

HOLLY VAN HART: Possibilities Abound **by DeWitt Cheng**

The 'presence' of Rembrandt's portraits was in paint, in the very act of moving his hand and conveying his energy to bring these figures to life. These figures were personage and paint. Rembrandt transmits his own energy, his own life, in the act of making a brushstroke.¹ — Painter/printmaker/sculptor Nathan Oliveira, who was inspired to become an artist by a Rembrandt portrait at San Francisco's Legion of Honor.

In the hurly-burly of the contemporary art scene, the various aesthetic battles of the past—drawing vs. color, representational vs. abstract, socially engaged vs. formalist—have in recent years been joined by a new one—modernists vs. postmodernists, or, those who claim that art has a transcendent meaning vs. those who see it as socially and politically subservient. This latest dichotomy often resolves into those who make objects, and are emotionally invested in them, and those who take a more conceptual, distanced stance, employing appropriation or hiring crafts people and technicians to do the work. Like all previous battles, the current schism is somewhat exaggerated by its partisans. I remember getting into trouble in graduate school in the 1980s for questioning the hard and fast lines drawn between modernism and postmodernism on a bullet-pointed class handout, so I was gratified to learn recently of the latest thing, Metamodernism, a synthesis of the two. (Being old-fashioned and prescient are often so close.)

In this context, the paintings of Holly Van Hart are firmly on the personal, modernist, poetic side of that temperamental and philosophic divide: they're oil paintings on canvas, in a tradition dating to the 15th century; they're both representational and abstract; and they express—well, let Georgia O'Keefe say it, succinctly: "found that I couldn't say any other way — things I had no words for." Van Hart's paintings, Romantic/expressionist depictions of birds' nests enclosing eggs, are clearly symbolic, and thus out of step with the contemporary fashion for ironic dispassion, even surrender or nihilism.

Van Hart's optimism derives in part from her long and successful career in industrial engineering and operations research in Silicon Valley, with its "unique culture of creativity and unrelenting optimism ... a place where anything is possible." At the same time, she "pursued painting passionately as a hobby – taking many classes, reading hundreds of books, forming an art critique group, and painting every spare minute." A few years ago, "absorbed and inspired by the idea of the limitless opportunities we have in our lives ... and the promise of our own capabilities, to be nurtured and explored and stretched to their fullest potential," Van Hart became a full-time artist. **These works about potential and metamorphosis, then, are clearly autobiographical, but they're also universal (as the deepest, most personal work often is, paradoxically).** The next-generation optimism, which is a deep part of American culture, is tempered, however, here: the woven twigs and branches of the nests—painted from the imagination—look spiky and slightly blurred, as if

windblown, and the eggs, if not in obvious danger, remain unprotected. In a recent interview she said, "I want the nests' texture to be a reminder of things unseen ... nature always has that underside. There are predators around, and nests blow out of trees; things happen." One can see the nest as shelter, burrow, surrogate womb—or as a crown of thorns.

If the images can be interpreted variously, according to the mood of the viewer, Van Hart's hard-won painterly skills are undeniable and compelling. Her naturalistic yet symbolic paintings—"Nestled," "Opportunity," "Swirl of Life," "Larger Than Life" and "Dream Weaver," the last two, featuring nests made with red ribbon interlaced with the branches, based on a childhood memory)—present their enigmatic subjects with both beauty and conviction, memorably. Several paintings featuring blossoms and branches set against light-filled skies—"Flush with Possibilities," "Outside my Window," "Springing"—seem to suggest, rightly or not, an Asian influence—not impossible, considering the cosmopolitan culture mix here on the Pacific Rim, or Van Hart's previous professional globe-hopping across six continents. A new, photorealistic painting, "Posh," depicts the familiar motif of eggs, here set amid loops of colored ribbons, with everything brightly illuminated, floating in a dark blue space. Natural and manmade elements are equally endowed with secret meaning and life.

In the current art climate, dominated by arcane, theory-driven conceptual art on the one hand and facile art-fair gimmickry on the other, Van Hart's subjectivity and poetry may seem retrograde to some; to others, myself included, it presages, we hope, art's return to meaning and self-expression, guided by disciplined craftsmanship and perpetual self-examination. Van Hart writes, "Each painting is a journey, requiring many layers of oil paint, and much inspection and introspection over a period of months." Nathan Oliveira, quoted above, reminisced about studying in 1950 with one of his idols, the German expressionist Max Beckmann. The older painter's English was rudimentary, so he advised the young Californian through his English-speaking wife: a painting life, he warned, probably with perverse pride, was "Sweat, much sweat."²

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