

Curtain of Water

Warren Zanes, 2007

People respond to the beauty of waterfalls in different ways. Annie Taylor, still in her petticoat (as the fashion of 1901 dictated), was the first to ride Niagara Falls in a barrel. Queen of the Mist, she wrote in white paint on the barrel's side. Most people don't take it that far. But there is something in a waterfall that stops us all. Calling them the "voice of the landscape," painter Thomas Cole celebrated the waterfall's marriage of opposites, "unceasing change and everlasting duration." In Native America traditions waterfalls are spiritual sites, the water forming an opaque curtain behind which the spirits are said to be at work. In the artist's realm, whether with the photographers of the 19th century geological surveys or the Hudson River School painters, the waterfall is an emblem of the sublime, a trope irresistible to the Romantic imagination.

Shawn Dulaney's *Curtain of Water* series embraces the deep symbology of the waterfall—but only to build out from that history. The insistent verticality of the work quickly distinguishes it from the Romantic landscape traditions. Where Cole used the shore's landmasses to anchor his compositions on the horizontal plane, inadvertently quieting nature's voice, Dulaney brings us closer, where the water's rush is a roar. We come so close, in fact, that the waterfall is no longer a facet of the landscape but a felt, immediate experience. It is a strategy that unlocks a different sensory response. *Emerge* and *Into Being*, their striking surface densities revealing the histories of their making, use the literal content, the waterfall, to recall for the viewer a place where sound and touch rival sight as a means of orienting oneself. *Soundless Sound* evokes what is perhaps the most striking proximity to that place of sensory reordering.

Dulaney's work quickly transcends its literal content. *White Voice* and *The Light* exemplify the manner in which the paintings begin with water to arrive at the subject of painting itself. The waterfall's marriage of stillness and motion, its simultaneous permanence and flux, is what Dulaney works with in order to address the dual nature of the painterly mark itself, both fixed and fluid. What Dulaney succeeds in doing is to bring the one who stands before the painting into the world of its work.

Behind the *Curtain of Water* series is an artist with a strong modernist sensibility, every element of her work distilled into what is most essential. Yet Dulaney is also willing to expose the emotional center of her paintings in ways not always common to the vastness and ambition of the modernist project. There is strength to the work that has led *New York Times* critic William Zimmer to associate Dulaney's paintings with those of Mark Rothko—but there is also openness to Dulaney's gesture, embodied in her invitation to those who stand before her canvases. She brings her viewer behind the curtain of water, where the spirits are said to work.