

PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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GALE ANTOKAL

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by Suvan Geer

What is the color of memory? Not the inherent colors of specific memories, but the insubstantial yet potent presence of memory itself. In Gale Antokal's latest chalk and powder drawings for her exhibit "We Are So Lightly Here," memory is a pale grey, more mist than solid thing. Softly that grey mist seems to cloak or coalesce around forms in this series of gentle images, filling each with a tender sense of longing.

It can be felt in "Place 5," in the patterned, grey smudges of irregular shapes that visually resolve into jagged footsteps in what looks like a thick blanket of white snow. They form a fresh set of footprints stretching before us, beckoning that we follow. Yet the clarity that came with deciphering their abstract shapes gets lost quickly in a confusing tangle that could signify a separation or meeting happening not far in the distance. Then you notice alongside this ambiguous marker of a journey another paler set of footprints nearly buried by the last snowfall. Both sets of smudged prints lead away, but neither offers assurance. They whisper to us about fate and others who have come this way and gone. You will find yourself wishing you knew the path ahead of us.

Antokal revisits that notion of an unknown journey in several other drawings that show mainly the legs of travelers, and their stiff old fashioned suitcases or bulging bags, all busily moving towards or away from us. Each tightly cropped image is a vaguely abstract cluster of dark and light grey shapes that seem randomly caught in movement across the paper. These are not individuals but travelers, and the artist pointedly gives us no clue where they are bound to or from. Their very transitory nature is pushed further because they are defined as simple dark and light shapes, with softly blurred edges created not by their motion, but by the grey mist the artist draws with.

That grey mist, it should be noted, is an almost alchemical mix of pastel chalk, graphite, white flour and grey ash that the artist applies to the drawings with her fingers. Just as Ed Rusha drew with gunpowder not only for its subtle color but also for its more latent psychological punch, Antokal exploits the drama and symbolism of her two non-conventional drawing materials. Flour brings with it associations of bread, hearth, food and all that keeps body and soul together. Ash is the other end of the spectrum—endings and death, sacrifice and letting go. Knowing these powders were used to draw the images of children sledding into a white mist, or a lone ice skater on a lake of pale ice striding away toward a distant island adds a haunting reminder of mortality. But it also gives a light texture to the surface, different from the chalk and graphite, a little something tangible for the eye to cling to as it assimilates these images of transition and passing.

It is when Antokal turns her grey mist toward the natural world that the scope and power behind her notion of transition and passing can be felt most fully. "DYM" is a large (50 x 44 inches) drawing of a pillar of billowing grey smoke or a dense steam cloud suspended in mid-roll above dark rooftops that are barely visible. It is suggestive of the charcoal on mylar cloudscapes of Hilary Brace, but this is not Brace's poetry of light that is offered up as meditation. Rather Antokal calls upon the power of an amorphous form that seems on the verge of disappearing into the thickness of its surrounding atmosphere.

"Procession 4" is a striking image of white milk spilling in a cascade down a dark flight of four steps that constitutes a metaphor of loss. The scene's beauty is arresting. There is that felt power again, similarly coupled to a tenuousness of shape and body, in the white mountaintops the artist shapes so lightly in "Place 1" and "Place 2." Snow covered ridges steadily vanish under the invisible pressure of wind that forever carves off their sharp edges or veils peaks with a dust cloud of snow. What we see signals change, erosion and transition. The mountain's majesty, caught in a timeless cycle of disappearance makes us yearn not for the stone's permanence, but for our own.