



Frances Barth: *L. Rides West*, 1993, acrylic on canvas, 64 by 66 inches; at E.M. Donahue.

Frances Barth at E.M. Donahue

Being accustomed to the flatlands of eastern Long Island, I am always amazed when I go to the mountains of upstate New York or New England in the fall. It's not just that the foliage is splashier but that, thanks to the tipped-up plane of the landscape, there's so *much* of it. Frances Barth's new landscape-derived paintings seem to be after a similar effect, upping the visual ante, showing the viewer more, but not in a way that feels forced or unnatural. Barth does not paint traditional landscapes; rather she uses the perspectival, historical and symbolic complexities that landscape painting offers as a counterpoint to a carefully considered modernist flatness and planarity.

In these paintings Barth seems to be as much concerned with the method of depiction as she is with the subject being depicted. Rocks and waves, mountains and sky occur in almost all of them. Sometimes an image will appear in a highly stylized, almost hidden manner, like the blue lava flow in *Vol. P.* or the waves in *W. Break*; at other times it will be presented straightforwardly, like the waterfall and swirling pool in *L. Rides West* or the curling stream in *Aq Flow*. Stone and water are emblematic of the interplay between the static and the fluid, and even though changeability seems to win out for Barth, constancy feels like a necessary condition—the unmoving against which movement is seen.

There is a classical Japanese air to these paintings, not only in the subject matter, the

somewhat awkwardly canted perspective and the careful balance between the planar and the linear, but also in the color. It's muted and dusty, but with a tang. Celadons, sea greens, mustards, beiges, powdery purples and iridescent blues knit the paintings together, combining subtlety and assertiveness.

Barth applies her colors thinly, giving the paintings the intimate look of drawings. This quality is heightened by the use of references to diagrams and maps. In *Tasia*, a pointy version of a green and watery planet is poised, toplike, on a table. It sits there, casting a shadow, surrounded by abstracted renditions of rocks and rivers, under what looks like a giant white oculus. It's all quite mysterious. Is it a landscape, an old map, a quirky cosmogony? It has, as do all the paintings, a symbolic flavor, an urgency, and yet it is hard to say what the story is or why exactly it seems to matter so much.

Barth holds back. Paintings like these could easily be precious if they were too readable, too logical or too "well done." Barth keeps things spatially and narratively ambiguous, and cultivates a nicely clumsy, cartoonlike line. The surface too, scrubbed and uneven in places, avoids prettiness. Her work is a mix of the referential and the abstract, the beautiful and the gauche, the busy and the simple. These are intelligent and complex paintings.

—Richard Kalina