



ASPENPEAK

ART OF TOWN

EMERGING ARTISTS
ELEVATED CULTURE
ENLIGHTENED PHILANTHROPY

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Still Life

Amid Aspen's booming cultural scene, painter **Linda Girvin** proves that it's never too late in an artistic career to emerge anew. As the first subject in an "Art of the City" initiative showcasing arising artists and their work across the country, Girvin's visceral "Portraits" toe the line between life and death, realism and abstraction—all the while highlighting an artist in transition.

by Christine Benedetti photography by Shawn O'Connor

Linda Girvin's art is based in photography, but she doesn't use a camera. When she tells people about her work, they'll often start with technical jargon, and she'll have to divulge that she doesn't know what they're talking about.

"I have a Nikon film camera that I've had since the '70s," she says. "When I did use a camera, I liked to use it as simply as possible. I never metered or focused; it was just an extension of my hand." Considering she started the photography program at the Anderson Ranch Arts Center, her reticence for the medium today may seem like a disconnect for some, but she says that the lens got in the way. "Photographers are the observer," she says. "I'm a participant in these photographs."

By these, she's referring to the pieces in her most recent series, "Presence With Absence," which, she says, represents a strict departure from the work she produced earlier in her career. "I'm in a different head space," she says. "I think it's a totally separate body of work, and people seem to feel it's my most resolved work yet." The striated shapes of the new series have a Richter-scale feel with Rorschach-test bursts of color. And while Girvin, 68, has had a nearly four-decade career, her latest work signifies the emergence of a new process and, symbolically, a new artist.

In "Presence With Absence," she wants the audience to suspend rational thought and to absorb the work as abstractions. But, the process is so interesting that even the most far-from-reality viewer will have a hard time resisting the urge to dig into each piece's multiple layers. Quite simply, the series is composed of scanned images of dead animals, particularly birds, some mixed with acrylic paint and blown up to 48-by-56-inch posters. However, as an intensive artistic process they're "two-minute performances" that straddle two- and three-dimensions, abstraction and realism, life and transition. To produce the images, Girvin uses birds as a paintbrush. She manipulates and moves their bodies while they're being scanned to create discontinuous lines and amorphous shapes. The results are spontaneous, beautiful, and haunting.

"I think I'm doing work that's very similar to abstract expressionism or action painting," she says. Inspired by a monoprint workshop at the Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Girvin says she found the original use of scanning too "two-dimensional," but the placement of organic, three-dimensional beings onto the scanner itself worked to create depth. "The scanning is just a technique I have to use to get where I want to get."

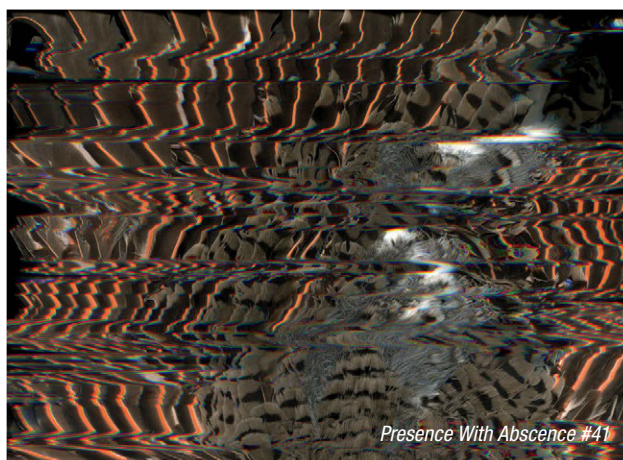
She originally began the series using fish and poultry, triggered by the stark presentation of food sources in other countries, like Mexico, where whole dead animals are lined up for purchase in markets, as compared to the "sterility" of packaged food in the States. (She often saw animals slaughtered for their meat on the farm where she grew up, in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and so food production has never been as obscure to her as to the average American.) As she started to work more with animals, her attention shifted to birds—warm-blooded creatures to which humans more easily relate, she says. "I like the beauty of birds. I like their freedom, their gestures—they have such 'ta-da' about them. Their wings: You can spread them like someone flashing a fan."

Looking more closely at her images reveals this thinking. The iridescent shimmer of a hummingbird's wing glints, and the stiff silhouette of a claw emerges through orange paint. The birds hang, suspended in a gravity-less vacuum surrounded by empty space, yet always moving. "It doesn't look like a snapshot," she says. "You get a sense of transition." For Girvin, that's the most important theme.

Girvin earned her undergraduate degree in perceptual psychology at Bucknell University, in central Pennsylvania. Instead of pursuing a career in psychology, she went back to school, in 1978, to get her Master of Fine Arts at the Tyler School of Art, in Philadelphia. When she graduated, she focused on photography. But while her earlier works reflected her tendency toward abstraction—pictures that require investigation—she soon shifted her focus to lenticular photography, a process that involves layering similar images atop one another to produce an animated effect. "The subject matter of my new work is much more

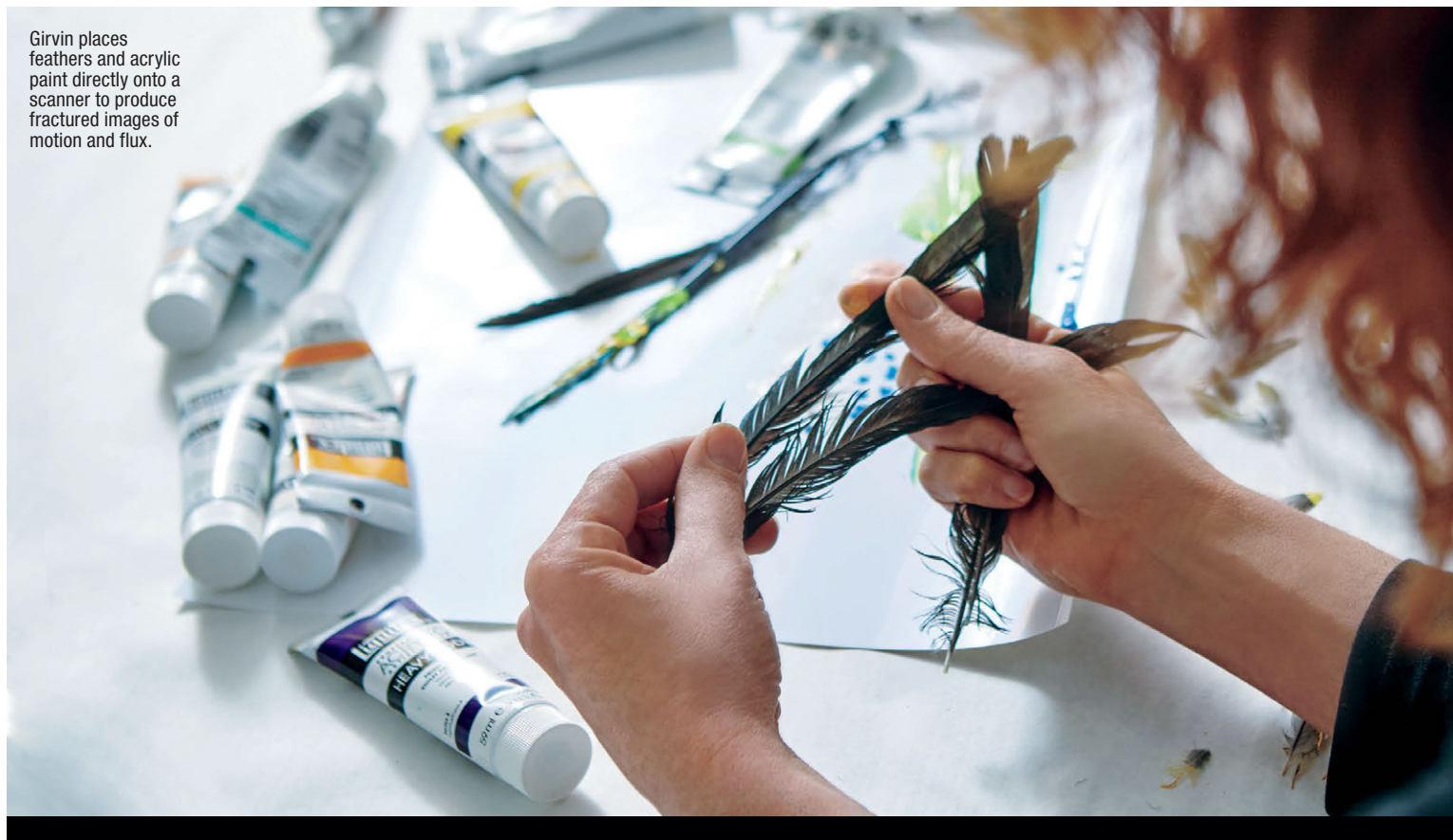


"Conventional photographers are observers. I'm a participant in these photographs."
—Linda Girvin





Girvin places feathers and acrylic paint directly onto a scanner to produce fractured images of motion and flux.



difficult than the lenticular images," she says. "I often hear from critics and dealers that [my new work] is extremely unusual and fairly profound in its use of technology to convey my emotions."

While transition and movement have always been a prevalent theme in her work, the current series, and the new artist that has emerged, didn't come about until she and her husband, architect Bill Lipsey, started to spend more time in Mexico. They recently completed building a house in San Miguel de Allende and plan to spend four to five months there each year. The rest of the year they'll spend in their Aspen home near the base of Smuggler Mountain.

"I feel closer to life and closer to death down there," she says of Mexico. "[I feel] the immediate quality, the palpable quality, and the heart down there." That synchronicity with the cycle of life has allowed her to peaceably work with a medium as ostensibly grotesque as bird carcasses. "I don't think I'm talking about death; I'm talking about life," she says, pointing to a specifically broad-stroked line next to a small bird. "These lines are transition lines. Every moment is loaded. I'm trying to get all that on a two-dimensional plane. I'm trying to push the boundaries of photography." According to one of her longtime collectors, she's succeeding.

"Linda is crossing boundaries and provoking," says Ann Koriijn, a Holland-based artist and collector. Koriijn and her husband first found Girvin's work while vacationing in Aspen. Their first purchase was from

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her lenticular series. They've continued to watch her work evolve, and, as their friendship has grown, says Koriijn, so has Girvin's work. "We own quite a bit of art, and we see people who are simply producing something that will sell," she says. "Linda does something [where] she doesn't know where it's going, but it's professional." It can actually be hard to draw the gaze away, she adds. "It's confrontational. There's something so harsh and then so beautiful with all of those colors. You don't want to think [about] what she did to get there, and [yet] it is absolutely beautiful."

In fact, Girvin doesn't want anyone to think about what she did to get there. She says that if viewers try to understand it in a logical way, they'll just be frustrated. She's taking it a step further and leaving the audience with as little information as possible. Her premiere of these works, called "Portraits," is on display at the Wylly Arts Center, in Basalt, through July 4, and the only piece of information she's giving viewers is a number—no titles, no mediums, no

dates. "It's not necessary to understanding the image," she says.

Girvin says she is finally ready for "Presence With Absence" to go public. Though, in a sense it already has—"Presence" is the re-emerging artist's latest series, from which the 10 images for "Portraits" were pulled. The works had previously only been seen by private collectors visiting her Aspen studio; now, much like the second phase of Girvin's career, they're poised for flight. **AP**