

## Barbara Rogers: Towards Serenity

by Carter Ratcliff

Blossoms, leaves, and tendrils are small things, yet they are large in Barbara Rogers's recent paintings. For almost two decades, she has been making large canvases, some more than ten feet wide, and populating them with forms that have the scale—and the presence—of human figures. *Ancient Embellishments* (2010) is over twenty-seven feet high and seventeen and a half feet wide. Its vertical format is unusual. Nearly all the other paintings from this period are horizontal, unfurling like monumental scrolls to present a lavish array of organic shapes. Some of these seem, at first glance, to be likenesses of familiar flowers or leafy vines. One can imagine them bearing tags of the kind that identify the inhabitants of botanical gardens, a familiar name in English followed by its Latin counterpart. Other shapes are so thoroughly stylized that it is tempting to call them abstract.

Yet Rogers is not an abstract painter. Nor is she a realist. In deep sympathy with plants she has observed in actual gardens, she creates a botany and, ultimately, a reality of her own. She is a utopian artist. And her utopianism is earned, the hard-won outcome of an evolution that originated in the dystopian asperities of her earliest mature work. Or if dystopian is too harsh a word, one might say that Rogers's paintings of the mid to late 1960s were shaped by her acute understanding of the tense and in many ways dysfunctional relations between men and women in American society.

At the San Francisco Art Institute, Rogers studied with Richard Diebenkorn, Elmer Bischoff, and Frank Lobdell—painters who did much to define painterly abstraction, then the dominant style, not only on the West Coast but also in New York. As a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, Rogers took classes with Michael Goldberg, a New Yorker and a leading exponent of abstract painting in the gestural mode. As the 1960s began, she had mastered this style and developed her own, distinctive gesture. Then, with a decisiveness that turns out to be characteristic of this artist, she abandoned abstraction for figurative art.

In Rogers's milieu, abstraction and figuration were not seen as mutually exclusive options. Her teachers Diebenkorn and Bischoff painted figures at certain points in their careers. After studying abstract painting with them, Rogers took life drawing classes at the California College of Arts and Crafts with Nathan Oliviera. In the work of these older artists, human form emerges from flurries of gestural ambiguity. By contrast, Rogers's men and women are sharply delineated—and deployed with sharply pointed wit. In a drawing from 1966, *His Rain Won't Spoil my Party*, a male figure charges a cloud with a storm. Three female figures run along the lower edge of the picture, protecting themselves from rain with a trio of umbrellas. In a frame within the frame, we see two figures chatting, their party unspoiled by the prevailing turbulence.

Rogers's work of the 1960s appears against the backdrop of the decade's first-wave feminism. Women were questioning the social assumptions—indeed, the prejudices—that defined men as dominant and women as subordinate. Another work on paper from 1966, this one executed in graphite and spray enamel, is

entitled *Women Marching Off to War*. It shows three female figures, heroic in scale, striding along a bleak horizon. Their heads are bestial, as in *His Rain Won't Spoil My Party*. Rogers suggests in vivid terms that women can no longer present a familiar face to the world. Calling on primordial energies, they must redefine themselves. The artist does not, however, underestimate the forces opposing this redefinition.

A number of paintings and drawings from the '60s reimagine society as an industrial process. *Producing Women Workers* (1964), shows female forms sliding along a chute, as in a factory devoted to the manufacture of anonymous functionaries. Similar machinery appears in other works of the 1960s, and a sense of rigid, limiting constraints carries over to pictures set in other surroundings—*The Interview* (1960), for example, and *Trapped in Suburbia*, of the same year.

In a statement from 2011, Rogers says, “If your artwork is not readily identified as art that challenges the status quo . . . you run the risk of being labeled the maker of beautiful and harmonious paintings.” This is a risk she has run for decades, with brilliant success. As I have said, Rogers is a visionary artist who responds with inexhaustible generosity to our need for beauty and harmony. Nonetheless, her career began with challenges to the status quo, and her observations were so acute that it is easy to overlook other impulses animating her early work.

Focusing on Rogers's feminist concerns in the 1960s, we interpret the muzzles and large ears of her most ferocious female figures as signs of militancy. But this

is not the only possible reading, and when animal features become feline, it looks as if the artist is invoking feminine sensuality. Of course, this too was a feminist issue. By now, several generations of women have insisted on defining their own sexuality, which means, in part, rejecting male definitions. Yet even in the 1960s Rogers was asserting her sexuality as a force independent of social and political issues. As the decade ended, this force became the primary theme of her art. With this new emphasis on the personal came a new style.

In the foreground of *Reclining Nude with Antelope* (1969) a female figure luxuriates in her physicality. Behind her, a tapestry of warm sepia tones resolves itself into a sunlit woodland inhabited by the long-horned creature of the title. The same year, Rogers reprised these motifs in a darker shade of monochrome and then, suddenly, a full palette returned to her art. Deeply saturated greens give weight to wide, tropical fronds. The bills of toucans and the bodies of flamingoes provide accents of hot red and glowing pink. Colors beyond the reach of inventory proliferate in orchids and other blossoms. With these paintings, the artist invites us into a rain forest filled with light and shadow and luminous mist.

The dominant figures in this imaginary environment are female, among them Alice, Renee, and a nameless woman with wings. Renee appears so often that we begin to see her as the artist's surrogate. Beautiful, refined, and, above all, self-possessed, she is so completely at home in the paintings of this period that her surroundings seem to become her thoughts and feelings made visible. Here is a woman whose desires create her world.

Before long, Renee is joined by a male figure with a knack for metamorphosis. In *Conservatory* (1973) he wears red livery and plays a long, golden trumpet. In *Card Trick* (1976) he is a sinister-looking magician in a tall hat. Usually, however, the male in these paintings is a black man named Nehemiah. Tall and muscular, he is as handsome as Renee is beautiful. Standing side by side amid a panoply of sensuous forms, they look like a couple.

When this figure is not visible, his sexuality is implied by the phallic bills of toucans, the stamens of calla lilies, and the sinuous necks of flamingoes. Orchids and other floral presences are vaginal. Rogers's symbolism is frank and all-pervasive. In this world, female sexuality is fully elaborated and more than equal to its male counterpart. Renee is self-possessed because she commands all that she needs for the satisfaction of desires that begin with the body and extend to the most rarefied extremes of visual delight. By now, the garden seems to be more than just a source of Roger's imagery. It looks to me as if it has become the manifold object of faith at the heart of her aesthetic. For it is in this setting that she finds ripened symbols of all that is vital to her.

In the late sixties and early seventies, for awhile, Rogers was the only woman teaching in the art department of The University of California, Berkeley. Her colleagues included her former teachers. Surrounded by maestros of the traditional brush, Rogers made the Renee paintings with an invention only recently adopted into use by fine artists: the air brush. By endowing Renee and her habitat with a degree of precision verging on the hallucinatory, Rogers challenged these male artists and their aesthetic of gestural ambiguity. With this

clarity came physical expansion. Many of the canvases from this period are nearly as large as the artist's most recent ones.

Early in the 1980s, she traveled to Hawaii in search of new forms of growing, flowering, entwining life. Having arranged to visit private gardens on the island of Kauai, she flew to Honolulu. Soon after her plane touched down, a hurricane struck. Sheltering in a beach house near the city, Rogers survived winds that reached ninety miles an hour and destroyed the gardens she had traveled so far to see. In the wake of the storm, she was drawn to the wreckage. Waves began to rage through her paintings and drawings, battering forms into near formlessness. In the aftermath of the Hawaiian hurricane, Rogers gathered—and cherished—fragments of the natural world even as she acknowledged nature's terrifying power. Insofar as objects are discernable in her work from this period, they are twisted, pummeled, and feathered. She had become a connoisseur of destruction.

Many of the post-hurricane canvases are rather small. As the scale and focus of her art shifted, so did her medium. By 1987, Rogers had exchanged acrylics for oil paint, and her renderings of damaged forms became ever more subtle. In *Tropical Debris #15*, a small work on paper from 1989, color is somber. Pigment is so intricately layered that often it is nearly impossible to distinguish one object from another. The artist's attention focuses on texture, not for its own sake but as a reminder of the devastation that her subjects have undergone and survived. At Berkeley, Rogers was surrounded by painters who located meaning in gestural nuance, and it is tempting to argue that during the late 1980s she joined their

ranks. After all, she was now putting brush and oil paint to uses as subtly as can be found in the work of Diebenkorn and the others. To make this argument, however, we must overlook a crucial point: in Rogers's art, the painterly effect is never primary. No matter how seductive a brushstroke's texture and torque, she is a painter of things, whether whole or disintegrating. Every gesture with a paint-laden brush reaches beyond itself, to grapple with the difficult truth that nature is destructive as well as creative, deathly as well as life-giving.

The *Tropical Debris* series took Rogers to 1990. Within a few seasons, she had begun a new group of paintings: *Her Garden: Objects and Sites Remembered*. At this point, she had moved to Tucson, adding a huge new vocabulary of natural forms to her everyday experience. Here the many gardens the artist had visited over the years are recalled and, in recollection, merged into one. This is a potentially boundless realm of which each canvas in the series can give us only an extended glimpse. As the title of the series announces, it is *her* garden, where she is free to elaborate in full the interplay between two kinds of form: natural and artificial. Plants embody the former and the gardener's intentions impose the latter. In a garden, nature and civilization intersect. Of course, a highly cultivated flower bears the impress of civilization, and a gardener's design may well be an imitation of nature. So a garden can be seen as a theatrical place, where nature and civilization play one another's parts. And Rogers's works of the 1990s often evoke the stage.

In *Her Garden: Objects and Sites Remembered # 5*, a pod on a tall stem and a blossom with plump, seemingly moist petals address us directly, from just across the footlights, so to speak. That one of these figures is male and the other female

is the only certainty here. The rest is speculation of the kind that thrives best in an atmosphere of remembrance. Though Rogers is no longer inventorying the aftermath of a storm, every surface in this series of paintings is laden with patina. Shapes are worn, sometimes crumbled, as if by innumerable seasons, suggesting that the passage of time is a slow, infinitely patient hurricane.

Even at its brightest, the light in these paintings feels elegiac. In several of them—*Her Garden: Objects and Sites Remembered* #21 (1996), for example, and #25 (1996)—night has descended. Pods, twigs, and curled leaves hover against backdrops that look at first like dark, impenetrable curtains. Closely watched, this opacity reveals depths filled with the remnants of other gardens—shadowed forms on the verge of disappearing. The works in this series are exquisitely detailed disquisitions on the tenuousness of memory. In *Her Garden: Objects and Sites Remembered* #24 (1996), the prevailing blue is at once gloomy and strangely luminous. And the blossoms inhabiting #41 (1997) seem lit from within. Much is lost; loss is symbolized by darkness; and yet this series tends toward the light.

Even the darkest of Rogers's paintings from the 1990s are optimistic, enlivened by the vitality of her inventions. In picturing natural forms, she shares in nature's creative power. Thus her flowering, pollinating subjects are new, even when she offers them as the findings of memory. And they are her own, even in the next decade, when she moves to the desert and begins to incorporate photographic imagery into her repertory of forms. The camera records and Rogers recreates.



With *Garden as Theater #19* (2000), Rogers makes explicit the metaphor that shaped her art for four decades. Her earliest works showed us scenes from the theater of feminist consciousness. Initially came dramatically focused vignettes from the elegant jungle that coalesced around a heroine named Renee. After the hurricane, Rogers found herself on a stage littered with debris. Mourning evolved into a drama of remembrance, in which the leading characters—natural forms in various states of destruction—were slowly made whole.

As I've suggested, this artist's memory is a creative force, and when she settled in a desert landscape near Tucson, Arizona, in the mid 80s, the gap between the remembered past and the immediately experienced present all but vanished. The *Hothouse Hybrid* paintings of the early 2000s are vibrant—and astonishingly complex—realizations of Roger's guiding metaphor: garden-as-theater. Or is it theater-as-garden? When a metaphor works at full force, its terms attain equilibrium. They become interchangeable and inexhaustibly generative.

In Roger's theater, forms display character. They interact, carrying on the pictorial equivalent of dramatic dialogues. Stems curve across expansive surfaces in response to one another. Blossoms become mirrors, generating variations of themselves. Thus a painting is bound together by a play of shape and color that we understand, intuitively, as a kind of communication. It is unified by interactions once resolved and impossible to pin down. This unity is, in part, what makes Rogers's works so beautiful.

In the Renaissance, painters employed rigidly worked-out perspectives to picture images of the ideal city. Dispensing with perspective, Rogers layers her organic forms to create both the intimacy and the vastness of the ideal garden—a place where social life can flourish in contact with natural forces at their most nourishing. Her paintings assuage our utopian desires, and that is another source of their beauty.

Utopia is an imaginary place described by Thomas More in a book published in 1516. Before More's *Utopia*, there was the Biblical Eden and Arcadia, the pastoral realm of ancient Greek poetry. The Land of Cockaigne is a medieval variation on Arcadia, a place where nature is bountiful and work, if any need be done, is a form of play. Untouched by misery, these early utopias are somehow prior to history. More's Utopia is different. Built according to lessons learned from the wars and politics of Tudor England, his perfect realm promises an escape from history.

The same promise was made by avant-garde painters of the twentieth century—Constructivists in the early years of the Soviet Union as well as their counterparts at the Bauhaus and de Stijl. From the history of art and life these modernists tried to distill principles that would rescue them from history's horrors. But there is no escape from history, and in Rogers's utopian paintings of the past decade we see none of the rhetoric of ahistorical purity that characterizes the work of a Constructivist like Vladimir Tatlin and such European utopians as Josef Albers or Piet Mondrian. In place of purity Rogers shows us fecundity. In her garden, a form is what it is by virtue of its power to evolve into something else. There is no

yearning for timelessness here but, rather, an acceptance of the temporal flow and a sense that time can cycle back on itself. Thus the past becomes the hope of an ever richer future.

The avant-garde utopians were artists of an urban ideal. Rogers is not, yet her garden is far from a wilderness and in her turn toward murals she joins with Mondrian and others in the search for an ideal architecture. For a mural implies a wall and walls imply buildings. Of course, Mondrian's art—and the architecture of his colleague Gerrit Rietveld—allowed only straight lines and right angles. They abhorred curves, in contrast to Rogers, whose recent art is filled with arabesques we can see as floral forms coming to terms with the demands of architectural structure. And so architecture is implied in another way, as the richly adorned flatness of the canvas evokes the flatness of a wall that may be interior or exterior. With her layering, Rogers merges inner and outer, the intimate and the grand. And she continues to find—or to cultivate—new varieties of flowering form.

*Lake Palace* (2010) for example, or *Awakening at Tongdosa* (2010) immerses us in a calm that feels imperturbable. Here, beauty is inexhaustible. And meaning is complex. In their need for purity, utopians are often driven to an empty clarity. In Roger's utopian present, certain textures are beguilingly uneven. Certain forms depart from the symmetry we might expect. There are many ways to understand subtleties of this sort. I would like to suggest just one, the possibility that we see them as remembrances of the ordinary, far from perfect world. Even now, Rogers has forgotten neither the conflicts she addressed in her early work, nor the

devastation that preoccupied her in the 1980s. She has built a vast “space for beauty,” to borrow her phrase, and I have called that space a utopia. Yet she has created that rare thing: a utopian order alive to the disorder that most utopias try to exclude.

I see Barbara Rogers as an artist who works her way from agitation to an all-pervading serenity. Thus the psychological unease and pointed satire of her early figures turn into the monumental calm we see in her later ones--- especially the female personages. As figures vanish, they are replaced by land- and seascapes filled with turmoil and its aftermath. As her imagery evolves, Rogers arrives at a vision of nature as tranquil, lush, and infinitely fecund. More generally, I see her as having made a powerfully original contribution to the currents of utopian speculation that have animated much of the most ambitious art of the past century.