

From *Nature Remains: Paintings by Mary Kay*, 2003

By Saralyn Reece Hardy, Salina Art Center Director

How does death accompany life in these paintings? Anger and fear reside in these images, and all that raw feeling that comes from love. The bloodlines of art and the abandoned relics of everyday life shape each page – fixing the remains of birth and destruction, presence and absence with equal force. These paintings of objects from nature record the risk, rage, joy and tenderness that pulse through the body when the mind's eye sees mortality in beauty. Beauty is revealed in experiences embedded in leaf and wing and released by an artist with sight in her brush.

Mary Kay can paint the smallest feather, while daring to place it against the broadest brushstroke. In journal pages made of time, place, paint, and feeling, continuity of style irresistibly cedes to subject, feeling, and gesture. Recovered objects, first found in nature and collected as specimens, compose this visual diary. Kay sees, engages and converses with the world through painting. Her pages are thick with the passion and reverie discovered in nature and expressed through art. Viewers connect with beauty through interacting with these works in their languages of color, mark, gesture, and composition. As a body of work, these paintings challenge a progressive model of art history where movements and expressive styles are exhausted and abandoned. These 173 paintings also disrupt attitudes about artists working in a single mode of representation. Many ways of seeing and making compel these works.

Kay says she searches for the right painted ground, the one that stirs and releases the object she will place within it. Moths, bees, bones, feathers, and shells float above or sink into grounds, seas, skies, and airs of color, movement, and texture. Improvisational backgrounds, sometimes layers and layers of color, create a pedestal or foil for the specimens that stand, open, and lie upon them. Some of these paintings expose quiet spaces of suspended time, while others shift between subject and object, place and time, memory and elusive moment. Reclamation of the world and expression of the self vie for place.

These energetic paintings represent conversations and contestations among beauty, truth and love. Forever bound together, those ancient ideas haunt our dreams and filter every perception. As cultural beings, we desire those conversations beyond all else. As creatures, we fix our beliefs in the world. We seek recognition, symbols, the company of what is imagined and what we call real. We need to know how attachment, insight, and perception make a difference. Kay shows us how this is possible.

While her marks are intensely personal, Mary Kay quietly converses with other artists: with Chaim Soutine for the presence of sensation and event in painting that will not leave the viewer to a single way of looking, and with Joan Mitchell for the mixing of color and movement in deep commitment to beauty and nature. Kay shares Philip Guston's resistance to endings and finality, while identity and the demands of painting are chosen over style. This work also resonates with that of Terry Winters in the use of organic forms as metaphors for artistic process. Still, all is original with each touch and gesture found and felt as new, with each specimen granted its own ground and recollected on its own terms.