

APHAELLE GOETHALS

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Some of Raphaele Goethals' paintings reminded me of black ice

on a pond in winter. The ice isn't really black but has formed so quickly as to be a nearly transparent window against the darkness of the water's depths. If one looks through black ice near the edges of a pond, one can see the sandy bottom, rocks, or water plants waving eerily in the frigid water. Within a pond in winter there can be all kinds of life trapped under a frozen lens.

Goethals' encaustic-and-oil paintings contain the colors of winter water and winter landscapes—blacks, browns, faded yellows and ochres, grays and muted greens, and sometimes startling splashes of blood red. Her work possesses the seer spectral light of dwindling November days and the sometimes stark presentation of a rock protruding snow. On closer examination however, a solid granite surface reveals an intricate filigree of lines, a complex plane geometry, and a subtle range of colors no matter how subdued.

Goethals' paintings possess some of the same paradoxical reality of winter landscapes that initially appear diminished and forlorn until certain details unveil themselves to the probing gaze. Surfaces in her work that appeared at first opaque become a series of translucent layers built up from wax, pigments, and floating calligraphic lines. The surface reality is not all that it seems. The opaque gives way to chromatic variations and the teeming, microscopic life of cells, nuclei, and double-helix phenomena. Another metaphor comes to mind looking at this work: Goethals' paintings are also like skin.

Each painting is a membrane, then, allowing light to pass through, bounce off deeper layers of information, get trapped within these layers, or move on to further depths. The viewer has to position her or himself close to the work, however, to perceive the "life in the pond" or the chromosomes sashaying around one another underneath a permeable membrane. There is something else in Goethals' work—calligraphic lines that languidly form a phrase or a clause whose meaning is not a fixed reality but is revealed anew each time it is perceived in the eye of the beholder.

Goethals' abstract paintings convey a sculptural presence, and each piece consistently suggests a blurring of boundaries. It is significant that one of her works is titled *Blurred Boundaries* because Goethals infers throughout her exhibit that the inspiration for her "sign languages" come from many sources: the experience of landscape, abstract expressionism, biology, histology, and, to borrow a phrase from the late semiotician Roland Barthes, "the pleasures of the text."

DIANE ARMITAGE



Raphaele Goethals, *She didn't know it was the last time*, encaustic and oil on wood, 48 x 72", 1995