

SUSANNA HELLER's Studio

by Robert Berlind
February 1st, 2012

One is, upon arrival at Susanna Heller's studio, warned to take care. There is wet paint on palettes and paintings, amid myriad drawings and studio paraphernalia. The small space is overflowing with work, much of it bound for an upcoming exhibition at the Olga Korper Gallery in Toronto. Every surface not taken up by a painting is covered with small sketches on paper, most made with the firm marks of a soft pencil. An inveterate walker—often from her home or studio in Brooklyn to Manhattan—Heller makes notations on small pads while traveling on foot, establishing palpably both the vantage point from which she is drawing and the expansive scene in front of her. In these quick drawings, as with the large paintings that grow out of them, space is not a matter of logical perspective. Although Heller's sketches include perspectival convergences toward the horizon, diminution of forms, and even atmospheric effects of blurring and softening with distance, the drama of near and far does not rely on realist description. Leaps in space are felt viscerally, as much in the stomach as in the mind.

In her paintings, Heller wields an expressive vocabulary of delicate oil washes, heavily worked impastos, and dense black strokes and dashes that animate the foreground or send the eye careening into the distance. She also conjures the *look* of buildings and other subjects—as seen in particular weather and light, at a great distance—in a way that does not conflict with graphic devices imported from her sketches, such as heavily outlined clouds and turbulent air.

Heller's focus is as much on her subject's energy as on its appearance. "Electric Storm," a 66 by 152-inch diptych completed in January of this year, establishes the view across the East River from Greenpoint, but its real subject is the storm of the painting's title: its electrical charge and its power. It is late afternoon, the low sun visible to the southwest



Susanna Heller, "Taratoma Cloud," 2011. 60 × 40", oil on canvas.

on the left panel. The right panel shows evening setting in along with the storm itself. The space of the diptych is continuous, but the two panels can be seen as a daytime/nighttime image.

Perhaps because she draws so much from the experience of walking, Heller constructs her paintings in such a way that the eye travels from foreground into deep space, often following a line that refers to nothing but the movement itself, always with a particular rhythm and energy. We are also led in other directions. In “Electric Storm” a group of black shapes takes us rightwards—up river, as it were, to the horizon. Going the other way, a succession of loosely brushed reddish verticals might be structures along the water’s edge, angling back. Markings in the sky may be currents of air on other paths; groupings of thin black and blue lines rise from below to suggest a perspectival convergence. There is not much middle ground, so we don’t progress in a measured way. The eye hurtles from *here*, somewhere in the vicinity of the picture plane, to *there*, in whichever direction one chooses.

In 2009 Heller made a major painting titled “On the Heel-Toe Express,” which she showed at Magnan Projects in Chelsea. Twenty-six feet long, it comprises a great number of small fragmentary paintings on canvas and scraps of wood, all cobbled together to form a narrative view of the artist’s jocularly-titled hike through town. Like many of Heller’s multi-faceted works, “Electric Storm” among them, what is most astounding about “On the Heel-Toe Express” is that it all holds together. In a written statement, the artist makes explicit the analogy between walking and painting:

A painting, like a walk, connects the physical experience (feet on the ground/paint on the canvas) to the movement, energy, and space. Past, present, and future are all ignited with each moment of seeing or each step.

While Heller succinctly identifies the physicality of “feet on the ground/paint on the canvas” with “movement, energy, and space,” I would further acknowledge her particular painterly ability to evoke the deep forces underlying their connection. Her ongoing subject is the exhilaration induced by what is seen and felt and



Susanna Heller's studio. Photo credit: Robert Berlind.

imagined. In her little studio, as paintings are moved about for better viewing, a visitor is made aware of the compression of the artist’s outdoor experience once transformed and articulated in her compacted yet spacious images. Her lively, even ebullient accounts of making the initial studies and the subsequent paintings reinforce the sense that multiple narratives have been enfolded into her work—that every aesthetic resolution is a provisional pause in an ongoing exploration. “Taratoma Cloud” (2011), a 60 by 40 inch painting, looks across the East River toward Manhattan from several stories up, over the roofs of some shed-like buildings and past a tugboat’s spot of red. This visual trajectory takes place under the frenzied cloud of the title, which could also be a gaggle of ferocious fighting birds in our immediate vicinity or, in this highly charged realm, mythic forces in dramatic combat. There is a continuum in Heller’s world that connects what is perceived and what is imagined. And Heller is a *rara avis* herself: an artist who paints with full feeling and mastery of means, trusting her process unselfconsciously and following her distinctive vision.