

Andrea Belag has recently undergone a pendulum swing in her Painting, moving from sensuous surfaces to spartan surfaces drained of color with a stripped-down plant, the cattail, as her featured image.

It's more than a shift, it's a definite advance because of the wider range of associations that come with it. The surfaces are a straightforward reference to elemental nature; the greens, browns and grays of her grounds might have been inspired by material on Petri dishes. Belag is comfortable with the association of an artist's studio with a laboratory where he or she conducts experiments of his or her own devising. For several years she has had three prints by Karl Blossfeldt hanging in her loft and the spartan botany he photographed might have acted as a slow catalyst on her present achievement.

These paintings are as close to the bone as they seem because Belag came to her cattail imagery honestly. She was attending the Triangle Workshop in upstate New York, a place under the guidance of the sculptor Anthony Caro, where formalist thinking holds sway. I imagine that Belag felt like Walt Whitman in his poem "When I Heard The Learn'd Astronomer". The point of the poem is that Whitman was bored by all the theory and went outside to look at the stars. Belag found a marsh overrun with cattails, as a haven to which she repaired.

Her plainspoken image is also like a rudimentary human figure, and it is easy to read a psychological dimension into the paintings. When a painting features two cattails, the distance between them signals either closeness or alienation. A single cattail, perhaps in the center, has a staunch "here I stand" quality. A group of cattails necessarily imparts a festive sense of abundance and betrays Belag's assurance with her new way of working.

Often the cattail is put down wet-on-wet so that it naturally and easily assumes its place and configuration. One admires the flexibility of the image; each manifestation is distinctive, and this sense of personality is a foil to the dispassionate way Belag accomplishes many of her grounds. She uses a simple technique derived from monoprinting. Using a sheet of paper, color and physical characteristics are picked up from one area of a painting and printed elsewhere on the canvas. Mechanicalness meeting the flow of nature gives Andrea Belag's paintings an undeniable and rich dynamism. Satisfaction also comes from a sensation like that set down by Pliny the Elder (who died watching the eruption of Vesuvius): "Nature is never more complete than in her smallest creature".

William Zimmer, New York City
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William Zimmer was a writer and critic for the New York Times.