learning to see nothing

new and recent work
on paper and canvas

Steven Schroeder
nothing

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on paper and canvas

by Steven Schroeder

Eleanor Hayes Art Gallery,
Kinzer Performing Arts Center,
Northern Oklahoma College
Tonkawa, Oklahoma
4 September – 18 October 2018
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wuxing 2 [2014]
from nine tokens of Heraclitus

expect nothing
you will discover
nothing
unexpected

it leaves no tracks.
a fragment of heraclitus [2018]
acrylic, ink, and paper on canvas | 24x36
a gift of fire: Cassandra [2018]
watercolor on paper | 14x20
(above) *a gift of fire: controlled burn* [2018]
acrylic on unprimed canvas | 21x9

(below) *a gift of fire: morning* [2018]
acrylic on canvas | 30x30
a gift of fire: speaking in tongues [2018]
acrylic on cardboard | 12x16 inches
a gift of fire: trace [2018]
acrylic on unprimed canvas | 9x21
a gift of fire: up and down [2018]
acrylic on bamboo paper | 18x24
free
nothing
but one perching
blackbird in ten thousand

who takes wing
unafraid when
the bough gives way

a dark door
singing wonder
in ten thousand songs
(right)
*all at once* [2016]
oil on canvas | 24x36

(above)
*an idea of north* [2018]
acrylic on canvas | 30x30
black alders, gray water [2016]
watercolor on paper | 14x20
blue state [2017]
oil on canvas | 20x20
burn [2014]
watercolor and oil on canvas | 24x36
burning off fog [2015]
oil on canvas | 24x36
a handful of nothing

a handful of nothing that matters, 
two thin strips of an old cotton rag, 
pulped and lost in a cloud—

hands dance like Butcher Ting, 
arc a screen through water 
like panning for gold—

fiber finds its own way.
Making paper, you say, 
is all about letting go—

a poem, a handful of nothing 
that matters, ready to begin again
cities of the plain:
*a backward glance* [2014]
oil on canvas | 24x36
cities of the plain: Lot’s wife [2014]
oil on canvas | 36x24
cities of the plain: rising [2014]
oil on canvas | 24x36
cities of the plain: still [2014]

oil on canvas | 24x36
in the act

nothing, practical,
in what laozi
says about war

and water—lie
low. never mind,
let go

the mind there,
in the act, a poem.
city [2017]

oil on canvas | 20x20
crossroad [2013]

oil on canvas | 24x36
distance [2014]
watercolor on paper | 10x14
(above) empty promises 2 [2015]
oil on canvas | 36x24

(below) empty promises 3 [2015]
watercolor on paper | 20x14
empty promises 4 [2017]
oil on canvas | 36x24
crossfire

crow song at dawn is tongue and beak and throat
dark volcano glass breaking on sunrise
over a parapet wall

two riffs shatter sleep, dry
growls like a crouching
cat catching

a glimpse before blueblack
voice flies obsidian
sharp, silence

space before a murder
replies from ten thousand
edges that mark the absence

a bullet leaves when it passes
through a glass darkly
epiphany [2015]

oil on canvas | 24x36
every common bush [2018]
acrylic on canvas | 20x20
fleur du mal [2015]
watercolor on paper | 14 x 20
flight [2017] | acrylic on canvas | 30x30
frozen [2014]
conte crayon and acrylic on paper | 15.375x16.25 framed
gray city [2012]
acrylic on canvas | 20 x 20
heosphoros [2018]
acrylic on canvas | 30x30
in the path of totality [2017]
acrylic on canvas | 20x20
in the path of totality: dance [2018]
acrylic on unprimed canvas | 20x28
(above)

January 1 [2014]
Acrylic and ink on paper
10x15

(right)

January 5, flowers [2014]
Acrylic and ink on paper
10x15
laozi’s commentary on
Aristotle’s Physics, Books I and II

mind you, it is a matter
of overstanding
standing, you
see. not
what

moves, where.
not where, when.
not when, why

begin. no
form, no
thing. no
matter, mind
wandering, you

chance upon what
could not be
otherwise
now

that it is.

we read into
what you write
out of your mind

and that is that.
language [2014]
oil on canvas | 24x36
last day of winter [2018]
acrylic on canvas | 20x20
let us find a city 1 [2012]

oil and acrylic on canvas panel | 12x16
Crow dancing at the top of that tree after two days of arctic cold is no philosopher of ice.

Standing midair on a twig that could not possibly support the weight of his hollow bones,

he keeps his feet between flying and falling, moves with wind knowing its music

will carry him when he turns to follow the light in his bright eyes, knowing there will be

another place to stand and dance above it all on what moves him in what he cannot see.
like flint 1 [2016]
watercolor on paper | 20x14
like flint 2 [2016]
watercolor on paper | 14x20
(above) march [2014]
watercolor and ink on paper | 14x11

(below) mind of winter [2014]
watercolor on paper | 12x9
too much light
and your eyes
scramble

for cover, cry
for someone
to shed a little

darkness
on the world

so they
can
make it out

with less pain
north I [2014]
watercolor and conte crayon on paper | 18x24
nothing makes it work [2014]
acrylic and watercolor on canvas | 24x36
(above) *osage orange* [2013]
oil on canvas | 36x24

(below) *plain sight* [2013]
acrylic on canvas | 36x24
(above) *politics* [2014]
aCRYLIC ON CANVAS | 36X24

(below) *Proverbs 29:18* [2017]
oIL ON CANVAS | 20X20
ripple [2017]
acrylic on canvas | 30x30
scrub cedar [2017]
acrylic on canvas | 30x30
this particular absence

What matters here is what is not there. After a storm passes, traces of a branch, a crown where the trunk was broken. No denying the storm. No denying the tree, present in the eye of the mind, a whole elsewhere in whose light this absence, this particular absence, is known.
she pondered everything that had happened in her heart [2018]
acrylic and latex enamel on unprimed canvas | 20x20
sky people: inflections [2016]
watercolor and ink on paper | 14x20
(above) *sky people: learning to see nothing* [2018]
sumi ink on paper | 16x12

(below) *sky people: piaf* [2016]
watercolor, ink, and acrylic on paper | 14x20
sky people: piaf 2 [2016]
watercolor and ink on paper | 14x20
sky people: two finches rise [2017]
watercolor and ink on paper | 14x20
After Hildegard, *Physica*

Every single thing can see life breathing in mud on the edge of a world so full of green expectation it is divine.

They see that it is good and name it. Everyone knows *Adam* is a woman who turns when emerald lovers whisper her name to see that it is good. She takes in light, and it becomes her body, broken. Stones are the bones of the earth, marrow where rain has fallen. Warm soul breathes life in cold flesh. She writes every name in a book. Demons have no taste for it, but the devil loves the ones that take in fortune seekers blind to green worlds rising hot from cold time.
sunset [2014]
watercolor on paper | 10x14
(above) *the absolute absence of god* [2017]
acrylic on canvas | 36x24

(below) *tall grass* [2013]
oil on canvas | 36x24
the last white leaf [2016]
watercolor and acrylic on paper | 14x20
Three Articles
As sin is nothing, let it nowhere be.
John Donne, A Litany

1
Nothing but this
godforsaken
red earth blue sky
shrouded dry
now. I believe you
might have spit on dust once
to make something of it
in passing. But
nothing lasts.
I'd like to see you
do it again.

2
Dying goes without saying.
You might say
it's just one
of those things
dust dry waiting
for a sign of rain, hoping
for a sign of life after.

3
Wonder
what spirit
dwells in this mud
house after the storm passes.
thistle [2018]
acrylic and ink on paper | 14x20
trouble the water [2017]
acrylic on canvas | 24x36
(above) the wind blows where it wishes [2018]
watercolor on paper | 20x14

(below) yellow crane tower [2017]
acrylic on canvas | 36x24
a desert people
will auf Höhen, wo die Menschen schweigen...
—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

They say plains eyes see distant things clearly. What is near is a haze.

That reminds me of the rabbi who, asked to explain the custom of placing a stone on the grave after a Jewish funeral, says

*Jews are a desert people. Stones are easier to find than flowers.*

And they stay when flowers fade, fitting tokens of fidelity.

I wish for a high place where the sky grows wide where old eyes see distant things like daybreak.

I let slip a word of discontent, and some sage says *there you are, be still, keep your eyes open.*
wuxing 2 [2014]
acrylic on matboard | 8x19
artist's statement
All the pieces in “Learning to See Nothing” were completed within the last seven years (almost all within the last five years), but the show is part of a decades long meditation on the plains. When I tell people that the Texas Panhandle is where I first learned to take nothing seriously, they sometimes take it to mean that I don’t take anything seriously. I take that misunderstanding as evidence of the frequency with which we overlook the significance of nothing, the force (as Emily Dickinson said) “that renovates the world,” how often we fail (as Wallace Stevens said) to see “nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.”

All the paintings in this show—acrylic, ink, oil, watercolor, and mixed media—are abstract in the sense that they seek not to mirror objects but to make a scene that provides a point of entry into the spirit of a place. I’m inclined to agree with Georgia O’Keeffe that all painting is abstract; and that involves a simplification that, paradoxically, offers access to greater complexity. That access, more often than not, is a matter of absence and of seeing nothing.

I’ve been painting for more than fifty years and writing poetry almost as long. I’ve also spent a significant portion of that time on the road between Chicago (where I live and work) and the Texas Panhandle (where I grew up). The work in this show doesn’t document that road or particular stopping places on it, but it may evoke them. Leonard Cohen’s brilliant
variation on Emerson is often on my mind when I paint or write: “There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” The work of art, I believe, is to seek out the cracks that shed a little light and sometimes (with Bertolt Brecht’s hammer in mind) to make them.

—Steven Schroeder, Chicago, September 2018