

## Drawing on Nature

A review of the exhibition: *Into the Light*, at the Yale British Art Gallery, 2001

by Geoffrey Detrani

"Into the Light," currently at the Yale Center for British Art, showcases the career of contemporary British artist Rebecca Salter. This expansive survey – more than 150 works – includes examples of Salter's efforts in drawing, printmaking and sculpture, as well as her work in painting. The "light" of the title strikes a curious chord because in her artwork, it is light that the artist controls so carefully, modulates so minimally and generally metes out in such careful measure. In doing so, Salter offers work in an overall register of ashen grey, bone white and bleached earth colors. These colors tell us something about art and artist. Here we'll find conviction and seriousness – certainly. But no exuberance.

If there is a signature tag to apply to Salter's work, it is "minimal." Though this term has loaded, art historical connotations that might not jive with the artists' interests or intentions, it conveys the outward appearance of her work. Salter does much with few outward effects – subtle shifts of light and color, striated lines, calligraphic gestures in pattern and sequence.

The anchors of the show are the large paintings and the gathered groups of smaller paintings assembled in grids. Though they may reference the organic and "Nature" writ large, Salter's paintings are heavily geometric. They are flattened, largely monochromatic fields of subtly modulated color interrupted by carefully made marks and incisions. Tactilely, her paintings are matte and chalk like. The weave of the cloth support – where used – is perceptible, even pronounced. In her method of working, the canvas is scraped bare of the meaty part of the paint, the viscous, gel-like stuff that otherwise might build up and sit on the surface of the painting. Absent this visceral part, what's left is the muted stain that holds the color and records the marks of the scraping tool. The artists' physical act in removing paint yields an image akin to a landscape that bears the scars of boulders dragged along by the crushing weight of a glacier.

And, indeed, geology and topography are two associations that spring to mind in looking at Salter's pictures. They are akin to veined rock revealed in cleanly cut slabs, or photographs of a homogenous detail of the earth's surface shot from a high altitude, wherein the flattening two-dimensionality of the camera compresses the view into an overall patterned field.

Part of the exhibition is given over to Salter's collaboration with traditional Japanese wood block carvers and printers. Salter, we are not surprised to learn, has a keen appreciation of the Japanese aesthetic, as realized in the traditional arts. Originally a student of ceramics, Salter spent six years studying in Japan, and this experience may have been formative in solidifying her artistic sensibilities. Included in the exhibition are elements of a series in which the artist and her collaborators chose from a ream of drawings a few to reproduce using the traditional wood block printing techniques. The results are a near perfect match – showing the credibility of this technique in faithfully reproducing Salter's marks and colors and mannerisms.

Salter's work most closely recalls the American minimalist painter Agnes Martin whose paintings were painstakingly crafted from precise, limited gestures and careful, understated color. In Salter's work, as with Martin, as with all abstract, minimal works, representation is not the objective. The mark on the canvas does not point directly to a thing in the world. Instead it proposes a parenthesis within which a set of things in the world of objects, experiences and ideas might reside.

In Agnes Martin's work, where the mathematical reverie of precision and the monkish suggestion of regimented and dedicated process is pronounced, the effect is that of a staring point in contemplation with no clear, limiting bounds. In Salter's work, the salt of the earth is closer – the reference range is narrower and more clearly organic. It's rooted in the ground, in the

limbs of trees, in the bump of light across a rippled lake and in the incisions (real and metaphorical) that we make in our earthly context.