



Little Spruce; 2007–2015; 51.5" x 75"; Ink on paper

With just a few ingredients (trees and grasses, hand and eye, paper and pigment) Emily Brown creates inquisitive drawings about her point of view in a particular moment: down, outward, up; panoramic; near and far; simple and composite. Made mostly over the past five years in the artist's studios in Maine and Pennsylvania, the drawings featured in this exhibition offer views of the landscape: some looking downward at the rocky, weedy ground, others looking outward at the natural world of shaggy forests, fields, snags. Some are small and intimate, like *Appleton Ridge, Fog*, and others large and cacophonous, like *Creek Bed*. They bring us into the experience of seeing. Looking down, we see the piece of ground we stand on and where we are. Looking up and outward we see the world around around us.

Brown's drawings grow out of the flat picture plane of paper, a process that parallels the emergence of organic life from the surface of the earth. Composed of lush patterns of brushstrokes on paper with warm-black vegetable-based Sumi ink and luminous watercolors, they convey wonderfully the natural world of trees and grasses. The growth of each drawing from bare, white paper to finished composition flows, and the marks seem to organize themselves before our eyes—sensuously or violently—into protruding 3-D structures in space, sharp pointy sticks and leaves of grass, deeply-inset niches of shadows, vistas of soft vegetation, luxuriant fields. The exhibition highlights the development of Brown's refined, yet spontaneous approach to the landscape, and includes several earlier small watercolors and gouache drawings which she calls "seeds of the larger works." These were painted outside, *en plein air*, and are essential precursors to the works later made indoors.

Brown's methods involve improvising with traditional East Asian Sumi ink techniques, which she employs in terms of both process and subject, to capture the spirit of the landscape within an economy of essential gestures. She uses rich textures and subtle values of washes on the paper, ranging from dry, scruffy marks to graceful calligraphy, pearly gray to deeply shadowy values. Brown explains her intentions: "Things in nature are ever changing. The nature and direction of light, movement, growth/blossoming/disintegration of living things..." She adds, "Making a picture that represents change is a challenge. I hope that the shifts in tone within areas and marks keep the viewer's eye moving, and observations flowing." In *South Wind*, for example, she creates a shimmering mirage of delicate marks that seem to rest lightly and ripple on the paper, like the wind itself.

In Brown's large-scale drawings, such as *Little Spruce*, the outward push of marks on the ground of the paper engages not just the eyes and mind of the viewer, but the body as well, with their human-scale proportions. She states: "I could not have done the studio pieces without the primary experience of being out there [in the landscape] and absorbing it... the muscular memory of walks/rides in the woods and fields, digging in the garden, turning over the compost—is why I love the landscape." Furthermore, the trees sometimes allude to human characteristics. Here, the small spruce tree seems to be struggling to assert itself, while the larger trees around it offer both protection and indifference, like some sort of good-enough parenting. Metaphors like this arise effortlessly in all of the drawings.

While most of the drawings in this exhibition capture a lucid, wordless vision of nature—with rustling leaves, bird-songs, and earthy smells—some seem to refer to a real-life experience of nature accompanied by fragmentary and intrusive mind chatter. (On my own hikes, this can be anything from worries and resolutions, to calculations and lists, to names of trees and birds.) With a certain lightness of heart, Brown's composite drawings such as *Walk Calmly* seem to suggest the possibility of a harmonious resolution of thoughts and memories with the direct experience of a landscape. It shows a peaceful rectangular view of trees harmoniously interspersed with other patterned modes of reality in the form of ovals, triangles and circles.

Brown's contemplation of (and reverence for) the ground of the paper and the ground beneath her feet is wonderfully evident in the patient explorations of mark-making in the shallow pictorial space of *Dry Stubble* and drawings in the Grasses series.

In Quaker spiritual practice, sitting quietly can bring the approach of the spirit and a keener awareness of things. Emily Brown's drawings offer the same opportunity for reflection.

SUSAN HAGEN
Guest Curator



Appleton Ridge, Fog; 2003; 9" x 12"; Gouache