

## In the Drenched Earth

*Susan L. Weller, 2009*

At first glance, the recent paintings by Shawn Dulaney are images that are arresting and simply convey beauty. At second glance, the presence of the paintings manifests and projects a space that situates and orients the viewer in a manner distinctly different than most paintings. Within this spatial projection, the viewer's body is engaged; the body senses what the paintings effect and not solely what is seen. The images shift to environments, positioning the viewer's body as a conduit for experience. Awareness of the presence of one's body within the environment of a painting gives rise to an integration of sensing, feeling, and thought. Shawn's agency, her means and process of making paintings, brings forth a holistic engagement with the viewer, similar to the sensory shift that takes place when one is walking in a natural environment and experiences immersion.

Shawn has a reverence for place. A place, simply put, is where somebody or something can be in, can inhabit. She travels to find places, waterfalls at Yosemite National Park, plateaus that skirt the Rocky Mountains, and waves off the west coast of Ireland. The places Shawn chooses to paint are not meant to be representational but instead register what a place elicits and her relation to it. From her memories of a place, she extracts qualities, energies, feelings, and thoughts to bring to painting. Shawn synthesizes these experiences as she is painting, taking a reductive approach to making an image by means of the physical act of dripping, brushing, splashing, stroking, layering, or gliding with a squeegee. She imbues paint with the complex qualities of emotive energy such as desire, joy, grief, and longing. By reducing the representational image of a place, she gives the medium of paint a physicality that embodies the kinetic energies of a place: flow, light, wave, electricity, or solid, for instance. These energies transmute, creating interplay within nearly all of her paintings. In *Moonlight*, the waterfall is constantly flowing yet yields to its frozen stasis; the eternal stillness of the deep black night sky moves only when light skirts its edges. These transmutations bring to mind Lao Tzu's insight: "The heavy is the root of the light; the unmoved is the source of all movement." What makes the painting seem more vivid, more charged, perhaps more true than a representation of a waterfall or even an actual waterfall?

The two axes of the painting, a vertical waterfall and a horizontal expanse of sky, allow gravity to startle us back to our physical presence, to the fact that the place where we stand is holding us up to be able to look, to sense, and to be conscious of living a relation with the world. Shawn's paintings are like "thin places", a Celtic term that in its broadest definition is when the ordinary shifts to the extraordinary, in which case the mystical is said to have been experienced. These paintings are generous – they just keep giving.