



An Eternity in Little Weimar, 2007; acrylic on canvas; 36 x 48 inches; courtesy Devin Borden Hiram Butler Gallery, Houston

HOUSTON

Hilary Wilder

Devin Borden Hiram Butler Gallery

With a suite of new paintings collectively titled *Salt from Sand*, Hilary Wilder continues her exploration of the border between order and disorder, tranquility and turbulence, stability and volatility—in short, flux. The title refers to Wilder's ongoing interest in transformative experiences. The process by which one separates salt from sand—as opposed to the impossible task of picking out, one by one, salt crystals from sand crystals—is an elementary exercise: add water to a salt/sand mixture to dissolve the salt; filter the sand from the water; boil off the water and salt is left behind. The structure of Wilder's primarily abstract paintings is just such a narrative of transformation; however, this transformation is not a zero-sum game.

In *Again the Morning*, a luminous, spherelike shape in the upper right-hand corner of the painting seems to bestow beneficent light on a mass of something like vegetation burgeoning out of the lower left and consuming nearly that whole quadrant of the picture and infiltrating other quadrants. At the same time, that luminous sphere appears to be melting, long skeins of paint running down to water another, somewhat more amorphous mass.

The Passing Hours resembles one of those beginning-of-life experiments, where chemicals in a glass vessel are bombarded with electrical bursts until amino acids form. Russet and blue-green drizzles from the upper-left corner in front of a vaguely discomfiting cloud mushrooming up from below the bottom edge of the canvas. In *An Eternity in Little Weimar*, a conflagration roars in the lower-left corner and burns across the base of the painting, wisps of smoke billowing into the upper half. Something similar seems to be happening in the foreground of *The Night Comes Down*, though here the conflagration appears to be burning itself out, dying to ashes and embers.

Against all this fecundity and/or devastation, against the exuberance of Eros and/or the terminus of Thanatos, Wilder posits some Euclidian

elements. Let's walk again through those already discussed. In *Again the Morning*, a faint, slightly irregular grid animates the "sky" between the melting sun and apparent vegetation, while in *An Eternity in Little Weimar*, a similar animating grid is quite regular and anything but faint, forming a ceiling that presses the smoke back into the picture plane.

In both *The Passing Hours* and the *Night Comes Down*, lines radiate through the upper half of the composition but to radically different effect; in the former, rays emanate from a source above the top edge of the painting, as though providing energy to the teeming mass below. In the latter, those rays appear to spring from somewhere behind the dying fire in the foreground, like the rays of a setting sun.

The modernist elements of grid and radiating lines introduce human order to a cosmos that cares little, if at all, for the human. Indeed, in another painting from this suite, the grid is not only nearly overwhelmed by the tumult that covers the top half of the composition, the lines of that grid are severely skewed and disordered, as if in panicked retreat.

In previous work, Wilder has drawn from newspaper photographs of devastation wreaked on humans by earthquakes and wildfires; here, natural forces are depicted more abstractly, but there is no mistaking Wilder's concerns. The basic chemistry lesson invoked above is a human response to a problem posed by the complexity of the cosmos. But human ingenuity can take us only so far, as Wilder suggests in these luminous, apocalyptic, generative paintings.

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