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Ambient Flower Reminiscence

Martin Blake

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Paint Shop Berlin

Berlin isn't by the sea.

Children growing up in a landlocked city will rarely be able to understand how deeply having water right outside their front door shapes young people. The same is probably true of the mountains.

When you stand before Martin Blake's paintings, you are standing by the water. Not on a specific shore, but at that edge where sight gives way to the surging motion of the water. Blue in every shade—from milky icy white to cobalt to nearly black indigo—permeates the works like the ebb and flow of the tides.

The elemental force of water is evident in Blake's works: the roaring spray that hurls itself into and over everything that stands in its way. And yet his paintings appear almost controlled. One can see the struggle over composition in them. Spontaneous arrangements and pasted-on photographs, which allude to personal references, are washed over or engulfed by the waves. Elsewhere, treetops rise from the currents. Dense, almost overcrowded zones border on vast, breathing expanses. Glossy, poured sections meet dry, impasto-like traces; sharply defined edges meet soft spray mist. The eye finds no firm footing. It is carried along.

There are no certainties, except that the water seeks its own path. Nevertheless, Blake succeeds in countering the breaking, pulling, and flowing with places that assert themselves within the waves like artifacts of our culture.

The ocean becomes a metaphor for something greater than the individual self: a boundless space where interior and exterior, landscape and memory, figure and color merge into one another. It becomes a stream of consciousness.

Growing up in California inevitably means coming into contact with skateboarding and surfing. Perhaps it is this bodily knowledge that is also embedded in the paintings: reading a line, waiting for the right moment, maintaining balance on a moving surface.

The connection between origin and painting is most evident in the surfboard that Blake built by hand, painted, and coated with epoxy resin. Erected in the room, the board becomes a stele, almost an icon or an altarpiece: an object that once served to glide across the water. Water has always been a symbol of baptism and purification, of flood and new beginnings. Paddling out at dawn has something of a ritual about it; waiting for the wave has something of a prayer. Anyone who surfs knows that the sea cannot be controlled and that the moment of joy arises precisely from this acceptance.

The ocean becomes a metaphor for something greater than itself.

When you look at the board, you no longer think of it as a piece of sports equipment. Its outline—narrow at the ends and wide toward the center—is that of a leaf. The shape of a surfboard isn't invented; it's taken from the water, sanded down until nothing offers resistance anymore. In the same way, a leaf finds its shape: by yielding to wind, rain, and light. Both are responses to a current.

The wave does not belong to the sea alone. It returns in the edge of a petal, in the veins of a leaf, in the way a rose unfolds layer by layer from its center. Blake's rose trees, whose crowns rise like whirlpools above the dark horizon, demonstrate this. What grows follows the same movement as what flows. And neither can be forced. A plant takes what it needs and grows where there is light. Those who tend to it can only create the conditions and then step back. It is the same in painting. The paint runs, pools, breaks up, and dries—perhaps differently than the hand intended. Blake intervenes, defines edges, resists—but he also knows when to stop. Perhaps therein lies the subtlest gesture of these works: allowing the painting to have what it desires.