



Laurie Olinder

Paper Falls and Other Natural Wonders

By Lawrence Weschler

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Laurie Olinder, the painter, photographer and critically acclaimed projection designer (veteran of countless collaborations with such cutting edge production companies as New York City's Ridge Theater), is sitting in her first-floor lower east side studio, gazing upon a row of long, tall, narrow scrolls covered over in matrices of only-seemingly monotone blue marks, Paper Falls as she calls them, dazzlingly various in their deceptive equivalence, lined up hanging along the far wall, trying to account for how they possibly could have come to her to begin with.

“I was in a place some years back,” she recalls, “where I was feeling a little unmoored, not really knowing what to do next, and wiling away the hours, it hit me that the thing I really love to do is just to dip my brush in something liquid and make a nice clean little freeform square, and then next to that another one. And at first, almost unthinkingly, I would lay in rows of such squarish marks across eight inch squares of paper—in a blueish indigo shellac-based ink, playing with subtly different shapes and sizes of mark across varying densities of application. As I say, no plan at first, except that they seemed to want to go longer, so I began seeking out more substantial scroll-like sheets, eventually settling on these luscious bands of paper, fashioned out of used T-shirts of all things, by a company up in Canada.



Paper Falls (detail), 2015, indigo ink on paper

“I’d spread the empty sheet across a long tabletop, and I’d start in the upper left hand corner and lay in a horizontal row of variously applied marks across the narrow top of the scroll, and then try to repeat that row with another directly below that, and then another—moving around the table as I worked—trying to keep the presently emerging long vertical files more or less straight and even, though of course, working freeform like that, all sorts of wobbles began to emerge, and far from avoiding such torques and creases and idiosyncrasies, I began to glory in them: they began to seem like the whole point. Hours would pass in almost meditative absorption—dab, dab, another dab—again, no particular plan in mind, though by about the three quarters point



Photograph by Elizabeth Felicella

the distinct character of each fresh scroll would begin to emerge.” Pointillist? “Yes, but the opposite of Seurat, who painstakingly applied his dots toward a particular preconceived effect, whereas with these, they’d only reveal the form toward which they were tending at the very end: a fresh surprise. I’d let the scroll dry and then hang it, tacked to the wall at the top, just allowing it to curl out slightly toward the bottom, and yeah, they reminded me of waterfalls. Hence the name of the series.”

Like waterfalls of splish-splashing blueish light, sluicing down the wall. Or, alternatively, like rows of stained glass windows, twinkling, mysteriously backlit. Squint your eyes and they’d morph into aerial mappings of long narrow cityscapes (in fact, perhaps not surprisingly, of Manhattan island itself), or squint them yet again and they’d seem instead like layers of tall skyscrapers seen from below at street level, ranged one behind the next, soaring high into the sky. Or maybe, rather, like player piano rolls unfurling across time (there was at any rate something marvelously musical about the Joplinesque configurations). Or for that matter, at other moments, they’d seem to evince some delirious semaphore code, blinking out a secret message.



Natural Wonders, 2015, walnut and pokeberry ink on paper

The point is—dab, dab, dab—they'd lend themselves to mindless mind-ful daydreaming in the mind of their viewer, every bit as languorously and lusciously as they initially had across the practice of their creator. Free play.

“As for those others over there,” Olinder now shifted our gaze to a quilt-like array of multi-colored squares ranged on the perpendicular wall to our left, “those are more recent. I wanted to try out different media—not just indigo ink—I began schmushing” (a technical term that, and quite exact) “all sorts of fruit and nuts—black cherry, pokeberry,



Untitled, 2015,
pokeberry ink on paper

Untitled, 2015,
walnut ink on paper

walnut oil—and even the used grounds of my morning coffee, to see what effects they might yield and what imagery they might suggest. And then I'd line the results up like that, to see how the images played off against one another."

And the result has indeed been a whole new fresh delirium: asteroids one moment, amoeba the next, swirling galaxies and petri efflorescences. Sand dollars and starfish, spores and puffballs, split grapefruit and splayed seaweed. A biomorphic profusion. Conch shells and jellyfish. Rhododendrons and rodolaria. Reminiscent at moments of the Art Forms in Nature first plumbed by that splendidly daft nineteenth century master Ernst Haeckel.



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“Yes, Haeckel!” confirms Olinder, digging out her well thumbed copy of the master’s compendium from under a pile of source books and papers. “I love the way he was trying to be super-accurate but a lot of it ends up being less exactly so—he so got into the imagination of nature that he began to make stuff up. And I can relate to that. I am doodling at the outset, but doodling with the intent to arrive at form. I love how natural forms relate to textiles and other such human patternings, not surprisingly, since at moments we ourselves are nothing other than nature replicating herself.”

Untitled, 2015,
walnut ink on paper

