

# GINA WERFEL



*Interface*

JANUARY 30 - MARCH 2, 2018 · KORN GALLERY · DREW UNIVERSITY

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Korn Gallery  
Dorothy Young Center for the Arts  
Drew University  
Madison, NJ 07940

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# GINA WERFEL

## *Interface*

Curated by Lee Arnold

JANUARY 30 - MARCH 2, 2018

**DREW** KORN GALLERY  
DOROTHY YOUNG CENTER FOR THE ARTS  
DREW UNIVERSITY

FRONT COVER:  
*Trace*  
2017, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches

*Clearing*  
2017  
porcelain enamel on steel  
72 x 72 inches cut into 7 panels

Werfel's installation in R. Burnett Miller Park in Sacramento, CA broke apart the design of her small painting "Thicket," re-creating the fragments in enameled steel. Walking through the park, pedestrians can discover, piece by piece, every part of the original painting. The painting is no longer a passive presence; a six-foot panel in the shape of a frame allows pedestrians to physically enter the painting and imagine how its fragments, scattered physically through the landscape, all fit together.





*Ceiling*  
2016, acrylic and mixed media on paper, 45 x 29 1/4 inches

## *Palimpsests and a Dynamic Everyday: the Paintings of Gina Werfel*

Jennifer Samet

Gina Werfel's paintings engage a process of aggregation and excavation. Ribbons of painterly marks congregate near the frame, around a lighter oval center. They suggest a multiplicity of voices, and also incise the surface, reminding us of the fragmented nature of our past and autobiography—our tendency to erase parts and prioritize others.

A reproduction of Andrea Pozzo's ceiling fresco, "Triumph of St. Ignatius of Loyola" (1685) hangs in Werfel's Davis, California studio: a source of inspiration for ultimately abstract forms and composition. Werfel's use of the image is clearest in her painting "Ceiling" (2016), where she transforms the arabesques of ascending figures adorned in fluttering draperies into strokes of sensual color on a diaphanous ground. While Pozzo's purpose was to create a grand illusion of perspective to celebrate the founder of the Jesuit order, Werfel uses the compositional device to recognize pauses as much as exuberant passages.

Over the last year, Werfel used a small painting on panel as the basis for a public art project in a Sacramento park titled "Clearing." The piece reinforces an ongoing linkage between Werfel's abstraction and the landscape, in a new way. The original source image was enlarged and transposed into component parts on porcelain enamel panels. Several of these panels, presented across an outer walkway, are in the format of a frame-like opening. In Werfel's work, the compositional symbol of an opening into space can denote an examination of the layers of a woman's life. Along with art historical referents, Werfel mines "souvenirs" and decorative objects as source material. She has used her son's childhood



*Textile*  
2017  
acrylic on canvas  
12 x 9 inches

drawings and old dolls to generate forms in her paintings. Some of her passages recall lettering and more quotidian patterns, like condensation on a windowpane.

Following a semester in Singapore to teach at Yale-NUS College, she began using Chinese paper and lace decorations as stencils for spray-painting sections of her work, as in "Textile" and "Asian Dream." These aggregations of multiple voices become a statement about what can constitute a painting. They consider the aspects of our collective and gendered existence, which are not privileged: motherhood, craft, play, patterns of our everyday life.

Recording transitory, shifting experience becomes the real subject of Werfel's painting. Her brushstrokes, and their orchestration, suggest musical notation. She was a plein-air

*Asian Dream*  
2017  
acrylic on canvas  
40 x 24 inches





*Junction*  
2017, monoprint, 22 x 30 inches



*Wiped Out*  
2017, monoprint, 22 x 30 inches

landscape painter for many years, and transitioned to abstraction around 2005. Looking at both Werfel's landscape paintings and her abstractions calls to mind Joan Mitchell's comment to the poet-critic John Ashbery, "I'm trying to remember what I felt about a certain cypress tree and I feel if I remember it, it will last me quite a long time." Mitchell's statement purposefully complicates her relationship to landscape: implicating memory and time into the equation of perception.

Louis Finkelstein, the painter-scholar who was a teacher of Werfel's at the New York Studio School, posited similar ideas about Mitchell:

*Virtually all of her paintings are in some sense landscapes. Yet in what sense? Are they organizations of spatial relations...a set of symbols...a recall of retinal impressions...the species of distribution of focus and unfocus, of closed and opened, of weighted and unweighted, or in and out; are they the rhythms of landscape or of body and eye movements while in landscape; are they calligraphic play involving an analogy of brushstrokes to natural forms...are they the recall of specific landscape or of the modes of transformation of landscape into art; or are they indeed all of these and perhaps more?*



*Looped*  
2016, oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches



ABOVE:  
*Slash*  
2017, monoprint, 30 x 22 inches

RIGHT:  
*Idle Play*  
2017, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches





These ideas—in particular, a calligraphic play where brushstrokes are analogized to real forms—are relevant to Werfel's work. (Werfel also directed a summer art program in Paris in the 1970s, and took students to visit Joan Mitchell at her studio near Giverny.) Werfel's paintings suggest the process of recalling glimpses of sounds and place and embedding them in paint—like de Kooning's famous statement, “Content...is a glimpse of something, an encounter, you know, like a flash—it's very tiny, very tiny, content.”

Werfel's paintings also reflect different ways of moving through space. Werfel is a swimmer and grew up on Long Island; and her compositional organization can suggest moving through water. She also paints on the studio floor, moving around the work and changing its orientation. Her marks reflect this kind of dynamism, even though they are not “fast” paintings.

There is a visual pleasure that is unmistakable in Werfel's energetic, confetti-like marks, and her palette. The painter Wayne Thiebaud has been a friend and colleague at the University of California, Davis, where Werfel has taught since 2000. The equivalence that Thiebaud creates between impasto paint and the delectation of sweets is not unrelated to the sensuous aspects of Werfel's color and brushstrokes. However, Werfel refrains from closing her marks into recognizable forms, instead piercing the surface to focus on the nature of layering. Paintings such as “Washed Away,” “Wiped Out,” “Trace,” and “Slash” suggest how memory and experience can disintegrate. Her painting process, which incorporates transfer, collage and stencils, as well as monoprinting, reflects the impulse to re-trace and re-imagine.

Another teacher of Werfel's was the painter Andrew Forge, who, after a creative crisis, began working with a repeated unit of mark making: a dot or dash. It was a way to conceptually aggregate the mark into an overall, pulsating surface—and to consider the integrity of each unit. Werfel's work also acknowledges these tendencies: the desire to create pattern through repeating marks, and the individual, fleeting glimpse. She both mines and effaces these passages through perceptual experience, generating an active, energized palimpsest.

*Jennifer Samet is a New York City-based art historian, curator, and writer. She is the director of research at Eric Firestone Gallery. She also lectures at the New York Studio School. She is the author of the column “Beer with a Painter,” in Hyperallergic Weekend Edition.*

*Question*  
2016, oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches

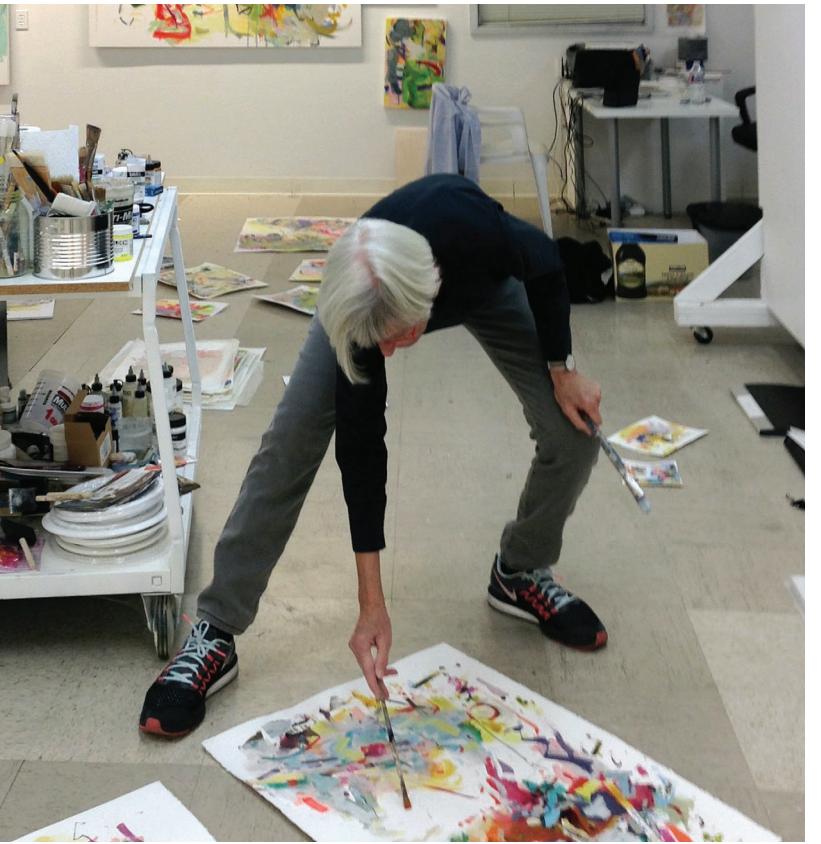


Photo: Hearne Pardee

*Trained at Columbia University, the New York Studio School and Hamilton College, Gina Werfel has been featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions. Inspired by a stay in Singapore in 2015, where she taught at Yale-NUS College, she began to layer stencils over her gestural brush marks, and while a visiting artist at the American Academy in Rome in 2016, she renewed her interest in Baroque ceiling paintings and incorporated their spatial complexity into her compositions.*

*Werfel has also been awarded residencies at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center in Italy, the Djerassi Foundation in California, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and Yosemite National Park. She recently completed a public art commission in Burnett Miller Park in McKinley Village in Sacramento.*

*Werfel is a Professor of Art at University of California, Davis.*

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BACK COVER:  
*Borders*  
2017, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 40 x 36 inches

