

Iowa Artist Breaks from Her Trap

Written by Judith Malone
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Ellen Wagener does the kind of drawings that work so well for so many people, there isn't much incentive to try anything new. Over a 10-year career, she has mastered a pastel version of genre painting, paying homage to the same row-crop agriculture, rolling terrain, and big sky that so captivated native son Grant Wood. Not surprisingly, she is sought out by regional collectors; the work is pleasantly reassuring and impeccably executed. What's not to like?

Last year, Wagener migrated to Phoenix of all places from her native Iowa. Her fans wondered if red rocks and cacti would soon emerge as her backyard motifs. She is a backyard kind of artist, after all. She has never been pretentious about her work. Wagener sightings were commonplace in the pastoral back roads of DeWitt, where the artist was born and raised. Again and again she returned to favored panoramas, faithfully capturing their essence in shifting light and seasonal variation. And like Monet and his haystacks, Wagener mined familiar touchstones transformed by atmospheric change.

Her transplantation to the West augered the same faithful representation of a new backyard. And there are what I would call predictable forays in that direction in the exhibit *On the Land: Drawing the Cycles of Nature* at the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, as Wagener samples what's beyond the Arizona back door in a group titled *The Ten Plagues & Contemporary Exodus*

But the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art and Curator Jane Milosch also rolled out a shocker called *F5 Tornado*, made up of seven 60-by-40-inch panels. *F5 Tornado* is a truly seminal work. It is a portent, a scream, and a combustible memorial to Wagener's creative journey. Sometimes artists are trapped, like the rest of us, when they do something too well. Expectations demand to be met, and change becomes an unacceptable risk. Wagener has raised a son to near-manhood on her own terms, as a full-time artist. She has lulled her audience with exquisitely controlled mark-making, and in the process fashioned a trap for herself.

Her son is now six-feet tall, she has undertaken a perilous journey to a strange place, and *F5 Tornado* is the explosive, magnificent result. It makes me want to be an art teacher. Stand up close to one of those panels. The perfect marks are all there, dancing in the foreground, but they have surrendered to abstraction and flux. Her earthy, Midwestern palette has survived, but is at risk. There is a loose, muddy dragging going on in the background, where once she rendered the pristine, static skylscapes that have so pleased her audience. The earth and sky are changing places; a dark, rich energy is on the prowl. The sky, in fact, is so full of earth, and the earth contains crystalline particles of sky, like broken glass. Every discreet mark is in swirling, frenetic motion, destined for the unknowable. Like Ellen Wagener, they can't turn back.

Wagener's exhibit runs through July 6. For more information, visit (<http://www.crma.org>).