



J. M. W. Turner

Born in Mexico, educated in the United States and abroad, Elena Osterwalder has assimilated the facets of Western culture that have ultimately formed the innermost core of her artistic being. For all of her privileged experience in the world, she is stained, philosophically speaking, with an Hispanic aesthetic that has engaged that experience in forceful dialectic.

Her paintings of a decade ago were distinguished by amorphous shapes reminiscent of certain Surrealists—Matta comes to mind. Yet Osterwalder differed from most of them in her pictorial structure as well as her motivation. The Surrealists' use of dream imagery, free association, automatism, their preoccupation with the Fantastic in general, helped legitimize the subconscious as an importuning presence. The Surrealists' aberrant depictions, however, remained largely dependent on traditional landscape and still-life conventions, whereas Osterwalder eschewed (and still does) horizon lines or perspectival ruses. She preferred, in this early work, to set her imagery afloat in an indeterminate space. In more subtle ways, the impress of Surrealism on Osterwalder's development persists. As it passed through Mexican culture, Surrealism quickened Catholicism's narrative strain, illuminating or expanding the locus of divinity to include the laity itself:

Artist Frida Kahlo boldly exposed her own tormented and ecstatic states in her paintings; she made use of Catholicism's myths and symbols to stress the integrity and vulnerability of spirit and flesh but maintained her allegiance to Mexico's Realist tradition. Osterwalder, on the other hand, understood that Surrealism's directives were broad enough and vague enough to accommodate her intuitive search for other (invisible) realities via abstract means. Not that she consciously sought such guidance. Long before Osterwalder was born, the tenets of Surrealism were well assimilated into Mexican culture, a culture historically attuned to the mystical aspects of existence. In other cultures, too, Surrealism's impact had already metastasized, aiding what seemed inevitable: the (artistic) dismantling of the visible world. The advent of Abstract Expressionism, some years later, simply hastened it! Even though Abstract Expressionism's hegemony had waned, weakened by an onslaught of movements and countermovements by the time Osterwalder had begun painting, she felt a kinship with it. For one thing, Abstract Expressionism shared with



Surrealism the view that the investigation of the invisible world, with all of its flux, its ambiguities and lack of center, is the contemporary artist's ultimate task. The stylistic cleavages that characterized the two movements were similar also: Surrealism's attachment to the history of Realism and its concomitant invention of elemental forms were matched by Abstract Expressionism's own historical attachment to the human figure as subject, gestural as it was, and the "abstract" voyages of Field painters such as Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock (his later works). Osterwalder's attraction to Field painting<sup>1</sup> was understandable, given its basic premise that a painting's surface, as a nonhierarchical continuum, carried with it a semantic potential. The English art critic, Lawrence Alloway, regarded this semantic potential in a moral light, in his proposal that Field painting's features could serve as a "model of tolerance"<sup>2</sup>. Seen through the lens of Hispanic culture, however, that semantic potential could only mean one thing for Osterwalder: the continuum of human relations as exemplified by the concept of family - not just those humans who happen to be gathered under one roof or bear a common name, but Family in the most inclusive, overarching sense: the community of the dead as well as the living, the holy as well as the secular; these are celebrated, willy-nilly, in constant ceremony within Hispanic culture. For Osterwalder, this cultural legacy of interconnectedness found ready translation in the Field painting idiom.

From 1977 to 1981, Osterwalder produced a number of paintings that were composed of small, individual strokes of paint, applied with apparent concentration and patience. The overall effect was that of a gently undulating web or tapestry, shimmering with subdued, jewel-like hues. The weaving technique, in which visible and invisible strands comprise a coherent whole, can serve as a personal metaphor for Osterwalder's cultural dilemmas. Neither exile nor ex-patriot she darted, chameleon-like, between the United States and Mexico, drawn by obligations to her family and later, business demands. Denied the exile's "luxury" of prolonged reflection, essential to fixing an ideal image of one's lost homeland and thence to a desired closure, Osterwalder was obliged to suffer the open wound of her condition or to elide these cultural dichotomies as best she could. She chose the latter course, weaving them together as if she, herself, was the shuttle to which the variegated strands of the two cultures were attached.



Osterwalder's paintings, "passed" for American, that is, they seemed to possess at first glance, the appealing surfaces so admired by Greenbergian formalists. But Osterwalder digressed: sometimes a

tropical scent issued from her work—a color too vivid for El Norte, a line too sensuous—sprung, perhaps from the strains of a Tango or the tendrils of some exotic flower. Her private interjections and subterfuges were intended to suggest to her audience other orders of experience besides the optical. If they were too subtle for some, Osterwalder's Spanish titles<sup>3</sup> provided clues to the work's inner constitution. The titles tinged her art, at least for some, with an intriguing “foreignness”. For others, the titles acted as hospitable gestures - plausible and inviting. In any case, Osterwalder's paintings were neither easy or familiar nor radically unreadable. They required a “struggle for attunement”, to use Donald Kuspit's phrase<sup>4</sup>, not only in the hour of their making, but in the hour of their apprehension by others. From the standpoint of the audience, whatever their cultural bias, that “struggle for attunement” recapitulates, if only in oblique or fragmentary form, the artist's attempt to take the measure of



her double-rootedness. This struggle dislodges the half-forgotten ruins of conflict, the moraines of despair and disappointment. As these “disturbances” are illuminated, i.e., brought into consciousness, art offers momentary solace via the symbolic array of possibilities inherent in it. Both artist and audience are drawn to the space of mediation between the self and the world that art proposes—the artist, not just in the act of creation, but as she, in turn, is audience to the works of other artists. Osterwalder's attraction to the painting of the Abstract Expressionists is understandable, even fated, in light of her Hispanic roots. Their search for a center, for self-realization, was not unlike her own, even if their approaches differed. They looked outward and backward to a heroic past<sup>5</sup> to shore up the inadequate present whereas Osterwalder seemed more inner-directed and comparatively modest in her reach. Like most artists, she drew on the daily internalization of experience in all of its chaotic manifestations, but as it played itself out in her art, certain constellations emerged with a constancy that signaled their import to her art's configuration. As suggested earlier, these evolved from the impulses of Catholic humanism, including its mystical component and the dynamics of familial intercourse in its broadest sense.

It may be pertinent here to remark on some aspects of Osterwalder's biography that may have further bearing on her art: groomed as a child to be part of the intelligentsia, (she is a voracious reader and speaks several languages fluently), Osterwalder saw no conflict in marrying at a suitably young age and bearing two daughters. Her husband, an enterprising businessman in his own right, is supportive of Osterwalder's calling. Osterwalder is said to be both strong-willed and tender in her matriarchal role. While she worked assiduously at her art even before her marriage, and continued to do so despite the demands on her time that motherhood entailed, her art flourished as the daughters matured and finally left home. This new freedom was mirrored in Osterwalder's solo exhibition of 1991<sup>6</sup>. Her paintings showed signs of a deliberate effort to "disrupt what (she) could do with ease"<sup>7</sup>. Her painting formats were noticeably larger and it was evident that small brushes, painstakingly mixed colors, even titles<sup>8</sup> were a thing of the past. Paint, itself, assumed a new dominance, its innate vitality enhanced by Osterwalder's animated brushwork and use of a more intense palette. The hint of any field/ground relationship, such as it was, receded, taking with it the potential for any interaction between forces or symbolic entities that such a relationship implies. By giving over those customary habits of painting to the irrational trajectories of spontaneous gesture, Osterwalder accelerated her descent to the primordial depths.

The works in the present exhibition evince a greater acceleration of Osterwalder's will to break through the encrustations of culturally-imposed identities that might impede her progress toward self-integration. Her effort of will showed itself overtly in the revised spatial plasticity of her works and the techniques used to achieve it. The paintings are composed in ordered, frontally presented layers, each layer covering the entire canvas. The topmost "skin" is pocked with depressions and apertures that expose some of the layers beneath. Technically, this was accomplished by separating each layer of paint with certain varnishes. The chemical stresses caused by the drying process of the paint and varnish produced a "naturally" degraded surface.

A sense of urgency to express the inward nature of her quest led Osterwalder to apply the paint directly from the tube on to the canvas, dispensing with the intermediary step of mixing colors together on the palette. Instead of brushes, she used wide metal spatulas that produced ridges—colloids—in the material body of the paint.

Regardless of the array of techniques that she has used throughout her plateaus of progression in recent years, Osterwalder has always considered herself to be a "conduit through which her psychic energies flowed and melded with paint's substantiality"<sup>9</sup>. The mystic union of paint with the actual somatic and psychological moments of the artist's lived experience, in short, the "divine"<sup>10</sup> act of painting, became the means by which Osterwalder was able to maintain her spiritual equilibrium in an environment (the United States) essentially hostile to such needs. For her, that act begins, not with

the quickened pulse of paint as it touches the surface of the canvas, but with the humble task of preparing the surface of the stretched canvas, with the physical effort of lifting it, moving it—getting to know its heft, dimension and indwelling “presence”. In Osterwalder’s view, each canvas differs in its potential to receive and absorb the energies thrust at it. The artist, therefore, should prepare early on, for the exchange to come.

Moreso than the works that preceded it, the paintings that comprise this exhibition are statements of intense sublimation. The great swaths of paint that distinguish them are wrought with a fierce energy, so swift and intuitively driven as to pulverize any image that might dare to stray into its path. Only in a few cases (the smaller works on canvas and paper) is that energy “tamed” sufficiently to enable the most cursory of images to emerge. One of these smaller works<sup>11</sup> alternately displays and withholds an “object” in its sooty field: a box? a book? or the sign of a thing not fully brought into consciousness? We savour it for its half-light that brings us physically closer to it, compels as to feel our way into it. For all the formal differences that exist between the smaller works and their larger companions, they collectively engender the belief that they are redolent of Proust’s lilacs, Swiss fields, the music of Pablo Casals and Charles Ives, the breath of Mark Twain and Octavio Paz — and in that engendering, they manifest our density of being in all of its poetic refraction.



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1. Field painting, appropriately dubbed “artificial infinity,” was characterized by the muting of field and ground and the implied continuation of the work beyond the confines of the painting.
2. Lawrence Alloway. “Field Notes: An Interview,” Abstract Expressionism, the Critical Developments. Harry N. Abrams, Inc., N.Y. in association with the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y., 1987, Pg. 128.
3. Titles such as “Tierra Colorada, Bugambilias, and Guadalupana.”
4. Donald Kuspit. The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist. N.Y. Cambridge University Press, 1993, pg. 84.
5. For the Abstract Expressionists, literary and mythological references abounded as artists sought to find, in Marcelin Pleynet’s words, “empirical justification outside...of painting.” Pleynet names Adolph Gottlieb’s Persephone (1942), Barnett Newman’s Slaying of Osiris (1944), his Song of Orpeus (1944-45), Jackson Pollock’s Guardians of the Secret (1943) among many examples in his essay “For an Approach to Abstract Expressionism,” Abstract Expressionism: the Critical Developments, pg. 43.
6. Nicolae Galerie, Columbus, Ohio.
7. Francis Bacon, quoted in “Francis Bacon at 75”, Connoisseur Magazine, September 1984.
8. Osterwalder used Roman numerals instead of titles to mark the chronological progression of these works.
9. Conversation with the artist in her studio, August 11, 1993.
10. “...the divine...refers to what one considers the most primal, enveloping and real...,” Bowman L. Clarke in his essay-review on William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902), included in Christian Spirituality, ed. Frank N. Magill and Ian P. McGeal, Harper and Row, N.Y., 1988, pg. 461.
11. Osterwalder used Arabic numbers instead of Roman numerals or titles previously used to indicate the sequence of painting’s completion. The painting to which I am referring here is coded: CAN-00015/93.

*I dedicate this exhibition to the five women who meant most in my life:  
my mother, tia Grete, tia Hanny, tia Margarita, and tia Elizabeth.  
Elena Osterwalder*

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