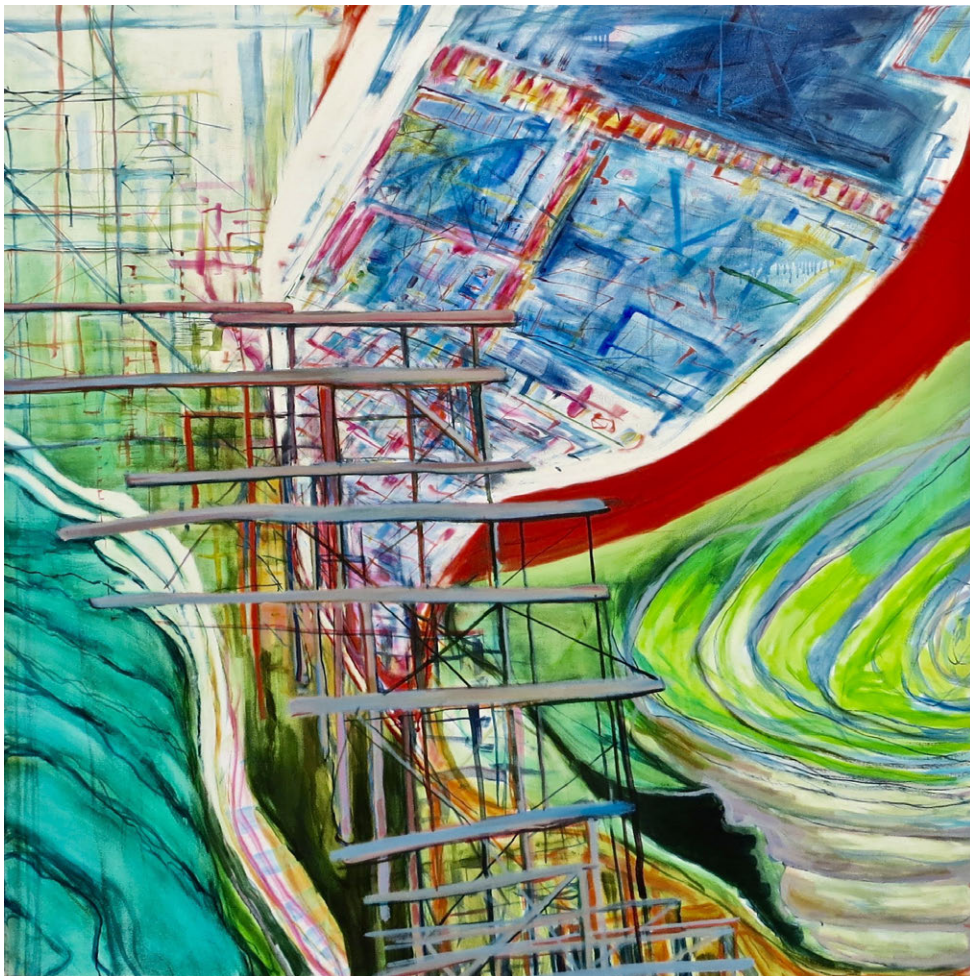


JUDITH BELZER

RECENT PAINTINGS



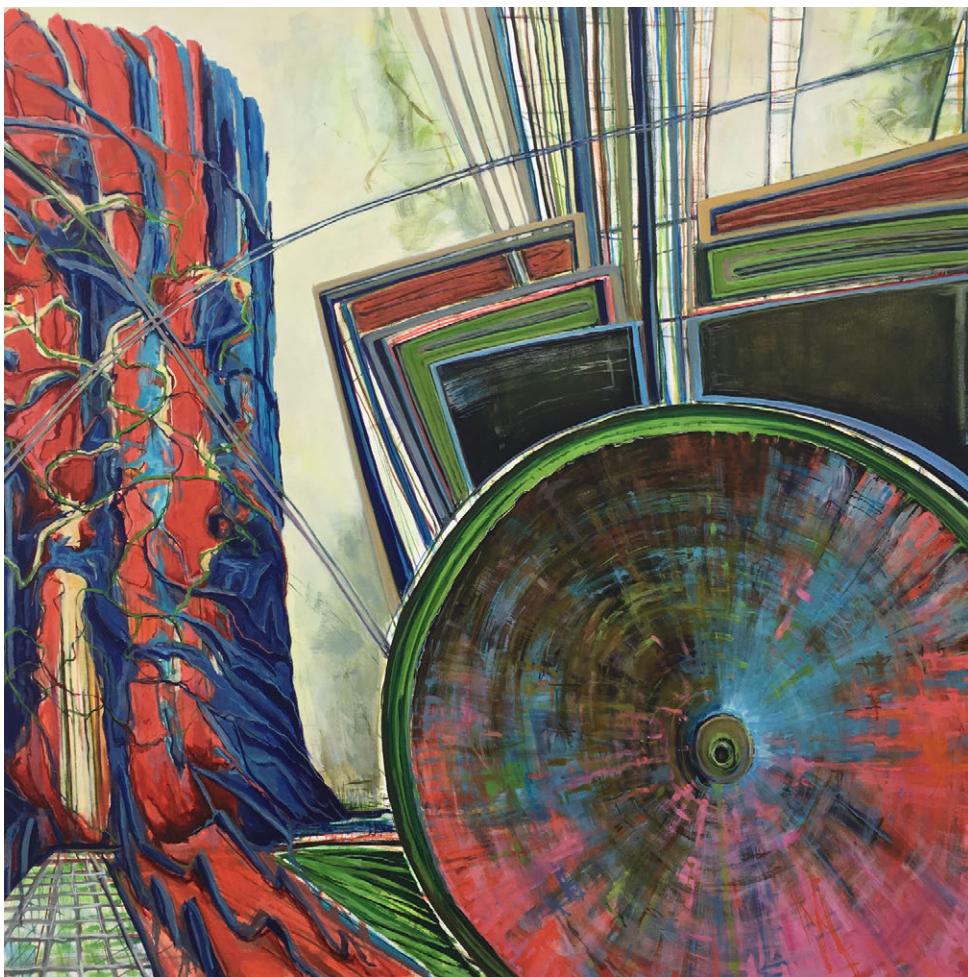
HalfEmptyHalfFull #16,
60x60", 2018, oil on canvas



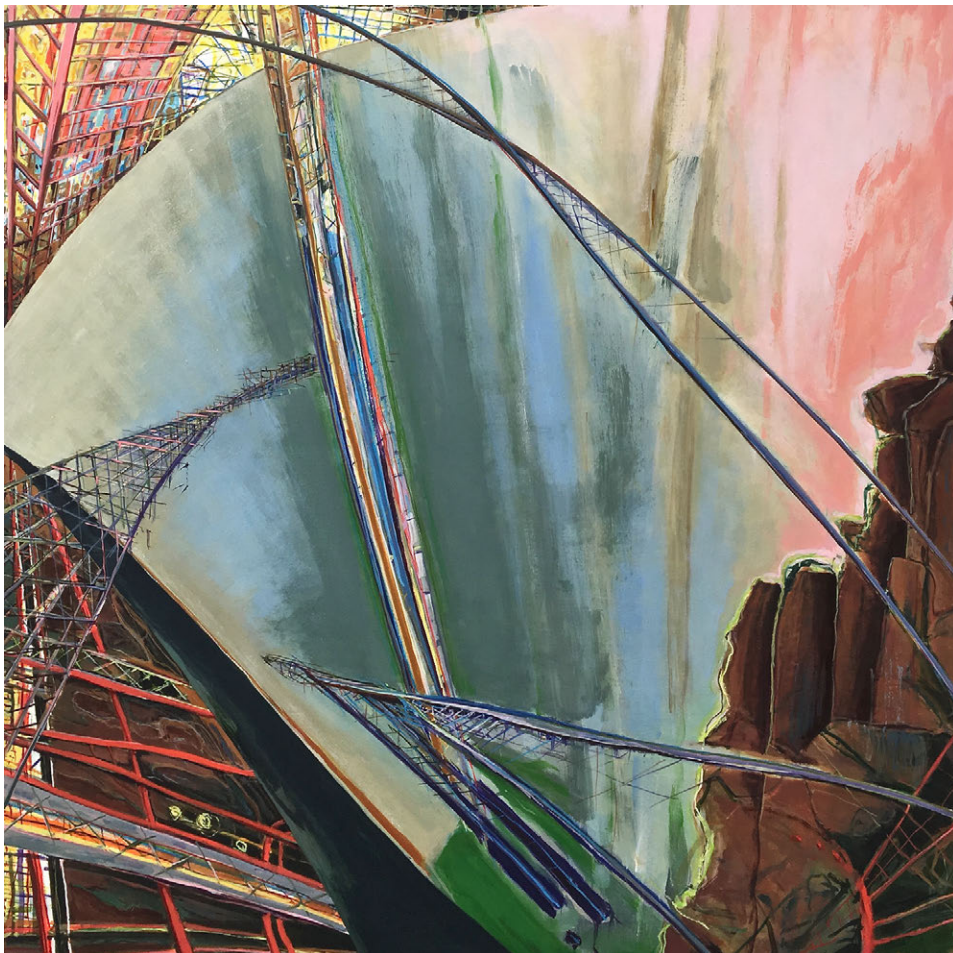
Canal Zone #5
50x50", 2015, oil on canvas



Leviathan #13
30x30", 2016, oil on canvas



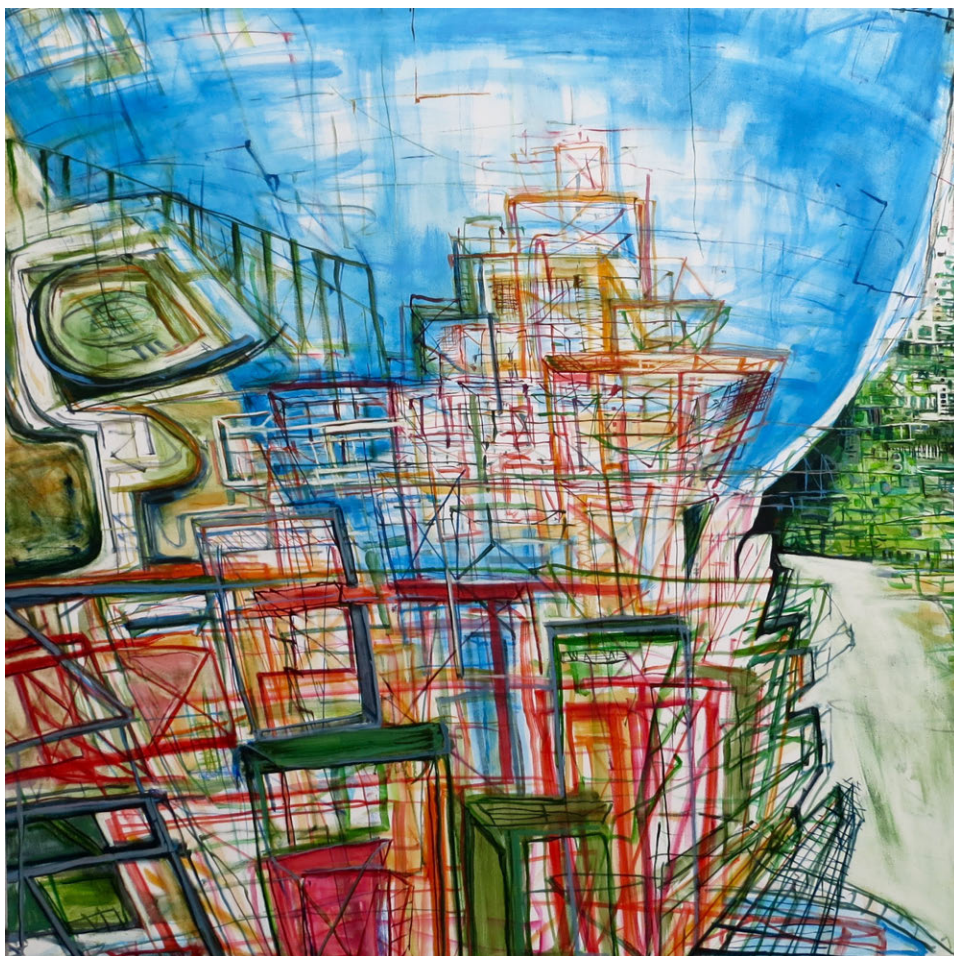
HalfEmptyHalfFull #10
56x56", 2017, oil on canvas



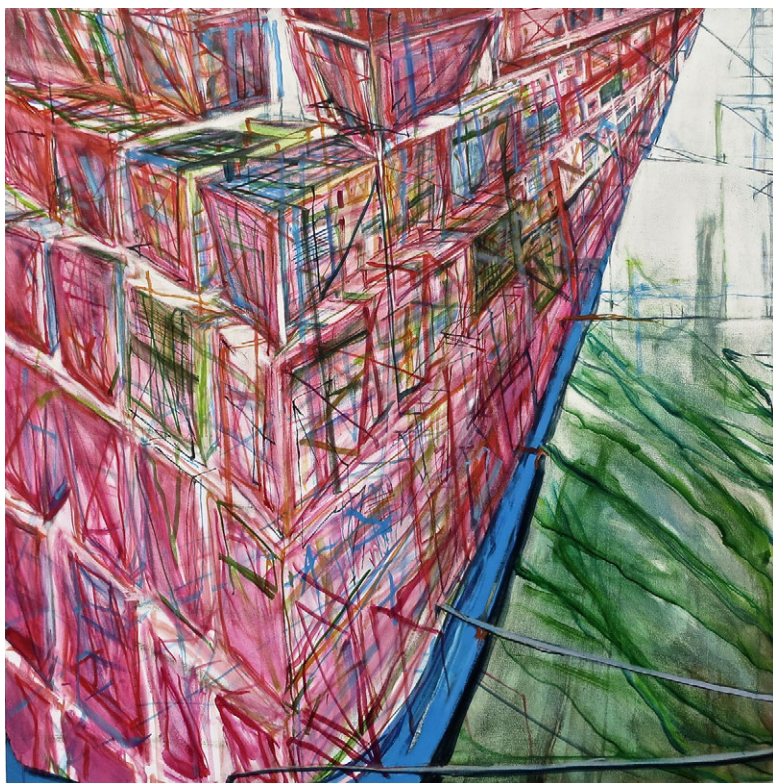
HalfEmptyHalfFull #11
56"x56," 2017, oil on canvas



Canal Zone #1
40x40", 2015, oil on canvas



Canal Zone #8
56x56", 2015, oil on canvas



Canal Zone #6
40x40", 2015, oil on canvas

J u d i t h B e l z e r

The improvisational representation in Belzer's paintings of magnitude in the color plates above is illusionist but breezily so. It is both indebted to the structural and mechanical planning of the structures it alludes to and contrapuntal in its noncompliant *abstract* precision, getting it right (right enough) while standing apart in artistic freedom. The chief emphasis of the paintings is on their own step by step marking, on a making in which each mark is an answer to the mark behind it and a question to be answered by the next. The paintings wonder at but are also wounded with wonder by monumental industrial space. Their objections are choked back. They use the bold sights to conjure strong warp-angled spaces of their own. Oh to be a painter like Judith Belzer and invent space.

Belzer is a realist, but not a "literal" one. The paintings amplify the loud dialogue of verticals, horizontals, curves, and diagonals in the industrial scenes without losing sight of the differentiated objects within them – they are half-allusion, half-illusion – and without sacrificing color. Belzer doesn't often paint blacks, browns, or grays so as to guarantee the harmony of other colors. Her colors are vibrant without apology. They are a large part of the quality of the *immanence of the creative act* in the paintings: but a moment ago, as it were, paintings still in formation – this mark treading on the heels of the last one, multiple patterns put down patteringly on the run, a heating up of color here, there a cooling down, tunings of color resonance. The Panama Canal paintings in particular speak the process that went into making them, whereas the monumental structures they respond to shout out the *terminal* result of their making; the projects they illustrate were in a sense completed before they were started; they have taken form as virtual replicas of themselves. Belzer's improvised bold liberties with the material of her "edgeland" areas ("mongrel spaces") serve the resonance of the whole painting. She has no appetite for measured unity, that cut-off, that wrong fiction revolving around its own axis. Michel Serres suggests in *Geometry* that geometry came from the technologies of architects, masons, stone-cutters, and their blockages in space. Belzer inclines toward transparency, you can even see through her containers and through the farthest off tubes in her scaffolds. .

She paints the massive bulk of dams with both awe and a certain critical standoffishness, instinctively objecting, as a painter, to their resolute opposition to plasticity, their stupid immovability. True, in *HalfEmptyHalfFull* #16 (173), the beautiful curve of her Hoover dam asserts itself with something of the volume and surface in sculpture, she gives it that. But the structure looks

locked deep into its own luminous concrete, and, as if goosed by the backed-up water behind it, tucks its butt in. At the same time, the blocked Prussian-blue water (with ever so slight ripples suggested by a few strokes of pale blue) is immobilized in dry opacity, as dead as it is gorgeous. Here, the painter rations her spontaneous brush activity; but the strong abstraction of the draughtsmanship bears her adamant mark. *She* puts the dam in danger more than it threatens *her* in its massiveness. Touches of anarchic features sprig it. Force is being held in check by an opposing force, her own.

In the Glen Canyon painting (177), the dam, shown perhaps as not yet quite finished, sits under a hint of the breathtakingly-high, lacy public-traffic bridge finished first (in 1958), and is plagued by a few structural bees-in-the-hair, jointed metal extensions whose functions (whether crane lifting, access, or what have you) are at once intrusive and obscure. The effect is to keep the monstrous concrete structure looking *under*, still *subject to process*. The steep perspective adds to this impression, and so does the draconian square of the canvas. Belzer's impulse is to annoy the beast, puzzle the form.

What artists and engineers have in common, what links them as designers, is the utilization of redundancy within a shape. In discursive writing, redundancy has the well-known defect of being dulling, but poetry feeds on it while disguising it; and more importantly, well beyond that, redundancy forms the cosmic basis of order, in all that disorder. Repetition, duplication, *this again, this all over the place*, a wild proliferation of elements in world upon world, is what bears us up and depreciates us. Men whose forklift trucks place rows of packed goods on dockyards, whose cranes hoist containers onto cargo ships, who see to it that very fat ocean liners, nosed by tugs, are steadied by cable-lines in a canal just a tiny bit wider than they are – these men work with repeated forms and perform repeated actions. Their surroundings echo the repetition.

Belzer likes patterns as much as she likes being cavalier with them. She seizes on the scene's repetitions and repeats them with a zestful hardly respectful brush. A scaffold is a perfect icon of redundant formations and its airy shape can easily be superimposed onto other objects *against original plan*. Train tracks are barred redundancy. So is the lacework of the stretched-out rectangle of the boom that drops and raises the cranes' hooks. As are shipping containers, which would be like multiple monotonous canvases if Belzer did not pepper them with vertical

and horizontal hash marks, diagonals, even x's, in a shake-'em-up erotics of pigments, a vitality also extended to the container-like scaffolds (if indeed they are not scaffold-like containers) in *Canal Zone #8* (179).

Belzer depicts the canal zone redundancies with inspired inaccuracy. Rapt with its compositional possibilities and indifferent to commercial transportation as such, her brush thin-lines or daubs them in with a touch of love and a touch of impatience. Her scaffold verticals and horizontals often extend beyond their presumed supports, escaping functional purpose. A pink swath may bloom on a container. Why? Because the color was wanted there. Reality is alignment *and* deviation, and art is anarchic. The world is poised like a globe on a fingertip, spinning from its own countervailing tendencies.

Belzer has noted how her square canvases squeeze the depicted scene into a power field. She presses scenes from the sides like a concertina *and* from the top and bottom. The square as such, of course, epitomizes regularity, being the same on all side, one line backing around on itself, self-enclosingly – it's one of the pure spaces of geometry; but in Belzer's recent paintings its geometry all but forgets itself as it pushes inward, as it were, tightening around and crowding together multiple disparate forms. It becomes a shape of strict exclusion and strict inclusion. It compels a certain shallowness of perspective that yet does not make a break from nature, from literal three-dimensionality, like the one familiar from modern painting since Miró in the twenties. On the other hand, what we see is not an "inside" that we feel we can enter. The rows of merchandise and the train tracks beside the canal in *Canal Zone #1* come zooming at you, if with a sparing swerve. Safer to stay where you are and not project. And better not step off into the abyss in *HalfEmptyHalfFull #11*, the painting of Glen Canyon dam, or the one in *Canal Zone #5* (174), where a steep descending foreground of scaffolds with outsized board-decking is countered by one or two (I will settle on two) equally steep downward slopes behind, half blue canal industry, half jungle, the first angling in at 1:30, so to speak, the other at 2:30, in relation/non-elation. These slopes and the frontal slope stand/slip/collide in a tension of independent planes (similar to the one in *Canal Zone #8*). Belzer's unfaithful illusionism leads to missteps.

On her website the painter takes a decided though hardly exclusively political view of her scenes of human-built structures that imperiously pour or carve themselves into the natural landscape. She thinks of her paintings as at least potential

warnings about the arrogant misuse of nature bred by the Anthropocene. At the same time, she's openly drawn, not to human faces and figures (it can't even be imagined!), but to the sublimity of engineered magnitude and the redundancies of manufactured and stacked or interlocking shapes. She doesn't depict the damage caused by human building and human digging (though what may be torn up jungle in the upper left of *Canal Zone #1* (178) looks like a discarded rolled-up giant rug); she's not a grim moralist. Rather, she herself inclines a little to a grand, epic scale without making the mistake of employing, at this late date in the history of art, a grand *manner* – she stops short of obviously ambitious, self-congratulatory, resolved effects, keeping to warm colors (even her blues can burn) and at times painting with a springy lightness and (again) translucent washes. Whereas many of us speak from the flying incident we are, Belzer-as-artist seems to hover stilly over her big subjects like a spy drone poised at an angle a bit off to the side, her vantage point dominant (reared up) over scenes exhibiting “our will to dominate and exploit” – eco-speak that veils a number of things, such as the need to provide power and water to huge populations and irrigation water to farms, economize on fuel, and engage in trade among nations, a practice that has linked and sustained peoples for millennia . . . So: pros and cons.*

But the paintings themselves are neither pro nor con. They are suspended in a resistant awe of monumental feats of engineering, including the leviathanic sterns of ships (she looked up at one while travelling on a tugboat towed behind it). They delight in the spectacle of it, as Dickinson and Whitman delighted in the mechanical Leviathan of their day, the locomotive, but at this later date in the history of ecology respond with mixed feelings. For me, and probably for the painter, who is well aware of the contradictory values in her work (“experiences are not all one thing or another”; “. . . both profoundly disturbing and exquisitely beautiful,” etc.), the awe of magnitude in the paintings overshadows ecological fears without eliminating them. Why is scaffolding faintly imprinted on the rain forest in *Canal Zone #6* (180) and even more so in *Canal Zone #8*? The reason, I think, is partly allegorical, a recognition of the human will to expand and displace, and partly a spurt of painterly exuberance and self-assertion in the midst of so much that is stimulating but fixed-in-place.

Belzer began to head toward major painting a few years ago when she moved to a hillside house that overlooks residential and industrial cites of the Bay Area (a move she mentions in her website). She now spontaneously transports her

* Recently, the Colorado reached the Pacific again after decades of falling short – but only because of the pulsing motion deliberately set off by a new dam near the end of its course!

everyday lofty perspective to her canvass's subjects and, moreover, paints on relatively large canvases (easily picture-window size), to great effect. The high-up point of view contributes to a sublimity of magnitude rare since Clyfford Still, in whose work, however, natural detail is famously sacrificed to achieve it (not to go back to the 19th century giants of monumental American landscape). Belzer's recent paintings are complete successes. The satisfaction one takes in them is not adulterated by mistakes of plastic conception or faults of performance. You can't pull them apart; they would just instantly snap back to what they are and know they should be. And they don't look like anyone else's. They're fascinatingly . . . *odd*. They have the unsettling power of the new.

— Calvin Bedient