

BELOW THE SURFACE

For Raphaele Goethals, beauty is both a means and an end.

BY MOKHA LAGET

RAPHAELLE GOETHALS

Represented by Linda Durham Contemporary Art
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Known for her signature layered wax and pigment abstractions, painter Raphaele Goethals is fast becoming one of Santa Fe's most promising artists. Sidestepping a mainstream tendency to shy away from the beautiful, Goethals' densely worked surfaces blend Renaissance skyscapes with demotic gestures characteristic of a sweeping *elan vital*. This spring will mark her first solo museum show—with catalogue—at Iowa's Sioux City Art Center, followed by her third exhibition at Linda Durham Contemporary Art, scheduled to coincide with the biennial at SITE Santa Fe.

You are originally from Belgium, but you lived in France and have been in the US for the last two decades. How has your European background affected your work?

Well, very early on I saw so much beauty and history, it was paralyzing; that's why I came to the US, in part. In Belgium, there was Duchamp, and very cool, cerebral art with an ironic edge, so maybe that was a reaction—I felt I didn't fit. Now I feel it's given me a certain sensibility and a broad awareness that is a real plus. That's why I called this new series *Blurred Boundaries*.

Talk about how you came to encaustic painting.

Ten years ago I was getting to a dead end as a painter. Intellectually I had a problem with it. I had to justify an area of research that made sense to me, and I couldn't do it with oil. Then I stumbled on wax and it brought me back to a solid base as a painter. There's a constant flow in each layer. It's pretty time-consuming, mantrap-type work—very process-oriented. The material is so alive, so skin-like, so luscious.

And some of your paintings do have a skin-like feel, especially the lighter ones, with this color of blood serum, and these elements of what you might find on a microscopic slide. What is really there?

I'm interested in two areas: the body—general cellular patterns, but not exact ones—and language, or pre-language. The signs that start to appear are not specific signifiers, but they're related. I think that we have, in our cellular makeup, an understanding of that pre-language. In art that is what is perceived.

Your newer pieces seem to be going more toward landscape painting.

Yes, I can call them that, but I'm flirting with disaster. I got interested in images of



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"The very first obligation is to the art itself," says Goethals (above).
Left: 'Exile,' 78' x 69'.



art history again, all the things we grew up with. Then I did a tiny piece that haunted me for a long time and became the inspiration for that series—it was so compact, so romantic.

Like a small square out of a Turner painting.
Exactly. That's what it made me think of, so

I started playing with that idea.

Do you feel any connection to the art that's going on now, in spite of the great disparity?

Well there's just so much going on, but people like Cornelia Parker... I love her work, that kind of thinking. More and more of us are from different backgrounds and influences. That's what makes it so exciting. I like artists who work with different materials, like Wolfgang Lamb, Beuys. I also like Brice Marden, especially now.

With everything that has transpired in the evolution of art—the irony, the cynicism, the truth, the beauty—where do you think the artist stands today?

For me, you function a little like a sponge. The artist absorbs everything the culture has to offer. I think artists are much more receptive and perceive things that may not be verbalized quite yet, and that percolates through the work. I use the word "rhizome;" it comes from Deleuze, but it's a beautiful image: Things that branch out like a subterranean weaving.

Do you think the artist has a moral obligation or responsibility?

Well, the very first obligation is to the art itself. You have to follow your true path, regardless of influences, markets, trends. I gave up on the idea that art can change the world, unfortunately. I do believe, however, in the emanation, or the function, of the transcendental quality and the beauty. You can focus on angst and anger and unfairness and social issues, and regardless of that, you come up with work that is uplifting.

But if the work has a transcendental quality with the power to elevate, wouldn't you say that's a pretty big role?

Yes, of course. You know, you put your heart and soul and mind in the work, hoping that just a glimpse of it will come through. In the end, it has to come from the heart and go to the heart.