospheric effects of the colorful works. The forms created by the lines range in size, shape, and clarity. The colors range from the lightest possible tones to full, rich hues. Light-colored forms dance across the canvas in *Playthings*; a range of forms sits on the surface of *The Unfamiliar No. 2*; and bright primary colors push against each other in *Connections*.

So there, in the smallest of nutshells, is what we see in some of the paintings of Larry Roots. It is a broad sweep of what is possible with paint or pigments on a flat surface. But what are



6



7

we supposed to do when faced with these paintings? We can try to look past the data of each of these paintings, at least as far as that is possible, and try instead to see if the painting feels right and, assuming that is the case, just what makes it feel right and how. We can move from one painting to the next and discover how shifting the lines, forms, and colors brings out different responses from within us. Mostly, though, we should be willing to let our minds wander as we view the art, trusting that whatever indescribable reactions we have are perfectly valid. In other words, Roots asks us to use our imaginations and simply wonder at the things we experience.

Roots earned his B.A. in painting from the University of Northern Colorado, Greeley. Though he is a full-time artist, he also directs two galleries with his wife Judy: Modern Arts Midwest in Lincoln, Nebraska and Modern Arts Midtown in Omaha, Nebraska.

5. Larry Roots, *Writings on the Wall*, 2006, oil and encaustic on panel, 48 x 96 inches
From the Collection of Ritch and Kathy LeGrand
6. Larry Roots, *More or Less*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 32 x 44 inches
Courtesy of Modern Arts Midtown, Omaha
7. Larry Roots, *Reading the Surface No. 2*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 40 inches
Courtesy of Modern Arts Midtown, Omaha

