

Ian Boyden's Alchemical Feathers

Ian Boyden's new series of paintings, *Alchemical Feathers*, pulls viewers through a history of the artist's exploration of form and material. Boyden transforms the feather, an archetypal image that references both the freedom and the gravity of near-weightlessness, by juxtaposing the image with the materials he uses to create it. Boyden's handmade paints are composed of a variety of pigments, including azurite, mercuric sulfide, iron, cuttlefish ink, and ground freshwater pearl. The material density of the paint pulls the feather from its status as an object and lifts it into abstract form, placing viewers in a realm that is disconcertingly only *almost* familiar: the form is one we know, but it is revealed in layers of vapor, in composites of density, in a crystalline stone bed that has left a record of what a feather is, as opposed to its outer appearance.

Boyden's feather forms have emerged largely as part of a long conversation he has held with the materials he uses to make his paints. Boyden notes that while he knows what each material is *supposed* to do (say, mercuric sulfide or ground pearl), his suppositions have little to do with how the personalities of these materials may decide to emerge. Any number of variables—atmospheric pressure, the chemical composition of the soils or water, the conditions in which the paper may have been stored—will influence how these materials behave once applied to the paper. Boyden states, “As these variables enter [the process], it is my job to facilitate their interaction, not to limit their part in the discussion laid out on the page.”

The interplay of those variables results in a spontaneity that Boyden characterizes as one of the great gifts of this set of paintings. It causes the works to function in ways

that are initially surprising yet, true to the alchemical nature of the pieces, also inevitable in that they show remarkable material knowledge, a love of experimentation, and a drive to investigate the borderline where form departs from matter.

Boyden sets out to make a painting, and from it forges an image that propels us into a state of wonder. This is fitting, for he understands images such as feathers, trees, water, and land as aids for dreaming, forging a direct link to the imagination. One of Boyden's influences, the fourth-century Chinese painter Zong Bing, loved to walk in the mountains. As he became older and less mobile, he painted the walls in his house with his beloved mountains so he could dream he was walking there. Boyden believes that Zong Bing was doing far more than merely re-creating scenery out of longing or nostalgia; instead, Zong Bing was creating a mountain—walking the mountains of the external world had allowed an internal mountain to grow. The mountain's depiction was not simply a picture; it was a reference to the understanding of the external mountain's soul. To be in its presence, whether outside or within, was to understand the self's capacity to dream.

Boyden gives us not the mountains but the space and perspective of a feather. He is not interested in setting us in a "real space." Instead, he evokes what we might call "dream space," in which the viewer's anchored, physical space is subsumed by the experience of perception and reception. By looking closely at Boyden's paintings, we are compelled to see the unseen—the invisible forces that propel the feathers into flight, cause the trees to bend, and bring water to rest. This momentum reels us into his paintings, then suspends us, still and silent, anchored yet moved by the current. By anchoring the feather to the bottom edge of the paper, Boyden also invites us to see

ourselves in the feathers: the feathers become, on some level, equivalent to the human desire for ascension and transformation.

While a feather can be a static, recognizable object—merely a part shed from a bird that we have picked up and set on a shelf—Boyden’s feathers move. As we move into the feather’s dream space, we see the slow, luminous burn of rockets, the pull of a current that has been split. The momentum is clearly tied to an emotion. The fields of momentum key into a large core of emotion that is related to how we understand what it means, for example, to fall vertically and silently, or to be pushed away, or to rise through darkness. Each of the images—what it works through or out of—evokes a different response.

In talking about the process of painting *Alchemical Feathers*, Boyden described how he kept standing back away from the surface to better understand what the super-dense pigments were telling him. In painting after painting, the forms grew toward the one understanding of physicality most foreign to the materials he was using: the feather-forms of weightlessness and flight. On the paper, mercury, one of the heaviest of pigments, was given flight, and the pearl was unlocked from its shell and released from the sphere. Even as he made them, Boyden said the pieces already felt very far away, as if they had been waiting a long time. They seemed, he noted, to grow directly from an archetype, which made his conversation with the materials all the more conscientious. Each painting felt complete for Boyden as soon as the archetype was balanced between its own mystery and its own certainty that it had been rendered in a form that would endure. In naming the series, the word “feather” accessed this archetype most faithfully—as opposed to other words that imply mastery over how a feather is used, such as quill,

pin, pinion, or nib. Of these, only the feather, a tool of flight, is at once an object and a journey.

Julia Hunter, Director of Foundry Gallery

The material for this essay was culled from a series of interviews the author conducted with the artist in April and May of 2006.