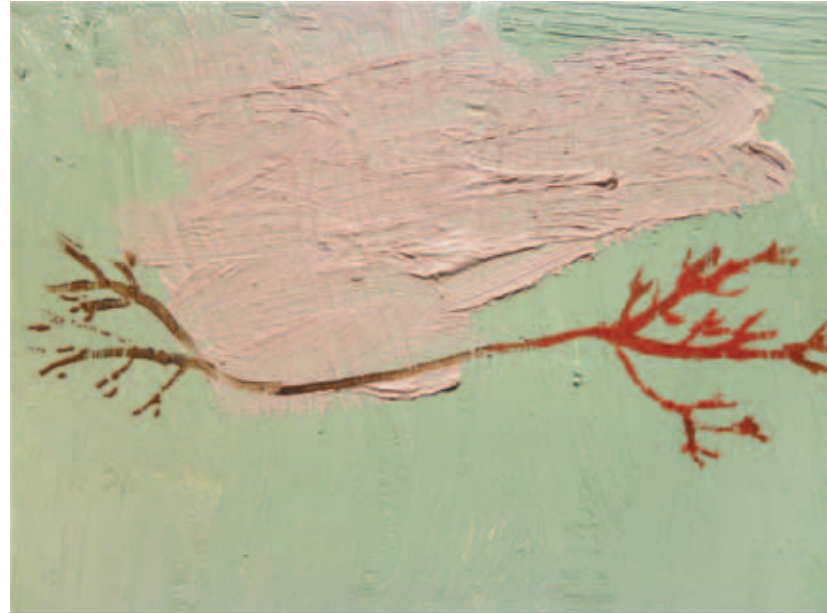


HOLLY FAY: SYSTEMS

October 10 to November 24, 2012



Systems, installation detail, 2012, oil on paper, variable sizes, approximately 4"x6"

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Art Gallery of Regina



Systems Branch, 2012, oil, oil stick, acrylic on paper, 22" x 30"



Systems Germination, 2011, oil, oil stick, acrylic on paper, 22" x 30"

Cover: Systems, installation detail, 2012, oil on paper, 22" x 30"

ART GALLERY OF REGINA

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The focus of Holly Fay's exhibition *Systems* is not the consideration of one painting in and of itself but how it operates in the space in relativity and interaction with the images around it. Viewers are presented with an installation; an orchestration of multiple paintings that populate the gallery walls to create an overall large-scale work. Here the gallery operates as an activated space, a theatre or forum, where ideas play out and where meaning is created through the interplay of the works within the organization of the room. On entering the space, one first encounters paintings on paper with subtle references to landscape that are pinned to the wall or framed in conventional formats. While drawing mild associations to her previous bodies of work, these pieces act as indexes of things to come, introducing us to Fay's aesthetic and visual vocabulary. Like a constructed symbology or visual language, Fay offers repetitive, figurative and yet ambiguous forms that float without context on layered surfaces. These painterly forms then break away from the rectangular conventions of their paper support and assert their objectness, spreading out across the gallery walls in oval-like, organic shapes, like pods, spores or cells that are clustering, regenerating and mutating. Painted on fleshy or neutral coloured grounds, these images reference both human and plant life systems, allowing viewers to free associate and draw analogies between the natural world and human biology. There is a consciousness in these clusters. Fay's interest here is in allowing the organization of the exhibition space to communicate and engage viewers in her investigations into the interconnectedness and underlying intelligence of all life systems.

Holly Fay's paintings are known for their visceral surfaces – like layers of earth and layers of flesh – and these works are no exception. Her particular sensibility with paint has contributed to canvases with an immediate sense of surface, allowing her paint layers to embody the visceral qualities of her subject matter. Marks, forms and textures are built up, buried and revealed, creating surfaces that are not only informed by her process but offer information or histories that are embedded within the paint layers. Her work from previous series has investigated bodily experiences of place and nature, being characterized as representing a phenomenal experience of the natural world, to explore the history that is inherent in our natural environment. Fay has considered human understanding of nature to be “a psychologically and physically ‘felt’ space outside of actual perception”.¹ Recently her focus has shifted away from suggestive references to landscape toward images and theories related to science, ecology and biology. Although resourcing both medical and botanical illustrations for her imagery in *Systems*, Fay is not presenting scientific images. Suggesting rather than literally depicting her subject matter, she abstracts and reduces her imagery to iconography, creating her own lexicon of stylized symbols.

This approach reflects her trust in the inherent communicability of her chosen medium. Loose, gestural paint-handling on individual pieces contributes to a sense of sincerity and freshness, resulting in honest imagery. Images range from possessing a graphic-like quality to being heavy impasto abstractions. The natural forms are isolated, simplified and without context, so it is difficult to recognize the scale of what we are looking at, whether the image is a micro or macro representation of the subject. Ambiguity is created through this strategy of offering close-up compositions and abstracting the representational, allowing viewers to free-associate with the images – cells could be pods, tree branches or roots could be veins.

Mounted to stand out or away from the gallery walls, the smaller pod or cell-like paintings are presented as objects, forms that are clustering in groups or families and then begin to spread out across the space, suggesting regeneration, growth and perhaps even mutation. Though there is an organic quality to the clustering and sense of movement of these forms, the spatial arrangement of these clusters suggests an underlying intelligence to the ordering. The positioning and associative nature of the plant life forms with those of human biology encourages audiences to explore the notion of genetics and its relationship to the environment. Human and plant genetics both carry an inherent intelligence that allows for change and adaptation with every new generation.

Fay puts forward concerns that through processes like the creation of genetically modified seeds and corporate controlled food production, we may not only be losing the genetic codes that are inherent in natural species for regeneration and sustaining life, but we are also altering our environment and ultimately ourselves.² The health of our bodies and that of the earth are inseparable. Since GM seeds and plants don't have the genetic intelligence that indigenous varieties have, we do not know how they will adapt over time. Through scientific modification, are we exposing natural species to unhealthy mutation, to uncontrolled or irregular growth, and therefore running the risk of not only losing plant varieties but impacting the natural environment and our own sustainability? Interestingly enough, uncontrolled growth is the definition of disease in terms of biology. This realization certainly gives a new and perhaps more somber perspective on the overall installation.

Despite this more somber reading of the work, there is a clear affirmation that resonates of the innate intelligence of life systems which exists outside or beyond the systematic control of human science. Fay is hesitant to refer to the work as political but there is certainly a quiet and yet pervading social consciousness that reveals itself through the myriad of visual signs presented. Trying to achieve a balance between being scientific and being emotive, Fay has suggested that perhaps this work moves away from the phenomenal realm, but I still see elements at play that disclose subjective, lived experience and consider an intuitive means of knowledge.³ There is a sense here that through her medium, Fay is attempting to not only communicate ideas but gain personal knowledge on the subjects of her inquiries. Allowing the work to dialogue through its encoded visceral-ness and its spatial organization within the gallery, *Systems* presents viewers with a compelling exchange between the conceptual nature of the work and the formal qualities of the paint medium.

Jennifer McRorie

¹Jack Anderson, *Embodied Presence: Michel Boutin and Holly Fay*, exhibition catalogue, 2012-2013, Organization of Saskatchewan Arts Councils, Regina, SK.

²From an interview with the artist on August 8, 2012.

³From an interview with the artist on August 8, 2012



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Systems, installation detail, 2011, oil on paper, 22" x 30"