

# JOHN BERGGRUEN GALLERY

228 GRANT AVENUE SAN FRANCISCO CALIFORNIA 94108 TEL 415-781-4629

FAX 415-781-0126 GALLERY@BERGGRUEN.COM WWW.BERGGRUEN.COM

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Squeak Carnwath**

*Was*

*Am*

**March 5 – 28, 2009**

**John Berggruen Gallery** is pleased to present an exhibition of new paintings by California-based artist Squeak Carnwath. *Was Am* marks Carnwath's eighth solo exhibition at the gallery and comes on the outset of her retrospective at the Oakland Museum of California. John Berggruen Gallery will host an opening reception for the artist on Thursday, March 5 in conjunction with First Thursday.

Aptly titled, *Was Am* “refers to paintings I WAS doing and paintings I AM doing.” There is an undeniable continuity in the vocabulary of her work throughout her career that is obvious in the 9 new paintings and 2 works on paper on display here – an endurance of symbolism and diaristic expression that allows her work to be easily identifiable, regardless of the year of creation, as a Squeak Carnwath. Many of the same characters and symbols from her previous series have returned in new iterations; urns and one-sided records suggesting the finite nature of life, Fayum-like heads hinting at the same and also bearing witness to that which has been captured in paint, tree stumps representing the tree of life and hope, hands to represent touch, and texts all make their way into this new body of work. Some of these very symbols are remnants of an even older, shared language - visual artifacts of an ancient Etruscan code. Carnwath utilizes these images to demonstrate the endurance of the universal themes of loneliness and loss, making the universal personal and the personal universal. Despite this, her work is not intended to be melancholy or sad. Rather, she believes that death and loss are both necessary to the realization of happiness and the living of a full life.

Carnwath views painting as a form of address. “It is a non-verbal form of speech,” she states, “although I use words too. Partly, using the words is a form of shorthand, and also a way toward intimacy, depending on what is written.”<sup>1</sup> This dualistic approach to text in painting is perceptible in works like *Manifestation* and *Your Life*; the former being a simultaneously intimate, personal, and humanly poignant exploration of the meaning of painting and the exercise of viewing in a pared down canvas where words are the only focal point; the latter work composed mainly of images and colors but including texts in the form of lists and the omnipresent graffiti-like “Guilt-free zone” that seemingly offers both the artist and the viewer the protection to inhabit a particular moment in time and be attentive to it. Carnwath elevates painting over other art forms, in part because she believes painting has the capacity to document like no other medium. As she keenly states in a painting from an earlier series, titled *Sign Language* (2000), “The first talking pictures were not movies.”

Squeak Carnwath was born in Pennsylvania and currently lives and works in Oakland, California. She attended Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont before enrolling at the California College of Arts and Crafts, where she received her MFA in 1977. She is currently a professor of art at the University of

---

<sup>1</sup> John Berggruen Gallery. [Squeak Carnwath: Life Line](#). “Squeak Carnwath in Conversation with Richard Whittaker”, San Francisco: John Berggruen Gallery, 2001. 11 color plates

California, Berkeley. She was a SECA (Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art) award winner, given by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, in 1980 and the recipient of grants from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1980 and 1985, a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1994, and the Award for Visual Artists from the Flintridge Foundation in 2002. Her work can be found in many private and public collections including the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Brooklyn Museum and the Oakland Museum of California.

Carnwath's paintings will be the focus of an upcoming retrospective, entitled *Squeak Carnwath: Painting is No Ordinary Object*, at the Oakland Museum of California, April 25 – August 23, 2009. This will be the first retrospective of her work organized by a major West Coast museum and will include more than forty paintings not exhibited collectively since 1994. The exhibition is accompanied by a 160-page monograph (co-published by Pomegranate Press) with essays by poet and art critic John Yau as well as Karen Tsujimoto, senior curator of art at the Oakland Museum.

For further information please contact Tamar Nahmias at 415.781.4629 or [tamar@berggruen.com](mailto:tamar@berggruen.com)

**Gallery hours: Monday - Friday: 9:30-5:30, Saturday: 10:30-5:00**