

ART / Violet Snow

Looking upward

When I was a kid, prowling around my neighborhood in the suburbs of Poughkeepsie with my Instamatic, I took several pictures of the sky, compelled by the rippling colors and textures. My mother thought I was crazy to waste film on clouds. Now two Hudson Valley artists have vindicated my childhood fascination, as evidenced in art shows inspired by local skies but finding space in New York City galleries.

Woodstocker Heather Hutchison's exhibit, "What I Learned From the Sky" had a run in May at Winston Wächter Fine Art in Chelsea, and she will be showing in Fleischmanns in July. Julie Hedrick's work, entitled "Air (Ariadne's Golden Thread)," also went up in May at Nohra Haime Fine Art on Fifth Avenue.

Hutchison's study of the sky began during her youth out West, where the vistas are huge. "In Arizona, you can see weather patterns coming up from Mexico, from three hours away," she said. "When I moved to New York City, there wasn't any of that." And yet, in 1988, when she first started working with the materials she uses now, sky blue was the first color she brought to her minimalist work.

"I was living next to a plexiglass factory on 24th Street, between 10th and 11th Avenues," Hutchison recalled, "and they were throwing out plexiglass. Metro Lumber was throwing out plywood. I was working for an artist who used beeswax." She continues to employ these materials in making and adorning boxes that work with ambient light to reproduce effects she observes in nature.

"Recently, I've been photographing the sky a lot," Hutchison said. "This winter, I'd work until 3:30 or 4, then go to the Hudson, Cooper Lake, the Ashokan Reservoir. I'd capture the changing sky as the sun set." She would study the way light fades, how it bounces off the mountains, and how it is altered by the juncture of sky with earth or water. "At those points, something happens with the colors," she explained, "like a vibration. I've been trying to capture it in the paintings."

The layered works of the recent show pose plexiglass in front of plywood boxes. Hutchison applies, within the boxes and on the plexiglass, substances such as watercolor paint, beeswax pigment, and duct tape in subtle colors, creating work that seems to glow from within, almost giving off warmth. As the observer moves, the ambient light reflects off the plexiglass, the surface behind the plexiglass, and the shiny duct tape, causing shifts in color and intensity that resemble the changing sky of sunset and sunrise. Shadows lend support and mood, paint fades in concentration across the surface, and haloes of luminescence strike the viewer.

"I'm trying to reduce it down to what's the most important thing to me," said Hutchison, "what moves me the most, the most essential element. And I'm getting the most I can from the most essential materials."

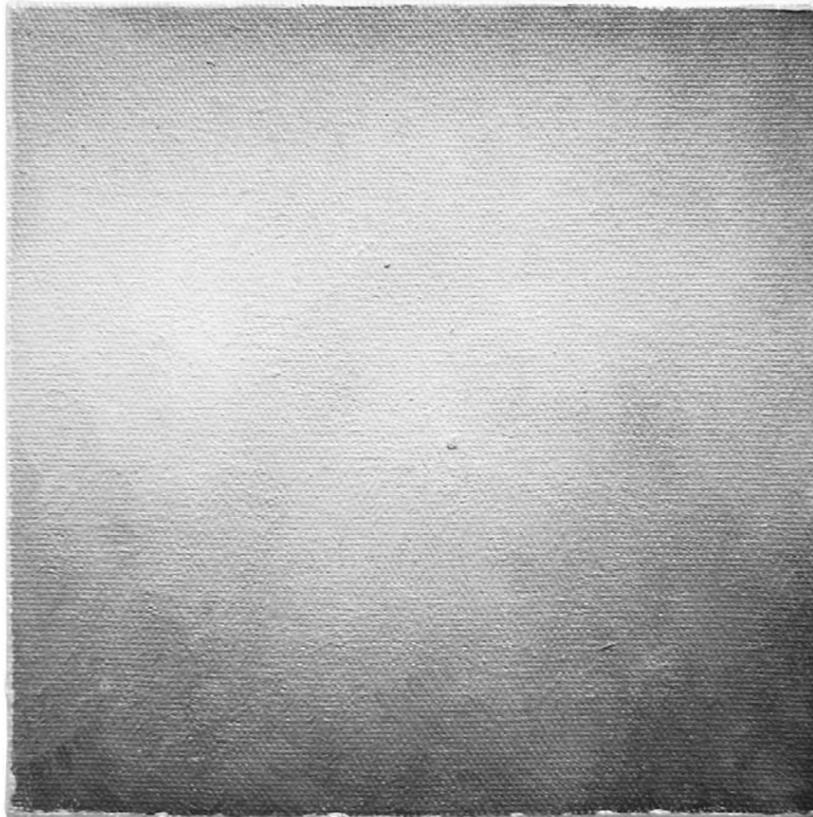
Hutchison's work has been shown at the Brooklyn Museum, the Montclair Art Museum, the Smithsonian, the Knoxville Museum of Art, and the 44th Biennial Exhibition of American Painting at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., as well as in dozens of solo exhibitions and group exhibitions over nearly three decades.

When Hutchison lived in New York and showed at Norah Haime's gallery in Manhattan, she



Above, Heather Hutchison with works from What I Learned From the Sky.

Left, Julie Hedrick's painting When We Close Our Eyes, We Still See.



met Julie Hedrick, who told her stories of life upstate. The two visited each other's studios when Hutchison also moved north. The focus on light and nature connects their work.

Toronto-born Hedrick was the subject of the 2001 film *Julie Of The Spirits*, shown locally at the Woodstock Film Festival and Deep Listening Space. She has also designed sets for dance and film and collaborated with dancers, choreographers, and musicians over the past 30 years. Living in the Rondout section of Kingston, she finds inspiration from walking her dog along the bank of the Hudson River. A recent series of paintings, entitled "Alchemy," were based on the winter views of ice on the river, expressed in moody black and white, rimmed with gold. "I was working my way through the alchemical process," she said. "When I was done, I was

spent. I didn't paint for six months. Then I started looking up at the sky. We live in such a beautiful place. I decided I was going to paint what I see up there and what I feel about my home."

She painted while listening to *Violet Jade*, an album of ethereal music composed by her husband, Peter Wetzler. The music, combined with the light emanating from the canvas, induced a trance-like state, as she used first watercolors and later oils to draw out the qualities of sky. Shimmering pale blues, pinks, and yellows are again edged in the gold of bright sun — a completely different means from Hutchison's of enveloping the scene in a subtle halo. The gold was added on impulse, but by the fifth canvas, Hedrick realized she was creating a meaningful link with her previous body of work — a link she associates with the gold thread Ariadne placed in the labyrinth to guide Theseus.

Neither Hutchison nor Hedrick knew of the other's obsession with the sky until the announcements of their shows appeared on Facebook. "It's uncanny," said Hedrick, "that we've both been, for the last couple of years, thinking about the same things, working deeply with the sky, while living here — and having two separate galleries in New York giving us shows at the same time."++

Heather Hutchison's work can be seen on her website, <http://heatherhutchison.com>. She will participate in a group show, "Luminance" at The Painters Gallery in Fleischmanns, July 23 – August 20, with an opening reception July 22, 3:30-6 p.m. Visit Julie Hedrick's website at <http://juliehedrick.com>.

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