

In her beguiling new series of moveable frescoes, Los Angeles artist Sara Bright renders an abstract allusion to poetry. During the last year, Bright has devoted herself to this new - though ancient - medium, mastering and refining her approach to its demanding, meticulous process and distinctive properties. For her fall solo exhibit at George Lawson Gallery in San Francisco, Bright will present a selection of small frescoes characterized by waves of delicate color applied with dexterity, an exacting instinct for composition and a subtle but pervasive lyrical harmony: in effect, wordless poetry. "They're definitely distilled images," says Bright. "Growing up I loved poetry - art and poetry. I've always had an interest in distillation... How can you say what you mean in the least possible words? These paintings are like that."

Bright, who earned her MFA at UC Berkeley, and BA in Studio Art and English Literature at Wesleyan University, was first introduced to the fresco process during her residency at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 2010. The medium intrigued her enough so that she kept it in the back of her mind, re-visiting it with serious intent in 2014 when she noticed that iLia Anossov, widely considered the West Coast fresco expert, was teaching a continuing education class at Otis College of Art and Design. Only three students were registered. When the other two students left, Bright ended up having a weekly private tutorial with Anossov.

Unlike frescoes painted on a wall - or ceiling as in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel visions - moveable frescoes are created on a portable ground. Bright applies three layers of plaster onto a burlap surface stretched over a wood panel, continuing the plaster around the edges so the finished piece has an organic three-dimensional form. "They are sculptural paintings. They have weight. They have a different mass than a painting on canvas," Bright says. "I always have been interested in paintings as objects."

There's an integral purity to fresco. The top layer of plaster, or *intonaco*, creates an impeccably smooth surface, key for Bright, who formerly applied multiple layers of gesso on her canvases, seeking a pristine smoothness on which to paint. She describes fresco as an "elemental" medium. The plaster and paint are made of pure materials - sand, marble meal, pigment and water. Many of the pigments come from natural mineral sources, like pink clay Pipestone found in Minnesota, used by Native Americans for making ceremonial objects, and Blue Ridge Hematite from the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Before painting the prepared surface, Bright creates elegant thumbnail gouache sketches, providing direction for the ultimate composition and palette. While referring to the sketches, Bright allows herself latitude to deviate. "I have to look at the sketches and then just put them aside," she observes. "[The frescoes] look really spontaneous. They are to a degree. I have to let them transform." Considering it takes a week to prepare the painting surface,

it would be risky to paint a fresco without a concept, says Bright. Also, while a canvas can be painted over, there is just one shot with fresco. Moreover, the *intonaco* is only able to absorb the pigment for a limited timeframe - perhaps two to four hours depending on ambient humidity and other conditions. The artist must paint during that brief window, before the surface becomes too dry. After investing so much into preparing the surface, the stakes seem higher to the artist. "The medium requires such intense focus and attention, when I'm painting a fresco, I'm never just messing around."

Bright dips into a melting pot of artistic disciplines for inspiration, including the work of her husband, artist Andy Byers, who creates ceramic wall sculptures, as well as 20th-century Color Field painters like Helen Frankenthaler and Jules Olitski, and classic Native American motifs. Also infused into Bright's work is her background in Japanese Sumi-e painting and Chinese calligraphy, with their characteristic gestural brushstrokes involving intense concentration and focus. "In a lot of ways, the brushstroke has become my subject," she comments.



As Bright points out, fresco is not a common contemporary medium. As such, it is associated with traditional styles of fresco painting. She draws from that tradition, while at the same time, also reaching into other, diverse, art historical practices, and branching out on her own. "It brings to mind these mythological scenes. I like that there's a gravity in that. These are serious paintings. I want them to feel deep, mythological," she says. "I still think of them as rooted in landscape... a kind of interior internal landscape."

*Sara Bright: Frescoes* is on view at George Lawson Gallery, in San Francisco, through October 10, 2015.