



EILIS CREAN
Fields of Recognition

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Abstraction vs. Representation

What if abstraction and representation are not truly opposites? In the contemporary Western world, visual experience is often imagined as a continuum tracing a line between those two poles: on the one end, naturalistic art representing specific visual experiences of the surrounding world, and on the other, non-representational compositions of pure form, where space, color, line, and volume exist purely on their own terms with no connection to an external reality. Certain proponents of Modernist art were keen to make this argument, but they framed it as a value judgment by turning the line into an arrow: they associated innovation, exploration, and progress with abstraction, interpreting the history of art as a gradual shift away from representation. At the same time, their opponents denounced abstract art as a degeneration, imagining that the move away from representation signaled the very loss of civilization. Sometimes these arguments lose sight of the artworks themselves, framing representationality as a political rather than an artistic metric.

Eilis Crean's art cuts through this noise by asking a fundamental question: are abstraction and representation really opposing terms? How might those two fields of visual experience be reconciled—and to what ends? It would be tempting to suggest



Communion

that Crean works in the midfield between abstraction and representation. But in fact, what gives her work so much impact is that it rejects the logic of a continuum between those terms. Engaging with Eilis Crean's painting opens up a diffuse space of visual experience, allowing us to encounter representation across multiple fields of recognition where seeing isn't always reduced to the physical act of ocular apprehension at a specific instant. Instead, in Crean's work, seeing is a process that reaches across time and space, bringing perception, memory, and the somatic sensation of place into the viewing experience.

The Edge of Recognition

Eilis Crean pursued her training in an era when art criticism had begun to soften its insistence on abstraction. As critic Arthur Danto described in 1993, "Abstraction is no longer the bearer of destiny in anyone's mind; it is but one of the things an artist can do."¹ Following in that perspective, Crean's

work began as primarily figurative, but she nonetheless developed a language of form allowing for nuanced visual passages that go beyond the demands of optical transcription. In a 1977 screen print, *Communion*, she depicts two figures in a landscape. She leverages the medium's inherent proclivity to produce flat planes of color, rendering the figures in an opaque gold starting at the feet that dissolves somewhat as it gradually opens into the screen pattern moving upward. Minimal passages of black define the figures' faces, but only just, giving the sparest hints of their hair and facial features. In total, the viewer immediately recognizes the subject, but if one were to excise a smaller passage—just the middle section of the two figures, for example—the image would read as an abstraction, a study in color and form that could stand on its own as a composition. The work is, from one perspective, an aesthetic challenge: how can an artist employ the formal elements of art within a representational image to create a compelling visual experience freed from the constraints of mimetic precision? Crean's handling of color and form create a sense of ethereal serenity that exceeds the potential of any direct visual experience of the subject.

But in another sense, the departure from optical exactitude offers a critique of vision as a singular, objective experience. One strain of Western art since the Renaissance has fostered an experience of visuality in which the image presents itself as a permanent distilla-

tion of a specific visual moment experienced first by the artist—whether from observation of the real world or from an interior vision of an imagined scene—and then presented *in toto* to the viewer. Yet artists have been subverting that assumption from the beginning—sometimes even rejecting it wholesale.² At the heart of this critique is the recognition that the image is not an indexical trace of the exterior world, but is, in fact, its *own* world. As much as we are culturally primed to see *Communion* as a singular event that happened in a specific place, the image frustrates that simple reading. Who are the figures? How are they related, and what is the interaction that we are witnessing? Is this about *Communion* as a noun, or communion as a verb? Or both? Are they walking through a park? A backyard? A country estate? Not only does the artwork decline to answer any of those questions, it is not even concerned with that form of narrative inquiry. Instead, it creates a space that exists outside of or at least unbound by external parameters. The image stands independent of the world as an image.

From a twentieth-century Modernist perspective, especially according to the logic of Abstract Expressionism, that might be the culmination of our visual encounter: after accepting the artwork as a purely visual form, we open ourselves up to its inexhaustible visual possibilities, entering the singular visual world the image creates and experiencing it outside any narrative, biographical, or

¹ Arthur Danto, "Art after the End of Art," *Artforum* 31, no. 8 (1993): 69.

² See Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle, WA: Dia Art Foundation, 1988), 3-23.



Embarkation

even physical context.³ Crean's work, however—even her most abstract work—affords a different kind of interaction through the element of *recognition*. In *Communion*, for example, we are cut off from a direct narrative interpretation of the representational imagery because we did not experience that place, time, situation, or interpersonal interaction, and nothing in the work gives us the cues that would allow us to feel as if we understood it through vicarious experience. But we have experienced places and times and situations and interpersonal interactions, and engaging with the image prompts us to overlay those experiences with our visual encounter. Recognition in this sense is not sudden full enlightenment—total recognition—but the *edge* of recognition, a gradual awareness of outlines and connections—a kind of fuzzy understanding whose indefiniteness allows for an infinite range of interconnection.

The concept of recognition has remained a critical theme in Crean's career. This is especially evident in her "Rituals" series. *Embarkation for Home #1*, 2008, offers a glimpse of a quotidian event of the sort that passes continually without much notice, the comings and goings that punctuate our lives as we intersect with each other. The subject is nothing more than figures approaching a car in a driveway, its door open as if impatiently waiting to carry one of the actors on to the next stage. The title is a dry nod to the Rococo painter Jean-Antoine Watteau's supremely pompous *Embarkation for Cythera* (Musée du Louvre), hinting that perhaps ordinary intimacies, not grandiose events, are the truly important moments of our lives. Tied up in these moments of coming and going are vague but deeply significant questions that we only occasionally devote time to considering. What does it mean to belong? To experience longing? To come home or to go home, to greet or to bid farewell, to come closer or to drift apart or to connect or to reconnect—to fashion some satisfactory understanding of our place in the world and with each other by stitching together times and places, memories and projections? *Embarkation for Home* is based on a specific place and a specific time among specific people, but the painting softens that specificity into an invitingly approachable scene—a stage open for us to fill with our own memories and experiences and emotions.

Dream Abstractions

Eilis Crean often works by setting up "what ifs," problems to solve through the process of painting. She began a new series in 2011 that challenged her to distill optical experiences into their most basic visual forms. The source material was not important beyond the visual interest it offered—it could be a view of her back yard, or a family snapshot. She moved through a series of progressively abstracted sketches, starting with a fairly close rendering of the original, then gradually removing detail, simplifying contours, and consolidating spatial forms. This process reduced each image to just five to seven shapes. She then created five or six interpretations of these minimalized sketches and applied different but equally pared-down color palettes, limited to just three or four pigments, not indexed to the colors of the original visual source, experimenting with a range of compositional possibilities. These completed, Crean chose specific compositions to enlarge into acrylic paintings on gessoed Arches cold press paper. Through this process, the images became even more adamantly geometric, eliminating the subtle gradations in tone and saturation that had occurred naturally through the absorption of pigment by the unsized paper in the earlier iterations. The resulting works constitute the "Dream Abstraction" series, thirteen of which are exhibited in this installation. Attentive viewers will recognize specific elements that

reappear in multiple works, remnants of the same visual sources after being subjected to multiple mediating processes. The series are like stage sets that can transform dramatically as the lighting changes, even if the scenic elements remain stationary. These images also bear traces of elimination in their final state, "formed as equally by parts lost in interpretation as by those that survive," as she describes.⁴

Originally, Crean intended these works as the starting point for yet a further iteration. They were meant as abstracted spaces that would serve as the settings for figural imagery. Just as in a theater stage, the variations allow the scene to take on a different character simply by changing the layout or the lighting. As compelling as these paintings were as scenes in which to deploy figuration, Crean realized as she progressed that they also had the capacity to stand on their own as finished compositions. They reminded her, as she ex-



Dream Abstraction #61

³ Art critic Clement Greenberg is among the best-known proponents of this perspective. See "Modernist Painting," *Arts Yearbook* 4 (1961): 101–8.

⁴ Quoted in *100 at 100: Juried Alumni Art Exhibition* (Atlanta, GA: Ernest G. Welch School of Art & Design, 2013), 27.

plains, of “a particular state of mind between waking and dreaming, where your eyes are open but you can’t name anything yet,” not so much a sense of confusion, but a space of gradual recognition where the mind’s linguistic apparatus hasn’t quite caught up to the primal awareness of the basic forms of space, light, and color that constitute one’s surroundings.

Knowing that these works originated through observation and developed through a process of minimalization is helpful in understanding their import, but not essential in appreciating them. In fact, thinking too hard about the source image counters the works’ effect; Crean has titled them numerically in part to discourage that kind of superficial viewing. They reward the contemplative gaze, offering pure formal insight while hovering at the edge of recognition. *Dream Abstraction #61* is a composition balancing light, color and form in a state of tension. Deep tones running all the way to black stand out from passages of bright luminosity—the layering of the brushwork suggests that the light is in the background, but the visual pull of the brightness brings it forward. Color adds further dynamism, juxtaposing cool copper green with acidic lemon, pulling both tones together in a warmer emerald green that floats between the two, while a light gray lavender plays against streaks of complementary yellow/chartreuse in the highlights. The forms are in dynamic tension as well, seeming to chase each other across the image from left to right. The composition begins with a resolutely fixed vertical

element, then moves to a form in the center that, while still vertical, adds circular forms giving it a more active energy; that energy then explodes in the strident vertical of the form on the right as it launches toward the margin. The dark oblique diamond in the top right adds a sense of counterbalance, however, arresting the composition’s momentum before it becomes unwieldy.

We could stop there and leave the painting entirely in its own world. But we could also observe connections—however tentative and indefinite—to our own world. Maybe those aren’t just forms, but figures. An onlooker standing on the right, a couple embracing in the middle, another turning as they hurry away? Maybe this visual space is also a place. A garden? An interior? It’s unclear. The painting offers unbounded possibilities because it leads us to the edge of recognition, but no further. It has taken that instant between dreaming and waking and extended it out, letting us luxuriate in a completely open field of possibility that doesn’t demand any resolution.

Mediating Representationality

The Dream Abstraction series was a turning point for Crean, leading her toward further exploration of the boundaries that allow or deny us access to the space of an artwork. Much of her new art, however, is built on earlier work, bringing familiar forms into conversation with new ideas. Around 2015, Crean had been sketching a tree in her back



The Sky at the Wrong Side of the Branches

garden, when she dreamed that as she was looking out toward that tree, she perceived the sky as being situated in front of rather than behind its canopy branches, inducing a sense of bafflement and fascination at a re-ordered world. She aimed to capture that feeling of displacement in a mixed media piece, *The Sky at the Wrong Side of the Branches*, where the blue of the sky emerges in vibrant, palpable spheres in the middle of the garden, in between the viewer and a charcoal drawing of the tree. A year or so later, she returned to that drawing and used it as the basis for a tree motif in a large oil painting on linen titled *Through the Branches*.

She stopped work on the painting for several years until she arrived at a strategy for



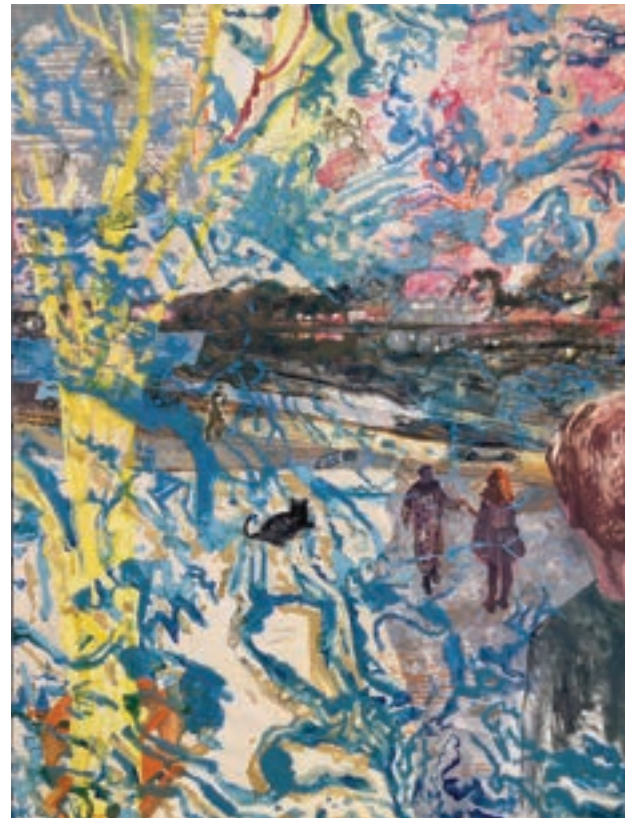
Through the Branches

mediating the painting process by translating the image through the medium of printmaking. Creating a relief print of the tree necessitated reducing the image to its most essential form, screening out extraneous information; the relief cutting process for the printing plate does not allow for any gradient or intermediate tonality, just presence or absence of form with nothing in between. She then projected the finished print onto the surface of the painting and used it as the basis for the blue forms on the surface of the finished work. The image made yet another transformation as she reversed the print, then used it as a formal motif in a second large oil painting, *Lakeside Charade*.

Both works include elements based on observation that have become highly abstracted

through intermediary processes—the skein of blue veins that originated as tree branches, for example—but both also include fully recognizable representational imagery. Some of these representational elements come from earlier artworks, like the yellow tree in the left of *Lakeside Charade*, a “rag tree” in the Irish tradition of hanging personal emblems like bits of cloth in a tree to summon healing or plead for good fortune. The emblem in this case is personal to the artist—it’s a depleted wire reel, apropos of the tree’s first appearance in Crean’s painting *Return*, 2010, representing her father nearing the end of his life.

While this context is concrete in *Return*, the rag tree’s reappearance in *Lakeside Charade* is more spectral, less an iconic form and more a hint of memory wafting through the visual space. That sensation underlies the viewer’s experience of the entire piece, whether they make the connection to the artist’s earlier work or not. Trees and houses seen across a lake, blurred by distance or perhaps by the passage of time; a parked car and a walking figure in the midground, and, a bit closer, two figures clasping hands in greeting or farewell. Standing on the margin is another figure, facing away to invite us to look through their eyes as a surrogate viewer, standing on the threshold of a space that seems at first to open up to us. The longer we look, though, the more the space seems as inaccessible as the past. The abstract elements in and around this



Lakeside Charade



Return

space help evoke this perspective, snippets of half-remembered times, passages of form that we are perpetually on the cusp of recognizing.

Crean continues to experiment with the transformative power of working across multiple media; she is currently moving toward collage, including digital collage, as a vehicle for limitless recombination and as an inexhaustible source of “what ifs.” In all of these investigations, abstraction and recognizable imagery both offer potential answers. As Crean describes, “Representation and abstraction are both strains of my work, ways by which I reconfigure what I’m looking at—two solutions to how to filter an image or filter an observation.” Part of what makes her art so compelling is how adroitly she deploys both solutions in tandem, creating fields of recognition that are simultaneously, somehow, part of our world and yet entirely self-sufficient as worlds of their own.

Nathan Rees
Carrollton, GA
March, 2024



Nathan Rees is an art historian whose research focuses on the intersections of art, colonization, and religion in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century West. He has published, presented, and curated exhibitions on monuments to Western settlement, representations of Native Peoples, and the theology of visibility. His monograph *Mormon Visual Culture and the American West* was published by Routledge in 2021. Rees serves as associate professor of art history at the University of West Georgia, outside Atlanta.



Abstract Variation #32, Acrylic on Stonehenge paper, 11x15 in, 2013.



Abstract Variations, Acrylic on Stonehenge paper, 11x15 in, 2013.



Abstract Variations, Acrylic on Stonehenge paper, 11x15 in, 2013.



Proceeds of a processions #1, Digital collage and inkjet print on Canson paper, 14.5x20.5 in, 2024



Proceeds of a processions #2, Digital collage and inkjet print on Canson paper, 20.5x14.5 in, 2024



Proceeds of a processions #3, Digital collage and inkjet print on Canson paper, 14.5x20.5 in, 2024



Proceeds of a processions #4, Digital collage, inkjet print, paper collage and acrylic paint on Canson paper, 20.5x14.5 in, 2024



Something about leaving, Acrylic on printmaking paper, 9.5 x 17.75 in, 2024

BLACKWELL TRUST

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Special thanks to the city of Newnan.

The Vault Gallery Press produces books, broadsides, and other printed materials in collaboration with the Vault Gallery and the School of the Arts at the University of West Georgia.

Designed by Kayla Marston. Printed by the University of West Georgia Print Services.