

Immortal beloved: Nature, according to artist Florence Miller Pierce

Iris McLister | Pasatiempo: Friday, September 5, 2014 5:00 am



Florence Miller Pierce: Peak #8, 1983, resin relief, 48x41

Amber, a resin first secreted by trees, then fossilized over millions of years, sometimes traps little bits of bark and bugs as it hardens. The precious substance is valued for its golden color, its ability to absorb light, and its tiny encapsulated bubbles. A sort of geological time capsule, amber contains ancient moments of activity and life. Certainly those pieces of amber with insects caught within are the most fascinating of their kind: how marvelous it is that a mosquito or ant (unfortunate though it might have been to succumb in that instant of entrapment) could be immortalized in such an ethereal, otherworldly shrine!

The art of Florence Miller Pierce (1918-2007) has often been described as Zen-like, meditative, even spiritually preoccupied. Such attempts to put words to her works can seem flimsy, frustratingly vague, and not even able to fully explain the weighty legacy of such an artist. Before moving to New Mexico in the late 1940s, the Washington, D.C.-born artist headed to Taos at eighteen years old to study with Emil Bistram, who has become synonymous with the Transcendental Painting Group he helped found in 1938. The group's psychedelic, obscurely spiritual paintings would influence Miller Pierce's artistic approach, but her work departs from that of its other members (Miller Pierce was briefly among its numbers) in almost every other way. The artist's own brand of minimalism didn't really come into its own until the late '60s, when she began experimenting with poured resin.

In the Light, Charlotte Jackson Fine Art's 13th solo exhibition featuring Miller Pierce, includes a handful of the shaped resin panels for which she is best known. To create them, the artist applied layers of tinted or clear fiberglass resin over mirror-backed Plexiglas. Before it hardened, she would press parchment paper into the surface to make subtle ripples and grooves. Subsequent pours of resin built the surface up to a waxy near-translucency, which Miller Pierce would further manipulate with applications of vellum. This process substantially dulls the reflective qualities of the works' underlying Plexiglas base, creating a buried luminosity.

It can be tricky to attempt an understanding of these works by studying print reproductions — or even high-resolution digital images, for that matter. Without the opportunity to witness them in person, a viewer does not see their peculiarly trapped light, which is muted, blunted, all but snuffed out. Miller Pierce's deliberate obfuscation of her base material's mirrored surfaces perverts any chance it might have of doing what a reflective thing is supposed to — that is, grab and project another thing's light or likeness. This is a wonderfully recalcitrant state of affairs that is most decidedly not of the “contemplative” or “quiet” temperament the artist's output is so frequently associated with.

An untitled wedge-shaped piece from 1985 is modest and secretive, containing a light that's shimmery but chilled. Jutting off its right border is a darkened, dappled bump: a growth, whose wet sheen suggests a section of organ or tissue. 1985's *Spire*, a wrinkled, narrowly tapered column, stands 8 feet high. In person it looks rippled and animated; it's easy to think that whatever lurks within it is wriggling. *Untitled 1986* looks like a frozen pond: opaque, milky, viscous, something stilled and cold. It's almost confrontational in its absence of motive or structure, yet it seems as steady and solid as a rock. It contains two circles that are smooshed together. The resemblance is to a cell stuck forever in the middle of dividing — if inanimate objects had cells. Its luminosity feels stunted rather than contained: looking at it means looking into it, as if one were searching for something living beneath an icy surface of frozen water.

The art of Florence Pierce is determinedly minimalist, but to equate it with contemplativeness or simplicity is inadequate and does nothing to describe the blunt physicality and aggressive presence of these bizarre compositions. Above all, they are armored and disciplined, with the entrapped pieces inside so intentionally obscured — so rigorously private — that they leave much more for us to imagine about them than any prehistoric insects in amber do. ◀

details

- ▼ *Florence Miller Pierce: In the Light*
- ▼ Opening reception 5 p.m. Friday, Sept. 5; exhibit through Sept. 30
- ▼ Charlotte Jackson Fine Art, 554 S. Guadalupe St., 505-989-8688