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Art review: Whitney Bedford at Susanne Vielmetter



Whitney Bedford's hauntingly beautiful new works at Vielmetter draw from a strand of maritime painting tradition exemplified by J.M.W. Turner, incorporate a bit of the Gerhard Richter signature smear, and cast a loving backward glance at old engraved illustrations. They are temporal and stylistic hybrids that hold together spectacularly well.

Bedford has been painting shipwrecks for nearly 10 years and most of her recent works could loosely be categorized as such. Her real subject is the sublime — nature's fearsome, awesome power to evoke it and paint's exquisite potential to describe it, to become it. "Untitled (Yellow Swell)," among the smallest panels at just 18 by 24 inches, depicts a placid sea with electrifying intensity. The ocean is a thick slab of purple beneath an acid yellow sky; the stillness belies an atmospheric toxicity.

On the grand scale of the largest paintings (up to 8 by 12 feet), the L.A.-based Bedford keeps the horizon extremely low, texturing the roiling sea with dense black ink hatchmarks, dangling in the sky oddly languorous streaks of lightning, tilting ships in the tempest and staging a consistently tense friction between flat brown planes and luminous turquoise gestures, concrete gray and that buzzing, ozone-charged yellow.

A small group of glass vials and a vaporizer (made in collaboration with Dane Mitchell) are more esoteric, and less interesting, attempts at capturing a scent specific to the expanse and volatility of the sea. The paintings more than manage that visually, delivering both a jolt of immediacy and a lingering, time-release intrigue.

-- Leah Ollman