

# MICHELLE ROSS

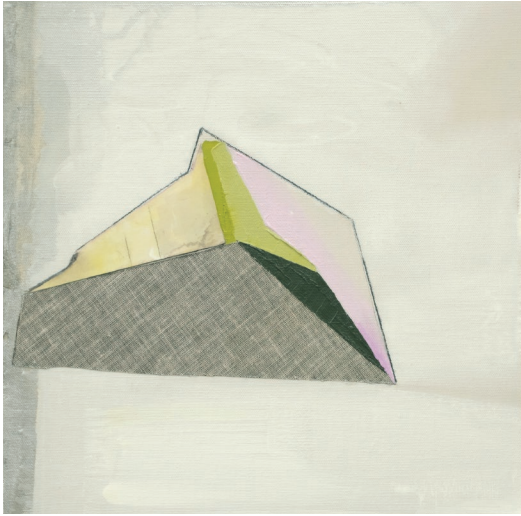




*Previous page*  
*The Moving and the Not Wanting to Be Moved (JA)*, 2019  
Gouache on paper, fabric, oil, graphite on vintage found  
canvas mounted on panel  
12 x 12 in



*Redress: With a composure periodically fractured by wailing (for D.R.)*, 2016  
Cotton, polyester, crinoline, hemp linen, spray paint, oil paint, digital print, graphite  
56 x 43 in



*Bud*, 2019  
Oil, acrylic, paper, vinyl, graphite on vintage found canvas  
mounted on panel  
12 x 12 in



*There's Also Room for Breaking Out of Living (JA)*, 2019  
Oil, graphite on vintage found canvas mounted on panel  
12 x 12 in



*The Inexperienced Miracle Worker*, 2015  
Oil, paper, plaster, chalk on birch panel  
65 x 62 in



## REDRESS: MICHELLE ROSS AND GARMENTS FOR THE INVISIBLE

by Sarah Sentilles

Michelle Ross's abstract paintings and sculptures trouble certainty. Unfolding and refolding, closing and opening, falling and rising—her images shift and change, refusing to stay in place. Looking at *The Inexperienced Miracle Worker*, I have a sense that the painting is a box that could be opened, a set of pages that could be spread out, or a void I might disappear inside. The layers of paint—purples, yellows, pinks, greys, blues, browns—seem infinite, deep.

Ross thinks about invisibility and its contradictions when she paints. “There is always something unseen, unperceived, covered, camouflaged, hidden,” she told me. “Why?” When Ross paints, she keeps in mind the human tendency to treat some beings as invisible—which really means the human tendency to refuse to see the most vulnerable among us. Because no body is invisible—ancient forest, endangered whale, honey-bee, refugee; rather, those with power refuse to see in a way that might lead to care, to responsibility, to repair, to redress.

Ross's *Redress: With a composure periodically fractured by wailing* (2016) was in progress when Philando Castile was murdered by police in Minnesota. “In the specific fabric and colors and dark center of that piece, I recognized the grief and horror that was happening.” In acknowledgment, Ross borrowed the title from an article in the *New York Times* that described Diamond Reynolds watching her partner die. It is a painting of grief, a shroud, a rending. When I look at it, I remember the biblical story about Veronica, whose name comes from the Latin words *vera* (true) and *icon* (image), and who is said to have been so moved by the sight of Jesus falling under the weight of the cross that she pushed through the crowd, past Roman soldiers, to reach him and wipe his face with her veil. In return for her tenderness, Jesus granted her an image: on that cloth, in blood and sweat, she found an imprint of his face.<sup>1</sup>

When Ross works on large, life-sized paintings, the act of making is physical—negotiating the space in her studio, moving around the panels—but it's no less physical when she's handling 12-inch square paintings that she holds in her hands. “The painting becomes really close to my body,” she said. “It is ineffable. It is almost like an imprint that is not an imprint, an imprint of me, of Michelle-ness, my sensibility, my desire to see certain colors, certain relationships.” Ross's paintings and sculptures—their folds, fabric, shapes, bends, lines—do feel like bodies, on the floor, on the wall,

but they don't look like bodies. No head, no arms, no face, no torso. Abstraction offers a way out of the impasses of representation.

Invisibility results from oppressive systems of power, but it can also be “a kind of superpower of resistance,” Ross explained. “The two don't square; I can't figure it out, which keeps me obsessed with the idea of invisibility as an image-making construct.” Though the “politics of visibility” have been central to movements for GLBTQI+ rights, visibility comes with risks in a surveillance state. In “Ten Queer Theses on Abstraction,” David Getsy claims abstraction as a “queer tactic.”<sup>2</sup> Though he notes that “some would cast tactics of opacity and camouflage as self-denial, self-loathing, or fear,” he argues that the refusal to be seen can also be an act of resistance.<sup>3</sup> Refusing to be understood, to be named—in other words, *abstraction*—can be read as a political act. Getsy writes about the pleasure of hiding, of failing to fit into how people have been trained to perceive, of remaining beyond classification.<sup>4</sup> When the categories themselves are suspect—queer/straight, white/black, woman/man, citizen/immigrant—then to be unrecognizable is, for some, a way to remain free. “Abstraction turns away from the imitation of how the world looks,” Getsy writes, “and instead it creates an alternative in which to imagine and image other ways of being and relating.”<sup>5</sup> He continues, “Abstraction can be one means to resist the cultural marking of the human body.”<sup>6</sup>

Ross has long wanted to make a series of pieces that hang on the wall that are “garments for the invisible.” Fabric is a recurring material in her paintings—cloth, scrap material, used paint rags, odd bits, leftovers from sewing projects. She understands fabric as a “liminal boundary.” When she was creating work for *The Desire*, a show at The Art Gym, she made some conventionally supported paintings on panel that failed. She told me she got into the habit of turning to fabric, using the sewing machine, piecing together quilt-like constructions or what she thought of as an outfit for the painting. Then she would apply the fabric to the painting, wrapping it, swaddling it. When Ross talks about fabric, I imagine a scene from a fairy tale: the main character has the sense there is something in the room with her that she cannot see, so she throws a cape over that presence to reveal its form. This revelation is at the heart of Ross's work.

Ross is now generating studies for a series she is calling “unreliable structures,” acrylic, oil, pastel chalk, graphite, and fabric on Arches oil paper. In “Study 4,” layers of ethereal, sprayed on color—pink, yellow, salmon, blue, green—create geometric suggestions of form. Lines appear and disappear. Shapes shift. The forms, Ross told me, “do not add up to a clear space or a clear perspective.” Looking at them, it is not clear whether the structures are “struggling to shore themselves up” or are “actually coming apart.” When she is making them, Ross feels like the forms might fall on her, but she also senses that she might be able to grab onto some section of the image and pull herself up. “How do you fix it?” Ross asked me. “How do you repair what can't be resolved?”



As Is, So There (5), 2014–15  
Oil, graphite on birch panel  
12½ x 10 in

In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett writes about “wildness,” what she calls an “irreducibly strange dimension of matter, an *out-side*.” Bennett then turns to the etymology of the word *absolute*, which comes from *ab* (off) and *solver* (to loosen). “The absolute is that which is *loosened off* and on the loose,” Bennett writes.<sup>7</sup> The absolute is what refuses to be known, what we cannot speak about using language, what remains beyond our labels and vision and understanding.

Reading Getsy and Bennett and immersing myself in Ross's art felt theologically profound to me. God's transcendence—that perplexing refusal to be named or to be known—seemed to me to be a queer act. Avoiding detection, escaping systems of knowing and categorizing and sorting, remaining unrecognizable and on the loose, became a holy thing to do. Doubt and unknowability were rendered divine.

*Sarah Sentilles is a writer, teacher, critical theorist, scholar of religion, and author of many books, including Draw Your Weapons.*

1 Sarah Sentilles, *Draw Your Weapons* (New York: Random House, 2017) p. 4-5.

2 David J. Getsy, “Ten Queer Theses on Abstraction,” in Jared Ledesema, *queer abstraction*, exhibition catalog for “Queer Abstraction,” exhibition at Des Moines Art Center, June-September 2019, p. 66.

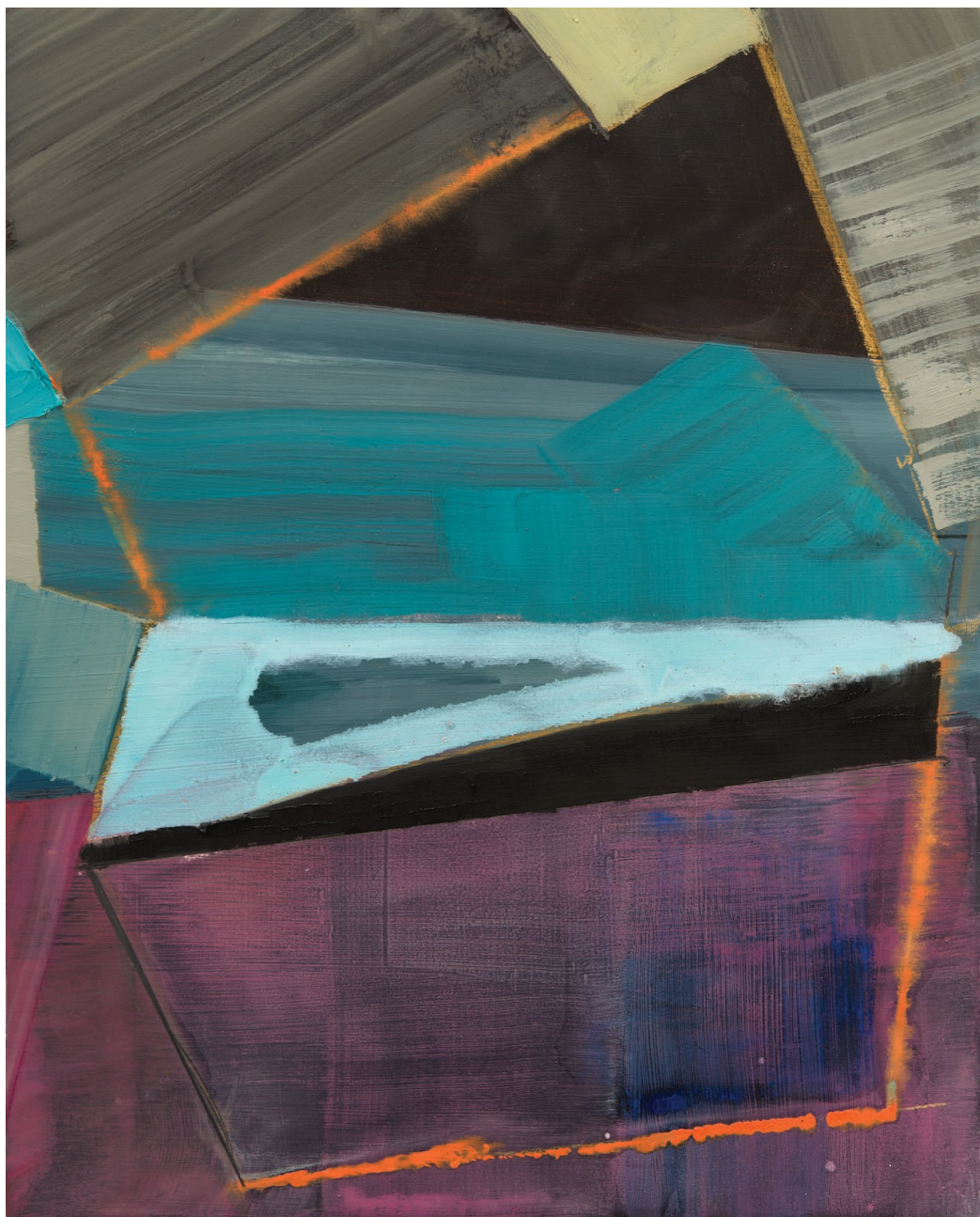
3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., p. 67.

7 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p.11.



*The Woolgatherers*, 2015  
Oil, graphite, chalk on birch panel  
15 x 12 in

## MICHELLE ROSS

*b. 1962. Lives and works in Portland, Oregon*

*2012 Hallie Ford Fellow*

Michelle Ross makes paintings out of a variety of materials in order to conjure a physical record and poetic response to being in the world. Working out ways to dismantle and reimagine modernist legacies, she uses decorative, geometric and material-based languages of color and form to interrupt the overt visibility and overexposure of bodies and the assumptions often lodged in depiction, including the resultant biases around gender and sexuality. Notions of queer abstraction provide a model for presence, resistance and nuance within the familiar visual tropes of modernist abstraction. Her work has been exhibited at venues including Canada Gallery, New York, New York; Sheppard Fine Arts Gallery at the University of Nevada, Reno, Nevada; Shaw Gallery at Weber State University, Ogden, Utah; Portland Art Museum and Lumber Room in Portland, Oregon; and Rome International University, Rome, Italy. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Pacific Northwest College of Art and her Master of Fine Arts in Painting and Drawing from Washington State University, Pullman, Washington.



**Hallie Brown** was born in 1905, outside of Tulsa, in Indian Territory that would become the state of Oklahoma. She supported herself as she earned a bachelor's degree at East Central University and taught in Oklahoma before her parents moved their family to rural Oregon. In 1935 Hallie married Kenneth W. Ford and together they established Roseburg Lumber Company in the midst of the Great Depression.

Hallie Ford was drawn to art all her life, specifically the accessibility of artmaking. She took classes with the painter Carl Hall at Willamette University in Salem, and painting became a central part of her life. Her philanthropy established and supported key Oregon visual art museums and universities.

After Hallie's death in 2007, The Ford Family Foundation's Board of Directors honored our co-founder by establishing a Visual Arts Program. The first element of this program was the Hallie Ford Fellowships in the Visual Arts, awarded since 2010. Through these unrestricted fellowships, we seek to make significant awards to visual artists who have worked to establish their voice and craft.

Another of our goals is to help support the ecology that builds connections and capacity in the visual arts community of our state. As the Fellows become the focus of exhibitions throughout the world, they bring more attention and support to their Oregon peers. We are certain that Hallie Ford would be pleased to see how both individual artists and the visual arts community in Oregon have flourished since the establishment of this program in her honor.

We could not be more excited each year to bring new Hallie Ford Fellows into this family, and to share their work with you.

*Anne C. Kubisch*  
*President, The Ford Family Foundation*

The Hallie Ford Fellowships are the flagship element of The Ford Family Foundation Visual Arts Program. The Foundation commits to an ongoing relationship with our Fellows through exhibition support, convenings, and professional development opportunities. In addition, the Visual Arts Program offers grants to visual artists for unanticipated career opportunities; supports artists-in-residence programs in Oregon and nationally; brings curators and arts writers from outside the region to Oregon for studio visits and community dialogue; commissions arts writing and publication; supports exhibitions, catalogues and other forms of documentation for Oregon artists; and awards grants to enhance exhibition spaces.

The Foundation is pleased to partner with the Oregon Arts Commission, University of Oregon, Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA), Portland State University, Reed College, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA), Creative Capital, Native Arts and Cultures Foundation, United States Artists, and the artists and visual arts organizations of our state.

The Ford Family Foundation was established in 1957 by Kenneth W. and Hallie E. Ford. Its mission is "successful citizens and vital rural communities" in Oregon and Siskiyou County, California. The Foundation is located in Roseburg, Oregon, with a Scholarship office in Eugene. For more information about the Foundation and its Visual Arts Program, visit [www.tfff.org](http://www.tfff.org).



## VISUAL ARTS PROGRAM

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*The Moving and the Not Wanting to Be  
Moved (JA), There's Also Room for Breaking  
Out of Living (JA), Bud:* Courtesy the artist  
and Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland, OR

*The Woolgatherers:* Courtesy the collection  
of Elizabeth Leach, Portland, OR

*Redress: With a composure periodically  
fractured by wailing (for D.R.):* Courtesy the  
Miller Meigs Collection, Portland, OR

*As Is, So There (5):* Courtesy Private  
Collection

*The Inexperienced Miracle Worker:* Courtesy  
Private Collection