

FULVIO TESTA

NOWHERE | NOW HERE

Fulvio Testa's intimate works, usually on paper, such as those in this exhibition, are paradoxically specific and resonant but completely independent of precise reference. They encapsulate his perceptions of the world around him in non-literal ways, at the same time that they embody his continual experimentation with color, touch, and structure.

Testa's recent watercolors, produced in 2020 and 2021, during a period of isolation at his home in rural Northern Italy, necessitated by the pandemic, and also in New York, are in some ways like a visual diary. The nuanced variations in color, tone, and rhythm of these small, intense paintings, seem like distillations of changes in weather, time of day, and seasons. They result, in part, from the artist's heightened awareness of the environment during a time of separation from other stimuli and from his reflecting on that situation. Yet these deceptively modest paintings are unequivocally abstract, inflected by Testa's deep awareness of the art of the past and recent past. However much they are informed by his acute responses to place and experience. They are potent evocations, not replicas or records of things seen. They pulse between near-minimalist purity and fleeting allusion.

When we accord these deceptively modest works the attention they demand, we toggle between reading them in solely formal terms and succumbing to their alluring overtones of landscape imagery. From a close vantage point, we are captured by the variations in the visual weight of the brushstrokes with which they are constructed, by the differences in the density and transparency of touch, and by the subtleties of tone and color. We are intensely aware of the hand that moved the brush across the sheet, steadily and with great control, now producing a broad, transparent band, now a narrow, more opaque one. Edges matter. We become absorbed in the relationships of the closely related bands of color: roses and lavenders that turn into unnamable browns and greys; infinite permutations of dull greens and off-blacks; a wealth of succulent earth tones; and more.

Yet no matter how much we concentrate on the formal aspects of these repetitive, economical compositions, at a certain point, we also succumb to their suggestions of landscape. It becomes impossible to resist reading the broad washy expanse in the upper part of the sheet as sky or identifying the overlapping bands below as fields and trees. Small material changes become immensely important to interpretation. Solid, slightly irregular bands become distant mountains and then return to being sweeps of fragile hues. A pool of wet

color in the upper zone suggests alterations in sky and weather momentarily, and then subsides into being paint once again. Perhaps because we are conditioned to associate horizontality with landscape, Testa's vertical paintings seem, at first acquaintance, more confrontational, less associative, perhaps more declaratively abstract, but the horizontal watercolors also insist on being viewed as paintings about *painting* as much as they are about memories of the outdoors.

Seeing a group of Testa's recent watercolors is eye-testing. We must look hard to savor the individuality of each work, as we become attuned to small shifts in the placement of "horizons," small alterations in the rhythm, density, and chromatic relationships of the bands, and changes in the implied weather. It's like listening to poetry being recited in a whisper. We have to listen closely. Ultimately, it is these paintings' uncanny double reading that makes them so memorable, their ability to conjure up places that seem at once familiar and strange, and to announce themselves as rhythmic, richly orchestrated strokes of color across a sheet. Confronted by Testa's watercolors, I always think of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* – utterly convincing descriptions of places that do not exist, written in words that make us ponder the richness of language almost independent of meaning.

Karen Wilkin

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