

O'Connor Art Gallery | Dominican University

MICHELLE WASSON
MAKING RAIN

January 23 – March 1, 2019
Curated by Karen Azarnia

On Making Rain

Michelle Wasson knows how to take up space. In *Making Rain*, Wasson's solo exhibition at the O'Connor Art Gallery, the artist's vast canvases engulf the walls. They assert themselves while emitting an exquisite sense of loss and wonder. They are of this world, and speak to something otherworldly. Surrounding the viewer with soaked color and painterly marks, the work evokes a feeling of being warmly enveloped by the steady onslaught of fluid washes.

These paintings are as much about what is taken away as they are about what we perceive. Using methods related to printmaking and batik, Wasson first applies wax or fluid resist, followed by paint and pigment to raw, unstretched canvas on the ground. She layers positive marks with a physicality and sense of abandon akin to dance. Wasson then launders the canvases, employing an element of chance, to remove and alter the positive marks. This sense of removal is palpable in the paintings' surfaces. As a final step, the resolved canvases are stretched taught, adding a layer of tension both physically and psychologically to the work.

A part of Wasson's current *Earth and Sky* series, these paintings were made after the presidential election of 2016. According to the artist they reflect a "loss of progress." It is important to look to Wasson's earlier work, oil paintings which have a similar hand albeit more figuration. These earlier paintings reflected her interest in artists such as Klee, Picasso, and Matisse. Exploring themes of loss, they were carefully constructed and according to Wasson "well behaved."

Wasson's recent painting *Mirage* is key, as it serves to bridge this older work with her current series. Unlike her earlier works, Wasson's current paintings exude a loss of control. One can envision the artist dispensing with the niceties of brushes, instead pouring and scrubbing on canvas¹ – as a reaction to our current socio-political situation. As the artist states, she has "never identified as a feminist as much as I identify as one now." With a sense of longing and sadness, these new works feel unhinged. They are beautiful, yet abject. Wasson successfully makes meaning through material and formal choices including palette, mark, and a sense of touch.

While these new works tend towards abstraction, imagery is still present. The repetition of a large iconic “x” prevails in *November Rain* and *LA On Fire*. It can be interpreted as many things: a butterfly, the human body or vagina, landscape, skyscape, or the letter *x* itself. It is fitting Wasson’s other influences include Louise Bourgeois, Carolee Schneeman’s *Interior Scroll*, and the Gutai movement. A Japanese group of artists focused on performative immediacy², Wasson’s energetic marks, like the Gutai, are at once direct and urgent.

Context also plays an important role. With their placement in the O’Connor Gallery, the three largest paintings in the exhibition each face a pair of vertical windows. On the top floor of the building, these windows overlook rooflines to the sky. They mediate our experience with the outside, as Wasson’s paintings suggest a window to another cosmic reality. Wasson also alludes to chaos and destruction in the painting *Chiba City*, a Japanese city almost completely destroyed during WWII, and the painting *LA On Fire*. Cycles of destruction and creation, the microscopic and the cosmic, are something we all intrinsically understand. A painterly shaman, Wasson evokes the sublime, conjuring a sense of something larger than us all.

-Karen Azarnia
O’Connor Art Gallery Director
January 18, 2019
Chicago, IL

1. Costello, Chester Alamo. “Michelle Wasson – A Sizeable Unencumbered Aesthetic Approach.” *Comp Magazine*, November 20, 2018. <http://www.thecompomagazine.com/michelle-wasson/> (accessed January 5, 2019).
2. Barnes, Rachel. *The 20th-Century Art Book*. (London: Phaidon Press, 2001).