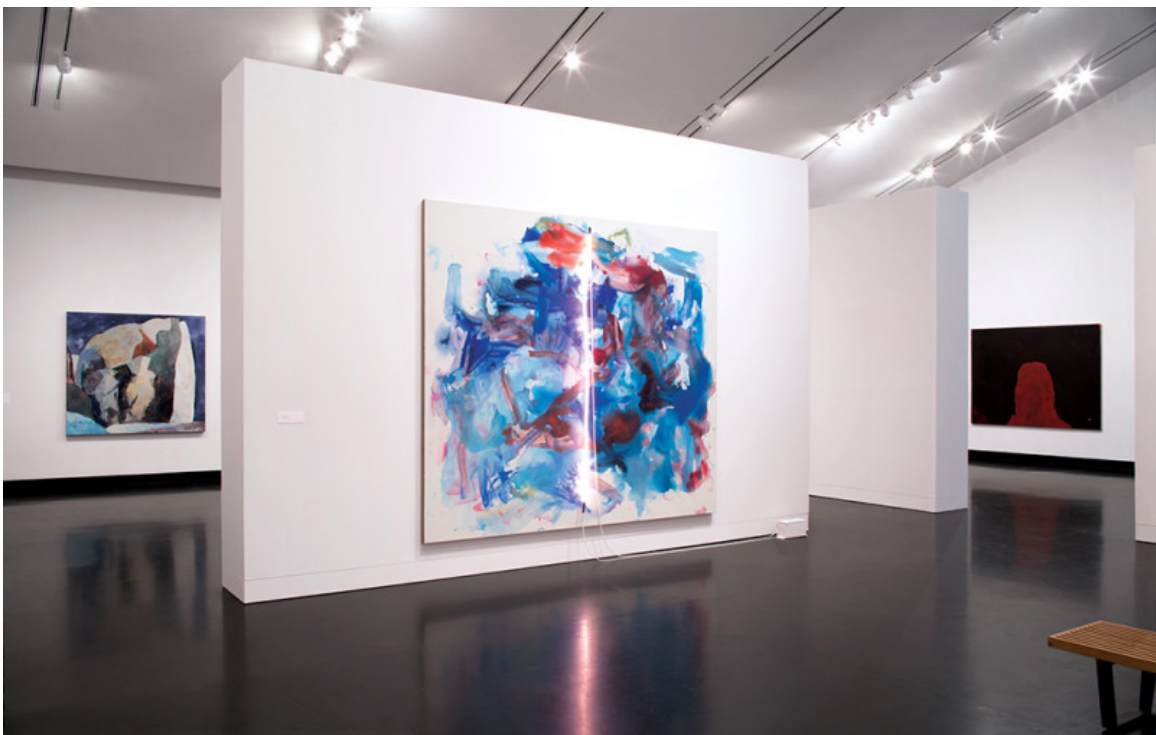


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# Art in America

## Beyond Neon: Mary Weatherford's Abstraction is Rooted in a Sense of Place

Stephen Westfall



*View of Mary Weatherford's exhibition "Canyon–Daisy–Eden," 2020, showing (foreground) lovely day, 2015, Flashe and neon on linen; at the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery. Photo by Arthur Evans.*

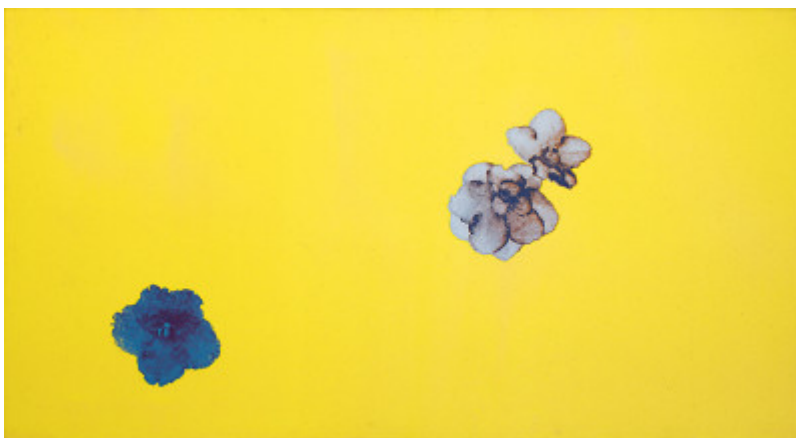
In 2012, Mary Weatherford was invited by the artist Joey Kötting, gallery director at California State University, Bakersfield, to make a series of paintings in response to the area's high desert landscape, local history, and light. Driving around during her five-week stint, Weatherford was entranced by the glow of neon signs in town and at roadside stands beyond the city's borders. Seeing the signs set against the Bakersfield sky at twilight catalyzed something for her. She found a local neon shop to fabricate ever-so-slightly bent tubes that she then affixed to large canvases bearing broad-stroked, fluid grounds. She chose each color—ruby, lemon yellow, light green, etc.—for its effect on the background pigments and left the cords and connecting boxes fully visible in front of the canvases as a form of "drawing." Before long, these breathtaking composite paintings, with their echoes of such predecessors as Keith Sonnier and Bruce Nauman, boosted her already significant career as a canny post-Pop, post-Pictures Generation feminist painter. She has exhibited at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles; participated in

MoMA's 2014 survey "Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World"; and mounted an acclaimed 2018 exhibition at the cavernous Gagosian space on 24th Street in New York.

Currently, Weatherford is the subject of a tight but well-selected thirty-year traveling retrospective. "Canyon-Daisy-Eden" can be seen at the Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College through July 12 and will travel to SITE Santa Fe in October. The show makes clear that the neon paintings, for which she is best known, relate not only to the sense of place that emerged in her work after she moved back to California from New York in 1999, but also to the collaged and silkscreened canvases that she began in the late 1980s.

Weatherford, who was born in Ojai, California, in 1963, grew up in San Diego as the daughter of an Episcopalian priest and a historian. She left California for Princeton, which offers art classes but not an art major. There she painted and studied architecture, while serving as an assistant to Sam Hunter, a foundational historian of postwar American art, especially Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting. Weatherford probably discerned in both those movements formal reminders of the mountains, cliffs, beaches, and impossibly deep and variant Pacific horizons along the California coast. Pollock, Newman, Rothko, Frankenthaler, Louis, and Noland offered an evolving conception of what Big Painting could do, from distribution of incident to saturation of color.

In a different though related vein, she attended a Rosalind Krauss lecture based on the scholar's influential essay "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," which examines the paradoxical relationship of "original" artists like Rodin to formal repetition, copies, and editions. Sherrie Levine's 1981 photographs of reproductions of Walker Evans photographs raised questions about male control of "authorship" and how a woman might enter the conversation. In 1984–85, after Princeton, Weatherford attended the Independent Study Program of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. Immersed in an environment emphasizing semiotics, critical theory, and appropriation, she was challenged to absorb such principles yet paint beyond their parameters.



*Mary Weatherford: Violetta, 1991, acrylic, Flashe, and silkscreen ink on canvas, 39 by 72 inches. PRIVATE COLLECTION.*

AMONG THE FIRST Weatherford paintings to garner attention were her large target paintings of 1989, two of which hang at the entrance to the Tang exhibition. Both titled *Nagasaki*, the canvases are each 82 inches square with extra-deep stretcher bars that evoke the iconic objecthood of the early stripe and Protractor paintings of her famous Princeton precursor, Frank

Stella. The circular bands, echoing the iconographic impact of compositions by Jasper Johns and Kenneth Noland, have the flatness of Stella's early handling, but without the border of exposed canvas between each plane of color. The hues themselves are more atmospheric: an orange bisque filling the corners of one painting, a pinkish field embracing baked beige circles set flush to brick-red ones in the other. These colors are derived from a kimono given to the artist by a former boyfriend, but there's a shared light in them reminiscent of west-facing stucco houses just after the sun has gone down, a Southern California light that whispers of Romanticism despite Weatherford's Minimalist and Neo-Geo appropriations. And then there's the shared title: "Nagasaki" referring to Puccini's posthumous *Madame Butterfly* and the suffering, doomed *Cio-Cio San*, even as it also resonates with the historically ominous titles of some of Stella's Black paintings (e.g., *Arbeit Macht Frei*, 1967). One can hardly miss the point of associating a bull's-eye with an atomic-bombed Japanese city. Not in the show is another 1989 painting, titled (using an alternative Anglicized spelling) *Cho-Cho-San*. Here a silkscreened peony blooms against its darker leaves, an ectoplasmic-toned white against a black-green ground. An early example of Weatherford's extended exploration of silkscreen and collage, the work nods to yet one more postwar male artist—Andy Warhol, who hid his Romanticism behind the apparent emotional cool of Pop appropriations.

Weatherford began silkscreening onto canvas in 1988, and, though the target paintings intervened, she continued for nearly a decade to employ this transfer method as a primary means for fixing an image. There are, in fact, multiple *Cho-Cho-San* ink-and-oil works (from both 1989 and 1990), as there are multiple *Nagasakis*. In the *Cho-Cho-San* works, the concentric circles of the target are reduced to thin lines dissolving in an amniotic pool of transparent darkness, releasing the flower into light like the answer floating upward in a Magic 8 Ball. In the Tang survey, *Third Riddle* (1991), a large (almost 9-foot-high) vertical painting whose title alludes to the suitors' test in *Turandot*, performs much like *Cho-Cho-San*. A silkscreened chrysanthemum blooms about three quarters of the way to the top and a bit to the right out of a violet-black stain split by a spear of light. The shadow that crosses the white gleam and fills up the space between the petals renders the flower seemingly three dimensional. In the deep seep of the dark violet stain set against the subtle detonation of the flower, we see the mastery of composition that Weatherford brings to her paintings from the outset. In the opera, the answer to the third riddle is "love," which augurs the cold-hearted princess Turandot's ultimate surrender to marriage. The luminosity of the blossom in the painting is perfectly matched to the moment of emotional illumination in the opera.

The distraught yet resiliently defiant female psyche is poetically figured throughout the silkscreened paintings. According to curator-critic Bill Arning, the near or outright mythic stature of beset female protagonists in ballet and opera referenced by Weatherford are often projections of the artist herself, so the "her" of *Her Insomnia* (1991) and *Her Clairvoyance* (1993) is the artist.<sup>1</sup> *Insomnia* was long related to the "woman's affliction" called hysteria, and thus to the debilitating foresight of Cassandra and Ophelia. *Her Insomnia* distributes red thorny rose stems on a near-black ground, while *Her Clairvoyance* shows eels writhing on a rocky ultraviolet sea bed.



Mary Weatherford: *Night and Day*, 1996, oil and silkscreen on jute, 90 by 63 inches. PRIVATE COLLECTION.

A nocturnal palette runs through those paintings, but not all of Weatherford's operatic images are so deeply shadowed. In *5:00 a.m.* (1992), thorny pale-green stems establish a vertical band against the washed-out violet-pink field, at roughly the golden section division of the six-by-ten-foot horizontal canvas. Even fewer shadows appear in *Violetta* (1991), whose flowers star an expanse of fluorescently virulent olive chartreuse. The flowers seem to flutter like moths and, sure enough, by 1994 Weatherford was collaging images of butterflies and moths, along with the actual shells of sea snails and starfish, onto her paintings' surfaces. Bearing a number of these smaller works, the "salon wall" in the Tang installation is itself a kind of bricolage installation.

BY 1995, WEATHERFORD introduced figurative elements to her paintings—in some cases, a silhouette of her beloved younger sister Margaret's head; in others, an image of herself bent double and clutching her head as if in grief, while her long hair spills over her hands like water. In hindsight, it is an almost unspeakable irony that Weatherford's anguished pose foreshadows Margaret's death from cancer in 2012, the same year that the artist made her formal breakthrough in Bakersfield. Margaret's silhouette is a centered vertical protuberance in several paintings, rising from the bottom of the canvas into the pictorial field and rounding into human shape in a way that can also recall a pool or a geological formation. There's a whimsical effect to these portraits, since the expressive features of Margaret's face are usually obscured in favor of a plane of paint, much like the thick pours that constitute the primary figure-ground relationship in a number of the smaller moth and seashell paintings on the salon wall. Through this combination of bricolage and body-centric painterliness, Weatherford transitions from the formal restraint (even at Big Painting scale) of the Neo Geo and Pictures aesthetics that she emerged from into a much freer painting space. She hasn't given up photo silkscreen or printing yet, but the rest of the painting surface is no longer suppressed to accommodate the transferred image. Rather, the transferred image sits like a stick-on element over other surface layers.

In the seven-and-a-half-foot-high *Night and Day* (1996), Weatherford's kneeling, hair-clutching image, almost life-size, rests in the lower center of a blue-black ground. Above, the remainder of the field is filled by a pale pink half-orb, with a much smaller white disk inside it. The deep

yellow and dark orange silkscreen shape of Weatherford's body is bolstered—made an almost tangible presence—by the addition of paint. The artist was using jute instead of canvas at this point, and the material's coarser texture meant that heavier-bodied paint was needed to hold flat color, while looser and thinner washes would pool irregularly in the exaggerated pockets between warp and weft, where the priming coat had settled. The work's vinyl Flashe paint manages these transitions with remarkable vividness, drying matte while maintaining a bracing chromatic intensity. The grief in the self-image is lightened by the figure's weightlessness in the painting's (outer) space and by the sensuality of the brush gestures filling each shape and ground. Other iconic self-portraits and portraits come to mind: Courbet's youthful *Le Désespéré* (The Desperate Man), 1843–45, with its bug-eyed expression; and Harry Callahan's photograph *Eleanor, Chicago* (1949), showing his wife crowned with ropy, wet hair as she stands neck-deep in water. Weatherford is amused enough by the lugubriousness of her own head-in-hands image to title one painting *Any Cat Stevens Song* (1996), suggesting that the soundtracks of our lives are attuned to our heartbreak as much as to our bliss.

Weatherford's expressive paint handling opened up further when she moved back to California in 1999. That was also when her paintings started responding formally to her natural environment. She generated visual tone poems of the coast, stacking shapes and bands of color into drastically simplified images of sand, sea, sky, and sun. In *beach* (2000), a five-foot-high painting, the order goes from bottom to top: dark head silhouette (touching the bottom edge), yellow sand, curving blue sea/sky, huge orange-pink cloud. It's an order not unlike that of *Night and Day*, but in spite of the wavering edges of each border, the horizon line situates us in a landscape rather than the semiotic outer space of the earlier painting. Some of the Margaret heads from 1996 also situate us in a "scape" of some kind. We are looking in the same direction as she is, from behind her. But there is little or no spatial orientation in the all-over chromatic weather that surrounds her.

Around this same time, Weatherford began affixing sponges to her paintings. An obvious nod to Yves Klein's "Sponge Reliefs" (1959–61), these sponge works are conceptually mutable, evoking the sea, heads, stones, and even potatoes. The clumpy invertebrates are appropriate, sure, but they serve a distinct aesthetic purpose. As the title of *absorbent* (2000) implies, the sponges soak up color and push it into real space, much as the silkscreened chrysanthemum in the trompe l'oeil *Third Riddle* promises to do.



Mary Weatherford: *absorbent*, 2000, *Flashe and sponges on canvas*, 66 by 82 inches. COLLECTION THE ARTIST.

The sponge paintings represent the apogee of Weatherford's bricolage practice before she began the neon paintings. Yet she continued to attach starfish and shells here and there, as she delved further into painterly mark-making to create a kind of caricature. Cartoonish essentialism runs through her sunsets, moonrises over brick walls (LA is a city of alleyways), and—in a couple of cases featuring compressed Franz Kline brushstrokes—quick, hilariously accurate portraits of a black cat that haunted her backyard. The eyes are tiny iridescent seashells with a black stroke for the pupil. This first half-decade back in California, spent stretching out with paint, seems to have prepared her to make the leap into a loose, tactilely rich painting from observation. That shift meant an increase in surface incident, achieved by layering washes in a way that leaves the color underneath showing through—the *ton sur ton* of Bonnard updated via the epic stain painting of Frankenthaler and Louis.

In 2004 Weatherford started painting the light and shadow of the day through a huge thicket of vines that had overtaken a trellis in her front yard. The Tang exhibition includes *the ivy mesh* (2004) on the salon wall. It's a small horizontal painting with gray-green vines and leaves emerging into foreground light and disappearing into black shadow. As these works expanded somewhat in scale, the dark background began to serve as a volumetric midway passage, yielding to light behind the thicket. Flickers of light flutter around the shadowed space like moths, a Corot effect pushed to the level of Charles Burchfield's *The Coming of Spring* (1917–43), in which every tree, hillock, and flower seems to have an individual soul. The vine paintings never reached large scale, which suits their scrutiny-inviting intimacy. It's a shame space wouldn't allow more of these paintings in the show, as I find the whole series to be among the finest, gnarliest, and most specific paintings of vegetation in the last half-century.

OVERLAPPING THE TIMELINE of the Vine works is an extended series of paintings Weatherford made of rocks at Malibu's Point Dume—two examples are at the Tang—and a subsequent series depicting a cave she found up the California coast in Pismo Beach. Only one of the Cave paintings is included in the exhibition, the labia-walled *Georgia* (2010), executed in

multiple shades of blue, with a slyly clitoral starfish almost invisible at the top of the indigo cave-void. It's an open letter to Georgia O'Keeffe with the starfish also recalling the stars in works by German-American Symbolist painter Agnes Pelton (1881–1961).<sup>2</sup> Weatherford would make plein air studies on paper at the sites and work on larger canvases in the studio. Treating the textures of rock as a Monet-like record of shifts in chromatic light, and rendering the contrast of glare and shadow in fluid and fast-drying paint, Weatherford became fluent in the polychromatic “action” techniques of staining and sponging. These were the basis for the blots and swipes that dance with the electrified tubes in the neon paintings.



Mary Weatherford: *Ruby I (Thriftimart)*, 2012, *Flashe and neon on linen*, 93 by 79 inches. HAMMER MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES.

The rock and cave works also have their antecedents in nineteenth-century French painting, notably Monet's views of the natural bridge at Étretat on the Normandy Coast, Courbet's sinewy cave paintings (he also made paintings of Étretat), and Degas's landscape monotypes, some of which are nearly abstract. This deep history brings us to Weatherford's engagement with Frankenthaler, herself a Francophile. Like her predecessor, Weatherford makes her large works on the floor, so she's actually in the field of the painting.

Of the three neon paintings at the Tang, *Ruby I (Thriftimart)*, 2012, most evidently springs from the cave paintings. As in many of those works, a border surrounds the central build-up of red, blue, black, and black-violet washes that suggest a monadic void. Vertically traversing the center but bending slightly to the right toward the bottom is a tube of ruby neon, staining the dark pool of paint with its glow. To the left, a white cord drapes down to a transformer box on the floor. Nothing is concealed. And, as always with Weatherford, much is going on.

Discussing *From the Mountain to the Sea* (2014), the first of her paintings in which two neon tubes of different colors merge into one continuous line, the artist offered a peek into her crowded mind: “I have [Lucio] Fontana in my head. I have Mario Merz and Barry Le Va. Of

course the cords are borrowed from Eva Hesse. It's sort of a rotating card catalog going on up here [taps head]." Later in the same interview, she said: "I'm not painting a painting that's finished and then putting neon on it. I'm painting with the expectation this element will be added."<sup>3</sup>

Weatherford's neon paintings have expanded into scapes that encompass treks up arroyos and allude to political violence. She regards the neon as something like a cut but also a lingering, compositional light.<sup>4</sup> The works reflect the influence of a chorus of predecessors, but they are always definitively shaped by her own mind, her own sorrows and exhilarations, her insomnia and clairvoyance. The glimpse of the city lights from the top of the canyon is her own song.

1 Bill Arning, "Weatherford's Women," in the forthcoming catalogue for the Tang exhibition. The volume will also include essays and poetry by artists Rebecca Morris and Arnold Kemp; an article by Elissa Auther, deputy director and chief curator of the Museum of Art and Design, New York; an interview with Tang director Ian Berry; and "East of the 5, South of the 10," a story by Margaret Weatherford, the artist's sister, who brilliantly imagines the LA area as a noir Olympus for the fallible Greek gods.

2 Works by this recently rediscovered artist are currently on display in "Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist," at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, through June 28.

3 Mary Weatherford, "from the Mountain to the Sea: A CONVERSATION," in Robert Faggen, *Mary Weatherford: The Neon Paintings*, Claremont, Calif., Gould Center for Humanistic Studies, Claremont McKenna College, and Munich, London, New York, DelMonico Books, Prestel Verlag, 2016, pp. 203–04.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 202.