

# NANCY GENN: THE POETICS OF PLACE

BY DEWITT CHENG

*My style of painting is deeply personal, navigating between geometric abstraction, landscape and architectural motifs. Atmosphere, or, rather, a sense of place emerges.*—  
Nancy Genn

In 1925, George Grosz wrote—along with the writer Wieland Herzfelde and his brother, the political artist, John Heartfield (whose loathing of Prussian militarism made him anglicize his name)—an article entitled “Art is in Danger!” In it, the three Dadaists argue for the inclusion in art of political content—replacing the crowd-pleasing beauty or sentiment of mediocre artists such as the young Lieutenant Hitler, who subscribed to the standards of the day but was simply too unskilled (and touchy) to be admitted to art school. A century later, the polarities have reversed: most art school graduates, having imbibed the gospel of conceptualism, disparage craftsmanship and beauty—which Duchamp scorned as merely “retinal”—in favor of a rather tedious, involved multimedia, multidisciplinary practice based on contemporary continental philosophy, demonstrating that civilization is a lie, and that self-expression is irredeemably corrupted by social elites. Today we have the flip side of Weimar Republic sentimentality: an intellectual’s form of politically correct nihilism that happens to be curiously fashionable among the overcapitalized (and, I would say, under-cultured) winners of global economy. The convergence of youth culture and an investment mentality have gradually all but emptied the art world of aesthetic self-expression and human content.

The six-decade career of Bay Area painter, sculptor and printmaker Nancy Genn serves as an implicit rebuke to such intellectual and aesthetic dishonesty. A artist of omnivorous curiosity and daunting self-discipline, Genn has followed her creative inclinations in a number of directions, from large paintings combining Abstract Expressionism with Asian calligraphy (influenced by the Seattle mystic, Mark Tobey, as well as her travels in Asia and the Middle East); ceramic and lost-wax bronze sculpture first made at the University of California, Berkeley, in the Peter Voulkos era; lyrical abstractions in

handmade paper that paradoxically assert their rag-paper-pulp materiality, with textured surfaces and feathery deckled edges, while simultaneously evoking light, place and even a spiritual dimension; and mixed-media collages that layer painting and printmaking techniques seamlessly.

Genn's work has been recognized and exhibited since the mid-1950s, to critical acclaim. In 1999, Katherine B. Crum of Mills College wrote, in her notes to a small retrospective, "The Art of Nancy Genn": "What is so striking about her work ... is not her [obvious] technical proficiency [which, in papermaking, led to the so-called Genn Method of layering], but the way her media serve a consistent and personal vision. Regardless of the antiquity of her media [or I would add, modernity], they are used solely for modernist purposes, for refining and sharpening the artist's experience of her world, and by extension, ours." She continues: "The varied and fragmentary elements of the collages ... appear to record the passage of time. There are many seeming accidents and breaks, surfaces that seem to have been abraded or washed, beautifully stained or weathered. Bits of writing, maps or other marking denoting a place or a human presence appears as illegible fragments.... Ultimately, Genn's works are emblematic of a human lifespan consumed, yet leaving traces that are valuable to contemplate even when they cannot be deciphered." In 2004, Alan G. Artner of *The Chicago Tribune* praised Genn's "highly complex creations that belie their labor intensiveness by seducing viewers with a play of architecture, calligraphy and light," while Giovanna Zamboni Paulis Of The Istituto Italiana di Cultura discerned in the work (when the show came to Los Angeles), "The richness of [Rome's] atmospheric hues and the uniqueness of its light ... held forever in the mind, thought and memory of the artist," an astute observation, considering the artist's feeling for the light and color of her surroundings—what Paulis calls "the primordial spirit of light"—and her three residencies at the American Academy in Rome. Francesca Casadio of the Art Institute of Chicago: "Genn's work exudes a lyricism that is made of humble raw materials, and, through subtle variation of color and texture, she successfully captures the mood of the moment, translating into abstract geometric forms what Monet did with views of Rouen's Cathedral 100 years ago. When looking at her art we are aware of journeys to countries we don't really know but sift from her work. Light, atmosphere, color, texture, line, structure, layers, calligraphy, architectural treatments, geometric abstraction—all transmit the sense of a place and harmonize together as in a well orchestrated musical

composition." Artist, emeritus art professor at Berkeley, and former Director of the American Academy in Rome, James Melchert: The most compelling aspect of Nancy Genn's work is its integrity. The imagery is in perfect harmony with the material and the process by which it was made. Far from being independent of its origins, the image in each piece provides a guide to what it is and how it came about. One has only to study a piece to find its secret and to perceive its beauty." In 2003, the Fresno Art Museum presented a retrospective of eighty works on paper and canvas, in tiles and cast bronze, entitled "Nancy Genn: Planes of Light," an apt title, considering Genn's admiration for the poetic minimalism of Lyonel Feininger, that cubist mystic whose broad planes of color suggest the varicolored elements of nature coming together to form airy cathedrals.

The spiritual element that concerned art for most of human history has been grievously neglected since the triumphs of Dadaism a century ago and of conceptualism and consumerism about fifty years ago. If art is to escape the danger of dissolution into entertainment, fashion, and status display, artists must reclaim art from those who would make it a handmaiden of sociopolitics—or creative banality. Artists like Genn who have dedicated themselves to the serious endeavor of understanding life through challenging work are a reproof to trendy silliness and cynicism. The Painter of Light, a title once accorded to Monet, was appropriated, unbeknownst to most people, by Thomas Kinkade, that purveyor of kitsch fantasies of gated communities. Anselm Kiefer recently declared that art is not fun. That goes too far. But we rootless postmodernist cosmopolitans should stop assuming that fun is all that art can offer, or art and humanity are really in trouble.