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## Los Angeles Times

### Review: Mary Weatherford's seductive paintings marvels of abstraction



Mary Weatherford, "Oxnard Ventura," 2014; Flashe and neon on linen. (Fredrik Nilsen / David Kordansky Gallery)

By Christopher Knight, Los Angeles Times art critic  
May 1, 2014

Seven large recent paintings by Mary Weatherford are marvelous excursions into territories of abstraction. Her work has been developing rapidly in the last several years, building complex momentum and self-assurance. These new paintings are the finest I've seen.

For many years nature has been a touchstone for Weatherford's work, whether depicting figurative tangles of underbrush and vine-encrusted arbors or simply vaporous atmosphere. (Earlier abstractions are in a current group show at the Pasadena Armory.) These she filters through the unavoidable artifice of modern life, using conscious painterly abstraction as a foil.

The suite of paintings at David Kordansky Gallery, all made this year, is collectively titled "Los Angeles." (In 2012 a fine series called "Bakersfield" was shown nearby at LAXART, while one titled "Manhattan" was shown in New York, where the California native lived from 1984 to 1999.) All are entirely abstract, yet an absorbing sense of place is as specific within each canvas rectangle as it is in the environment outside.

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Roughly 8 or 9 feet high and as much as 8 ½ feet wide, each painting is vertical. Vaporous fields of color are composed over a white ground using gestural strokes of Flashe, a vinyl-based acrylic paint that is simultaneously translucent and chromatically rich. Thin layers are applied to rather heavy linen, its chunky tooth providing sturdy contrast to the paint's soft, matte, opaque surface.

Rich color becomes as substantive as the physical support, even though it has no real heft. The painted forms, which recall the work of Color Field painters of the 1950s and '60s like Helen Frankenthaler, Sam Francis and Morris Louis, are almost always self-contained, rarely touching the canvas' edge. Dark and brooding or hot and evanescent, the shapes seem to billow, like rising smoke or gathering clouds.

In the most audacious move, Weatherford "draws" over the painted surfaces with one, two or three neon tubes. She lets the draped electrical cords essential to powering their glowing artificial light become an integral part of the composition. (The chords continue out of the picture, leading to a small transformer on the floor.) Eccentric and whimsical, the Post-Minimal sensuality of Keith Sonnier's late-1960s and '70s glass-and-neon installations enters the scene.

None of Weatherford's linear glass tubes are straight; instead, their slight ripples, meanderings or irregular curves emphasize the light's tactile, handmade qualities. She distributes the neon tubes sparingly. Simply bolted to the surface, they appear placed according to the internal rhythms of the paint. Their flash performs in concert with the Flashe.

Even though nothing literal is depicted, your mind wants to read these paintings as landscapes -- as bursts of lightning amid thunderclouds or beckoning commercial signage in competition with the dawn. Yet while Weatherford has titled many individual works with place-names — "the light in Lancaster," for instance, and "Oxnard Ventura" — you'd be hard-pressed to locate in them any particular identifying feature of those locales.

Early 20th century abstraction went the other way, expressing faith that colors, shapes and lines could be powerful reflections of an artist's inner life, rather than the outer world. On that, too, Weatherford's seductive paintings likewise pull the plug (pardon the pun). They suggest instead that great abstraction is in fact a field for projection of manifold human desires – hers and ours, in equal measure.