

Entwined

Selected Paintings and Drawings by Mary Hrbacek

Robert C. Morgan

The tree paintings of Mary Hrbacek are different from those of the *plein air* painters from the pre-Impressionist period in mid-nineteenth century France. Unlike Corot or Theodore Rousseau, she is not interested in flourishing trees situated in a primeval landscape saturated with darkened shades of green.

Rather Hrbacek's trees are more stark, more hard-edge-- closer to the early studies of Piet Mondrian, specifically from the period of 1910-11. There is one painting in particular by the Dutch painter I cannot help but compare to Hrbacek-- a tree study from the Museum in Rotterdam in which Mondrian impulsively moves between representation and abstraction. His painting is suspended squarely in the middle. We see the branches in gray tones against a neutral sky. The openings between the branches resonate as negative spaces and push forward toward the surface of the picture plane. The spaces appear in the process of being transformed into aggregates of abstract form.

As I study the paintings and drawings of Hrbacek, I cannot help but recall Mondrian at that instant of realization where the inherent structure of the tree is moving toward something else-- a new vocabulary of abstraction. Yet I look at Hrbacek's paintings not as purely abstract but as having a certain symbolic or semiotic content.

By this I mean her paintings have a tendency to operate as signs in which variations of the upper branches of these leafless trees positioned against cloudless skies suggest variations on a theme. One might read the artist's painterly forms as musical notations or as calligraphic gestures spontaneously bequeathed from nature. Taken as a whole, they might constitute a vocabulary of signs referring to anthropomorphic attributes of the human body as in the dark-sided *Last Dance* or the brilliant evocation expressed in *Moving On*, both from 2007. The signature painting of the exhibition, *Entwined* (2009), with its twisted and gnarled tendencies, began as a charcoal drawing in 2005. The expressed differences between the earlier drawing and the painting occurred over a four year period. While the initial study in charcoal carries a certain heft as it crawls from lower left to upper right upward along its craggy winding trajectory, the painting reveals an acute lightness. Instead of weight, *Entwined* carries a certain buoyancy as we catch visual traces suggesting bones or shells through an outwardly refined and carefully inflected manner of linear assertion.

As noted, my general take on Hrbacek is that her paintings are about winter branches more than flourishing trees. This gives the artist an opportunity to investigate these natural forms in terms of light and dark. To some extent, this investigation begins as a drawing and eventually comes to fruition in the more developed color variations through painting. This is evident in *Hanging Suspended* (2010) where the graduation of light on the underside of a branch shows four distinct

variations of earth color, ranging from ochre to raw umber. Although her use of color is generally reduced in trees painted prior to 2010, the shift of emphasis appears startling in *Red Metamorphosis*, painted in early 2011. Here the bright red against the sky recalls the work of the Dresden painters at the outset of the twentieth century where symbolism suddenly turned to an outward chromatic form of expressionism.

What I find enduring about Hrbacek's paintings is their exalted humanist content despite a sublime existential demeanor. In Beckett's stage set for *Waiting for Godot* a lonely tree without leaves is the only prop on stage. It appears symbolic and defiant as a sign that human beings will endure, even as they move ahead unaware of the consequences of their actions. I find a similar content in Mary Hrbacek less by comparison than in the way her arboreal forms behave like creatures entwined with one another. Together these paintings represent a semiotic idea of form derived from nature that spurs our response as to how they express meaning.

Robert C. Morgan functions as a writer, art critic, abstract painter, and global lecturer. An author of many books and monographs on contemporary art, translated into several languages, he is an authority on early conceptual art for which he has written extensively. Professor Morgan currently teaches in the graduate MFA program at Pratt Institute and at the School of Visual Arts in New York.