

Marshall Crossman *Big Water*

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If oil and water generally don't mix in real life, they go together very nicely, indeed, in art. The marine painting tradition that began with the Dutch in the 17th century continues today, in the work of Marshall Crossman and others, even if realism is disdained in certain art circles in the current fashion for conceptualist puzzles. Like Turner, Friedrich, Homer, and Ryder, these contemporary artists depict the ocean as both reality and symbol, satisfying those of us who occasionally find themselves gazing out to sea, like the Manhattan landlubbers in *Moby-Dick*, "thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries."

Crossman's art career coincides with her relocation to the Bay Area. A Nebraska native, Crossman found herself in cool, foggy San Francisco in the late 1970s, and never left: "Oh, I've arrived," she says, describing her feeling of belonging. After a long career in graphic design, she found herself increasingly committed to painting, an activity that had enthralled her since childhood. Crossman's dynamic, expressionist paintings of shopping women and high-school yearbook group photos—as well as a series of abstractions—were well received and her painting career was launched. *Big Water*, comprising oils from her Beach and Pacifica series, both inspired by her home, mere yards from the shore in Pacifica, south of San Francisco, is Crossman's fifth show at the Dolby Chadwick Gallery.

Although Crossman lives at water's edge, and absorbs its sights, sounds and smells, she is not a maker of marine genre paintings. She has now been painting for decades, having absorbed a host of influences, from figurative expressionists like Auerbach, Bacon, Baselitz, deKooning, Fischl, Giacometti, Kiefer and Park, to lyrical abstractionists like Frankenthaler, Guston, and Mitchell. These diverse enthusiasms, occasionally contradictory, surface in her work. Her small square-format Beach Series paintings, inspired by faded Polaroids hung in a Pacifica bait shop, of fishermen holding their catches, may have a nostalgic appeal for some viewers, but they are not about old men and the sea, necessarily. They're about the activity of painting, as are her larger paintings of figures playing in the surf, which do not rely on photos, as one might expect, but are synthesized from visual memories, sometimes photo-assisted.

Crossman: "I have to go beyond the photograph. I don't want realism... I am not trying to freeze reality like a camera. I'm trying to allow the figures to move in the water." The still, iconic fishermen and the romping kids, dissolved in spraying foam, are not overtly abstract, but they are abstractly organized, and painted with Abstract Expressionist verve and dash. Perhaps they are readable, also, as metaphors for the artist: playing with the slippery, elusive medium of wet-into-wet oil paint almost like a frolicking child, but also reveling in her "catch" once the work (or play) is done. Water symbolizes the unconscious and the instinctive, and Crossman disclaims any conscious thought during the painting process: "It's very physical, and I love that... It's totally intuitive. What's

exciting about it are those moments of discovering something really good ... when you've just worked two days and discovered nothing. It's surprising how it happens and that's the draw for a painter. It's such a risky thing." She writes: "I am wholly committed to the pure expressive quality of the paint itself." The Pacifica series eschews figures, concentrating on expanses of ocean bounded by the horizon above and the surf below; they're quieter and more abstract than her figurative works, which exalt and exult in motion and energy; painted from memory, "meditative and minimal," they're about the experience of living at water's edge, with the rolling waves employed, not as symbols of man's fate (as in Turner, Homer and Ryder), but metaphysically, as the visible increments of time's passage (as in Friedrich).