

## PAINTING CONVERSATIONS

Primal, Non-Objective Work Provides Space to Think

by Nancy K. Weant



*The Art of Solitude*, 2006-2007, oil, mixed media on panel, 84" x 144"  
Collection of the Daum Museum of Contemporary Art



*Silence Like Thunder*, 2004-2007, oil, mixed media on panel, 96" x 120"



*Mother Fuchsia*, 2007, oil, mixed media on panel, 60" x 60"

Ron Ehrlich's lowercase exhibition title, *in other words*, fits aptly since his mural-sized oil and mixed media paintings on panel speak volumes to those willing to listen. Each of us experiences an onslaught of visual imagery in our daily lives, and whether we like it or not, the power beneath the surface of the visual images is daunting. Ehrlich recognizes this and uses his skill to manipulate imagery to affect his audience. Those who take pleasure in thought-provoking non-objective painting must make an effort to visit the Daum Museum of Contemporary Art soon and join in the conversation that Ehrlich ignites.

This conversation begins immediately upon entering the first gallery on the main level and viewing *Silence Like Thunder*, which measures an impressive 96 by 120 inches. *Silence Like Thunder* begins the conversation with a large swath of white streaking diagonally across two massive vertical panels. A lightning bolt comes to mind not only because of the title, but also because the shape resembles an actual lightning bolt. It cuts through both panels and leaves free areas above and below it. The area above appears to be daylight with

its warmer colors throughout, and below, every color imaginable drips from the streak of white into a dark pool of blue reminiscent of a stormy sky at night. This majestic painting opens the heavens symbolically and sets the stage for the conversation to come. A narrow line of pink goes all the way across the top of the two panels connecting them and drawing the eye upward to the two galleries above, where the real conversation begins in earnest.

The larger of the two galleries upstairs contains a roomful of spectacular paintings, all vying for the viewer's attention. At one end of the gallery, *Story Teller* grabs the viewer's attention with its sheer size, nearly nine feet square. The surface of this work shows evidence of the artist's hand everywhere. The working and re-working of the multiple layers of paint creates an interesting texture throughout. Tobacco-colored stains streak down the painting, and in several areas burn marks appear on the surface, giving it the aged and weathered appearance of someone who has lived long enough to recount the stories of the past to an audience unaccustomed to the lessons it can offer.

At the opposite end of the gallery, *The Art of Solitude* stands out from the other paintings in the room with its soft palette of tans, creams, whites, and pinks. This work seems to be the mediator between the conversations in the room. When one tires of the visual talk, then one can take a break here. Just to its right hangs *Mother Fuchsia*, a much smaller painting at 60 by 60 inches. Perhaps the title alludes to the voice of reason that is necessary when too much static erodes listening altogether. Ehrlich's primal, non-objective paintings with their many layers of paint, overworked surfaces, and apparent burn marks succeed in assisting the thinking individual by providing a space for the mind to contemplate ideas, often neglected in contemporary society.

Historian and art educator Nancy K. Weant holds a BA in art, art history, and archaeology and a master's of art education from the University of Missouri, Columbia. She currently is an adjunct lecturer in the art department at the University of Central Missouri, Warrensburg.