

Merrill Wagner

April 2007

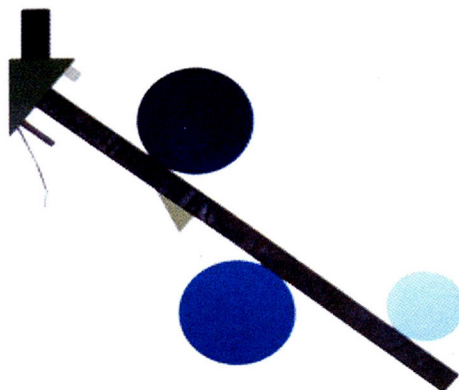
by Shane McAdams

Flowers

Sundaram Tagore

February 27-April 7, 2007

Merrill Wagner's art has always connected to nature: in her *plein air* paintings the connection is direct, while in her better-known steel, rock and wood constructions, it's more oblique. Her current exhibition at Sundaram Tagore splits the difference with a collection of new representational constructions on painted steel that couple the rigor of her past semi-abstract work with the immediacy of a walk through the garden.



Merrill Wagner, "Fallen Over Flower" (2007). Rust preventative paint on steel. 99" x 107".

Several wall-mounted sculptural paintings bear close resemblance to her past work. "Ripple" (2006), with its skewed array of welded reddish panels, reads as a rather concrete piece of art. It feels indebted, superficially at least, to the utopian influences of Russian Constructivism, but its surface, mottled with semi-transparent rust-proof paint, is decidedly organic. Despite the composition of its industrial materials, the piece tips more toward Wagner's carbon-based sources and natural leanings.

The focus of this hearty exhibition is a series of semi-abstract sculptures of flowering plants. Materially, they have the weight and color of her more abstract work, but their referential subject matter endows them with a different complexion. They are most successful when Wagner uses compositional strengths to exploit the uneasy balance engendered by an improper meeting of idealized nature and cut steel. "Pod" (2006) reaches back into the architectural and constructivist sources Wagner might have avoided in her earlier work. Its bare steel stem rises slightly left, cantilevered over its painted base. A sharp, triangular leaf looks as much like a counterweight as it does a depiction of a natural object. Elegant and balanced, both spatially and pictorially, it carefully treads the line between overt representation and geometric abstraction.

The largest and most striking of these flower pieces is "Fallen Over Flower" (2006). Here, the angle is more severe, with the heavy metal flower defying gravity to keep itself off the ground. Its blue geometric

leaves read as painted steel even as the piece retains its identity as a doomed flower. As is often the case with Wagner, the raw, angular industrial quality of the steel is leveraged for its potential for poetry. A single steel ribbon peels away from the fractured stem and floats slightly from the wall. This subtle effect adds a lightness and individuality to the piece that might otherwise give in to the bluntness of its weighty geometry.

One surprising element of the show is a set of three rock sculptures along the concrete seam of the gallery floor. The stone piles are bisected by a chalk line that continues the groove covered by the rocks. These works are not meant to steal the show, but they inadvertently bring it full circle. They act as foils to the pictorial sculptures, bringing them, literally, down to earth and whispering of Wagner's love of landscape, which has been more latent in previous work. This show is a walk through the garden that makes you think of Vladimir Tatlin while smelling roses.