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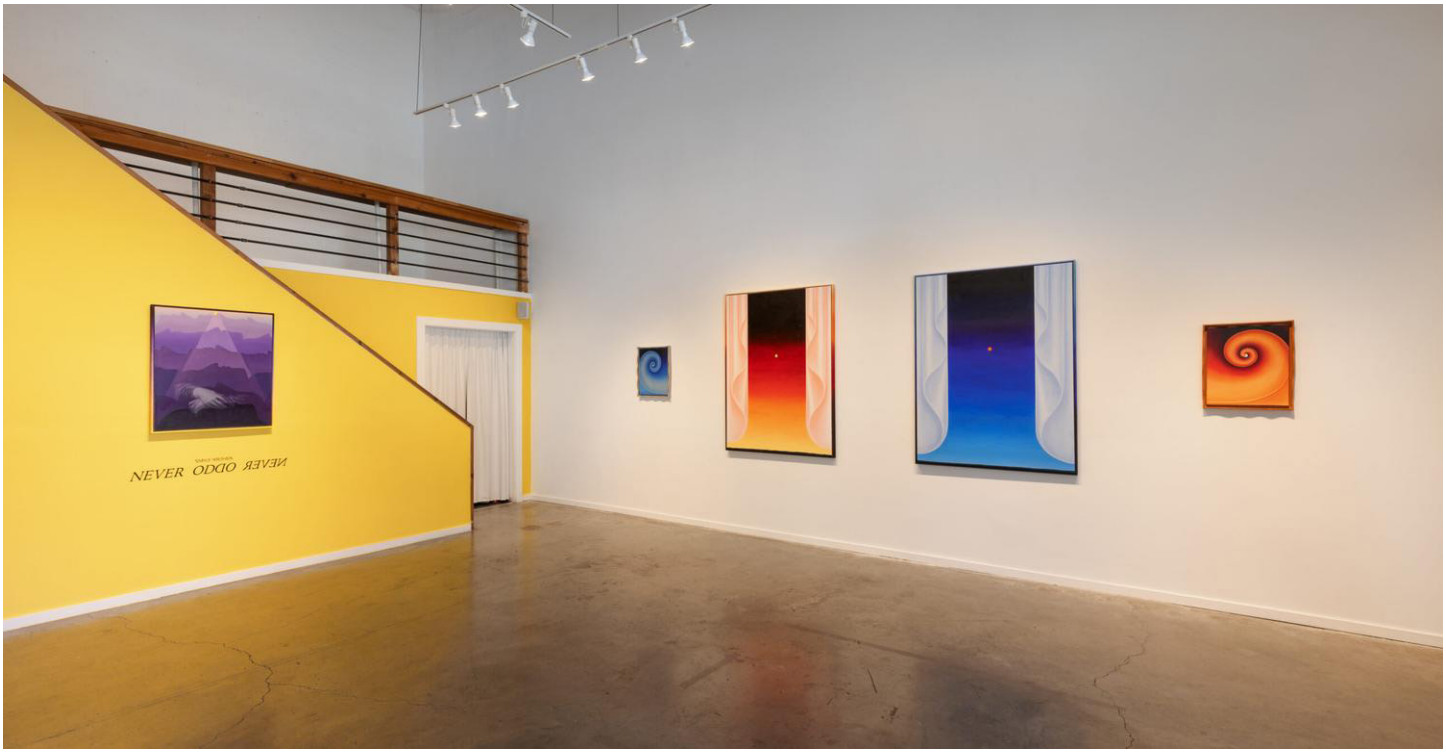
Never Odd or Even at Red Arrow Gallery Exhibition Review and Interview with Nashville Artist Emily Weiner

By Cara Lynch | 16 February 2024



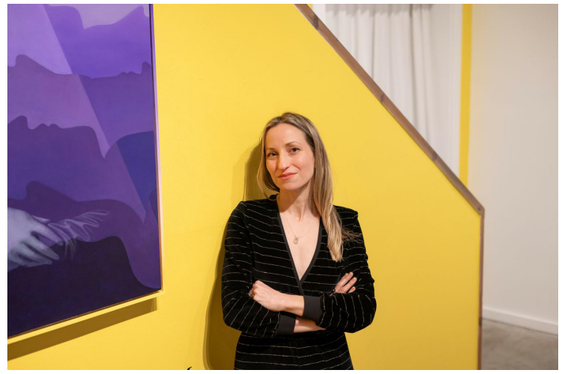
John Schweikert Photography

Throughout history, we have seen artists take the role of the mystic, questioning the nature of our existence, and "lifting the veil" from our reality. Nashville artist, Emily Weiner, does not shy away from these lofty topics. Instead, she embraces them, armed with the knowledge of her predecessors and working in their wake. Her exhibition, "Never Odd or Even," is a contemplation on cosmology, infinity, representation, and something we didn't see at first—but was always there.

The paintings are glorious, minimalist landscapes, painted often in rich hues of ultramarine and cobalt blue. The curtains are being pulled away, and we are begged to look beyond. Faces in profile become boundless mountain ranges. A spiral oscillates between micro and macro worlds. Landscapes reflect and mirror themselves. A sun becomes a moon, becomes a void, becomes a portal. The work is thoughtful and expansive. As an installation, the paintings made me acutely aware of my role as a viewer, but also of how I perceive the world.

I thought a lot about framing devices. A few of Weiner's works in the show feature hand-built ceramic frames, while others are wooden and painted. Both extend her imagery onto our level of reality. This, combined with their deliberately flat rendering, allows them to confront their own illusion. A small landscape at the foot of each piece runs the length of the works in the show, connecting them all and implying that we are all part of something bigger than we realize.

After seeing the exhibition, I got the chance to sit down with the artist and ask her about work and practice.



Christopher Wormald Photography

Cara Lynch: Your work is operating in this really sweet spot right now for me. It communicates on multiple levels. It is technically sound, accomplished, and beautiful. And then, you are asking these big questions about our existence, while being very self-aware of your own artistic lineage. For you, what parallels does visual experience have to our experience of reality?

Emily Weiner: I think in both cases it's a question of language, or having a particular way of describing the world. When you've been painting for a long time, the references and techniques that you steal, digest, and spit back out: those are your building blocks. Those are the words you use to form sentences. For me right now, those sentences are coming out through the paintings as deeper questions about the nature of reality or existence or—

CL: Being—

EW: Yeah, being. I think that we are always, regardless of what field we are in, trying to describe the world with the best language we have available. You could be a quantum physicist and use the language of mathematics to describe the same phenomena that an artist is trying to describe through paint. I'm using the vocabulary of painting—borrowing from da Vinci, Picasso and the canon that I was taught in the late 90s early 2000s—and placing those art motifs alongside references to everything else that I've encountered since… My constellations of symbols are not always intentional. For me, a good painting happens when its elements have no immediate connection, yet their non-sequitur-ness makes sense within the suspended disbelief of the canvas's frame.

CL: Are you a religious or spiritual person?

EW: I always have been spiritual, but a bit undercover. In recent years it's more undeniable. My husband is a practicing Buddhist. He studied religion in college and then went to graduate school for theology, so he did a lot of work investigating organized religion and the religion he grew up with. We met at a time when I was thinking about Buddhist philosophies but not subscribing to any one path. Since then, I have followed him to several silent meditation retreats in New England and now we go to a monastery in Mississippi for family retreats. I still have a more blurry-edged idea of spirituality and religion than he does, but it is primarily informed by Buddhism.

CL: I think in some ways art can start to take the place of traditional religion in some ways too—especially visual art. You know, you are having this experience with yourself and something bigger.

EW: I think we can borrow from the best parts of religion. At the heart of all religions there are really good teachings. Maybe that is why I can have these blurry edges to my own theology, because an art practice is like a container—our own little systems of belief that we can collect, share, and believe in.

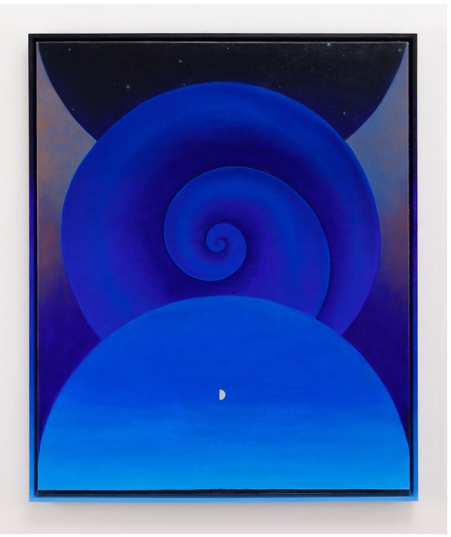
CL: One thing that I was really interested in this show was the continuation of symbols. For example, you have this Rubin's vase, and then you kind of twist it and it becomes a landscape. Is there a specific symbol or idea that has evolved in a similar way through your practice? Is there one that you've held onto for a long time that is important?

EW: The moon is the one that connects almost everything.

CL: And that little landscape that sneaks up on you!

EW: Yes and that, too! That kind of comes from Georgia O'Keefe, a Santa Fe kind of horizon.

CL: She was one of the references I wrote down—I have a few. Especially female artists that have taken on this mystic role. She's one that I think about (even though she is more rooted in nature), Hilma af Klint, Hildegard of Bingen. She has this image of an egg that is her model of the universe. Your painting of the spiral coming away, revealing something else, reminded me of her work—how she is trying to map the universe in a way.



Parallels, 2023, Oil on linen in painted wood frame

EW: Yes! That painting—called "Parallels"—is similar, an abbreviated map of the universe. From my late teens, I have been really interested in physics. I was fascinated by scientists in the early 1900s—Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg who were developing the theory of the atom and Albert Einstein who formulated general relativity. They were thinking about particles and bodies in space, how they worked and how they interacted. Zooming out, there have been all these theories since, like the holographic universe and parallel dimensions. I don't want to get too fixated on any one of them, but I do have this feeling that we only perceive a reality that is our little bubble. Parallel to that there are other things going on. So that painting was an attempt to point out the multiverse nature of our reality in some way: Three parallel planes.

CL: I was thinking that. There is that micro-macro and zooming out theme that recurs in your work. Especially with the spiral. That is a symbol that really does that. We think about that in nature at the smallest scale and how that extends further and further.

EW: Totally. When I was in college I was doing this series of paintings—really weird—of Stonehenge visiting different sites on earth. I was picturing Stonehenge as a tourist, not the other way around. So instead of being this amazing Wonder of the World it was unmoored and just visiting different sites, ranging from an anthill to the Orion Nebula. Stonehenge seeing things for the first time on both micro and macro scales, all equally sublime.

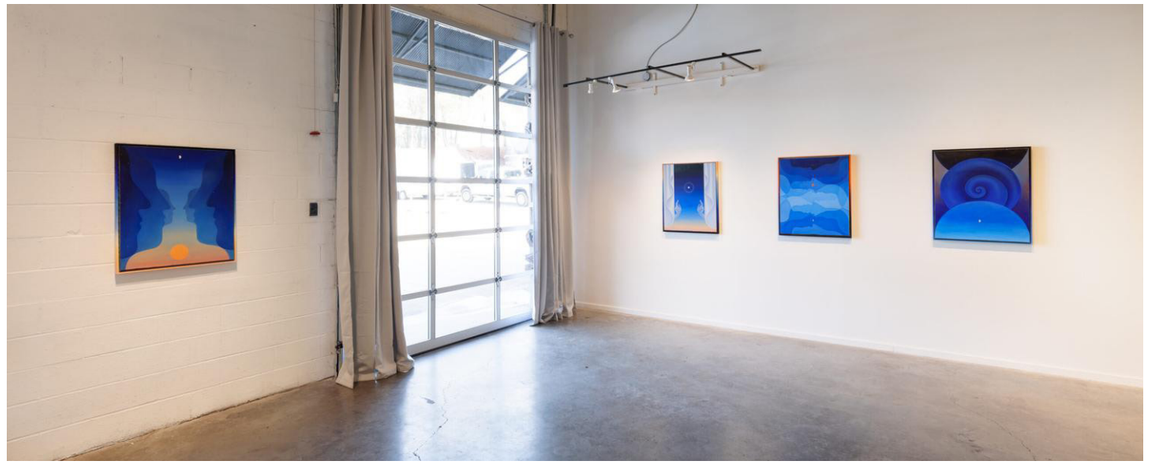
CL: Have you visited Stonehenge? I am dying to go.

EW: Yes it was really cool. You start thinking about this other society that was really in tune with something, really sophisticated—but their explanation of the world is inaccessible now.

CL: I know you studied at Barnard for undergrad and then SVA. Did you study with anyone or take any classes that really impacted you?

EW: I had a formative painting class in college at Columbia during the semester of September 11. There was a group of students that became important to me, I was looking a lot at those peers and figuring out how to paint and what it meant.

Later, in graduate school, Marilyn Minter was a faculty mentor… She was helpful not in a warm, loving way, but in a real and honest way, with a really sharp eye. I got into her class because another student dropped out and I was tailing her, begging her to let me in. Her first visit to my studio, she came in and was like, "You have a good aesthetic." But the second time she told me, "You need to learn how to paint." I was crushed, like, "What do you



John Schweikert Photography

mean?" But it was true: I went to a liberal arts school, and there was no formal instruction in the classes I took. I was mixing the wrong solvents into my oil paint because I literally didn't know how to paint.

Graduate school put me on the path to figure out how to build a painting—but I had to do it in my own weird way. I was looking at other artists in the program who had a ton of formal technical education—and I was asking them questions like, "What kind of grounds do you use? How do you get that luminosity?" Because of Marilyn I was on a mission to figure that out thoroughly. And kind of prove her wrong in a way. *laughs* And in our final Open Studios she came through, gave a nod, and said, "keep it up." That was it—but that was enough for me. I thought, "okay, she doesn't think I suck anymore." *laughing*

CL: Grad school is such a good time for that—picking the brains of everyone around you. Especially people with more technical background.

EW: Yes, so good!

CL: If you have down time, when you are not working towards something (although it seems you are always kind of working towards something right now!), if you have a playful, experimentational part of your practice. I know you work intuitively, so that is kind of built into the work, but I was wondering if it manifests in another way if you have free time or if you don't have the pressure of a show immediately upon you.

EW: I bring a sketchbook with me when I go away on weekends, and I make drawings with colored pencils. They are really helpful. I can be less precious and more risk-taking because no one is going to see them.

CL: That's what you think now—one day…

EW: Yeah, you never know!

CL: I know you have some previous experience as a curator, and I was wondering if or how that has informed your work.

EW: I think it made me a little more open to that dialogue that happens between different artists' artworks. I also became more aware of the conversations between the symbols in my own paintings. The symbols jump from piece to piece and then start to have a dialogue with each other. At Vanderbilt, where I worked as a curator, they

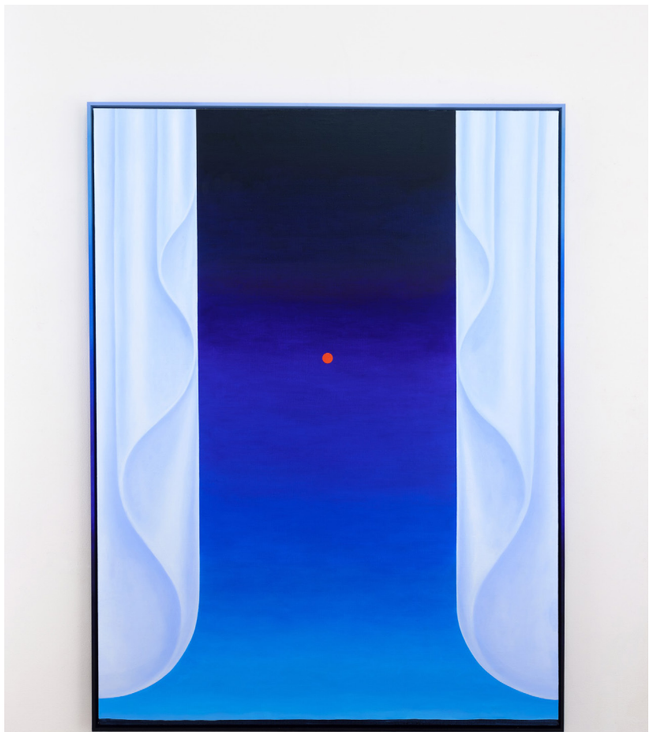
had a collection of 10,000 objects. They have an incredible collection, and it was inspiring to see them together.

CL: I didn't realize it was so large!

EW: I loved working with ancient Greek and Roman artifacts, and Renaissance paintings—objects that were hundreds or even thousands of years old. I was caring for them, and looking closely at them in private. It really made me start to look at work that was seemingly removed from my time period in a more direct and personal way. That's when the Greek vases started coming into my paintings. Their archetypal imagery doesn't feel like it is so far away from our contemporary lives. They are talking about the same themes: mythology, love, sex, death.

CL: Is there a recent exhibition that you saw that you really loved?

EW: I just got back from Mexico City. I saw objects from the 1300s–1500s from the Mexica people of Tenochtitlan (which I always heard referred to as the Aztecs). My Western Art history education was primarily based in Europe, so seeing this art in person was especially mind blowing. You see a lot of the same archetypal imagery—the serpent, the skull—but in a very different context.



Mundus Inversus (Vermillion Moon), 2023, Oil on linen in painted wood frame

CL: I went to Tulum about a year ago to see temples and religious sites there. There are a lot of interesting things about these earlier Latin American cultures that are relatable to some of the things you are talking about—I am thinking about the Mayan calendar and the cyclical nature of time. And how some of the objects I've seen from those cultures mirror each other or have two different sides…

What is your favorite non-art related thing to do in Nashville?

EW: I love Radnor Lake. They have a nature center and a bird sanctuary. If you are there on the right day, a park ranger will let you hold a corn snake or point out where bald eagles are nesting.

CL: What about your favorite art-related thing to do?

EW: I like to go to openings here. When artists come out for each other they seem to really come out. It's a different feeling than many New York openings which are a bit more hectic. Because the community is smaller in Nashville, you are pretty much guaranteed to see people you know, and to have the time and space to catch up.