

MARY ANN AITKEN

IN SINGULARITY

BY ROSE BOUTHILLIER

A particular houseplant--some sort of bromeliad; spiky, weeping, lush--appears often in Mary Ann Aitken's paintings. Her focus on the plant suggests its life-affirming potential, but not in any general sense. Rather in a truly personal sense, as in how one object becomes more familiar than the rest, more known, and in turn, somehow knowing.

Along with her dedication to the studio, Mary Ann Aitken worked for over 20 years as an art therapist for patients with mental illness and addictions. This experience of art making as a healing, self-affirming act imbues her work with gravity. There is a deep, heartfelt joy in that seriousness, just as there is darkness and aloneness. Solitude gives Aitken's paintings their disarming directness; looking at them, one feels (aches with, drifts in) their own singularity.

Her works on panel have a distinctive thickness to them, the slowness of heavy oils, layers, and grit. This texture implies intimacy as well; closeness to the thing and to the self in painting it. But there is levity too: wrought, roughhewn working offset by quick gestures--a foot print, scribbles of mixing color, the nimble swipe of a brush or palette knife. Grounded and vigorous, Aitken's paintings are steadfastly electric. Looking at her *Untitled* (1989) still life, I feel as if I've held each item in my hands, sticky now from the slice of dark pink watermelon, softly flopping the banana peels down on the table, weighing the heaviness of canned goods, closing the gummy screw top on the ranch dressing,

tracing the cool metal curves of the spoon. Her *Untitled (Coffee Maker)* (1984) evokes habitual movements, performed in the haze of drowsiness, the gathering of drips and stains, soft gradual browns.

Domestic life forms breathe in Aitken's work. Her paintings on newspaper are particularly animated: exposed, dated fragments of text and advertisement toggle with colorful dobs of petals or goldfish. The fragile paper, meant to last only for a day, preserves a fleeting moment in time. These works are reminiscent of Paul Thek's paintings on newsprint, sharing a similar sense of lightness despite (or in) transience. Yet, Aitken's paintings are more down to earth.

I really can't get Aitken's *Self-Portrait* (1983) out of my mind. The artist floats in a rough black field, a turbulent void. She wears her red painting robe, donned in the studio to protect her clothes. In the painting, it protects her from the void. Compact and raw, her features are indistinct (two merged, bluish dots, a glob of dirty blonde) but her presence and energy are strongly felt. On the right, loose robe-hued brush strokes are casually placed, as if she were using the background itself as a palette (does painting have a fourth wall to break?). Every mark reflects and reveals the self. Aitken, an extremely private person, was hesitant to share her paintings while she was alive. Perhaps this was for the very reason that they disclosed so much of her in their intense, material sincerity.



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1. Mary Ann Aitken
Untitled, 2010-11
Oil, sand, and paper on canvas
11 1/4 x 14 inches

2. Mary Ann Aitken
Untitled (Coffee Maker), 1984
Oil on panel
9 1/4 x 7 inches

Courtesy of the Estate of Mary Ann Aitken



1.



2.

1. Mary Ann Aitken
Untitled (fish bowl), 1983
 Oil on paper
 12 x 14 inches
 Collection of Susan Goethel Campbell

2. Mary Ann Aitken
Untitled (red flowers), 1989
 Oil on Masonite
 24 x 24 inches
 Courtesy of the Estate of Mary Ann Aitken



3. Mary Ann Aitken
Self-Portrait, 1983
Oil on panel
19 x 15 inches
Collection of Ed Fraga