Jonathan Griffin traces the artistic evolution of the 2021 Aspen Award for Art Honoree, Mary Weatherford

SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY

Since 2012, when Mary Weatherford first screwed a neon tube to the surface of a painting, her mastery and ambition has grown commensurate with her reputation. 'Neon Paintings', which opened at the Aspen Art Museum in 2020, was a tightly honed encapsulation of her recent work.

Jonathan Griffin *is a writer and a contributing editor of frieze, based in Los Angeles.*

Most of her paintings from the past decade are instantly recognizable as Weatherfords. Even when, occasionally, she doesn't use neon — as in the cerulean *The Sea, The Sea* (2018), from that show — Weatherford's broad brush-marks, layered color, liquescent paint and confident handling of scale announce the work as her own.

There was a time, however, when Weatherford made paintings that looked quite different, both from this recent work and from each other. This is apparent in 'Mary Weatherford: Canyon-Daisy-Eden', the survey of her diverse oeuvre curated by Bill Arning and Ian Berry, which originated at the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, and is now open at SITE Santa Fe. The exhibition allows for a deeper, often surprising view of an artist many people may think they know. Weatherford's journey has not only led her through a heterogeneous array of painterly styles — from hard-edge abstraction to image-appropriation and collage to photography to landscape painting — but has indeed enabled her to trouble established notions of authorship and originality.

Among the many things most people probably will not know about Mary Weatherford is that she studied guitar in the 1990s with Dave Van Ronk, icon of the American folk music revival movement. 'It humanized my art,' she recently revealed to curator Hamza Walker, 'the reverence for storytelling and nuance, the human voice and improvisation.' Also significant is folk and blues music's relationship to time — to history and progression. Songs, riffs and patterns are traded between musicians so freely that ownership becomes moot, and brittle newness is supplanted by care and sustained engagement. 'Studying with Van Ronk, there's no advancement', said Weatherford. 'There's a betterment of beauty and artistry and depth of poetry.'

The earliest works in 'Canyon-Daisy-Eden' are two target paintings, both titled *Nagasaki* (1989). Weatherford began painting targets in 1984, while participating in the Whitney Independent Study Program. The device remains most widely associated with the work of Jasper Johns and Kenneth Noland, so in a sense, Weatherford's embrace of it was a theft, or an occupation. (Sturtevant first remade Johns's *Target with Four Faces* in 1986, three years before Weatherford publicly exhibited hers.)

Weatherford's target paintings were inspired, in part, by the forest scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), when Kim Novak points to the rings of a cross-section of a tree and tells James Stewart: 'Somewhere here I was born, and there I died.' Novak's character, Judy, is pretending to be another woman who was supposedly reincarnated, but Weatherford saw in the scene 'a model for a time line'; the concentric rings of a tree trunk visualizing how passing time can be less like an arrow through space than an accretive thickening or deepening.

Weatherford was thinking about how she might move forward from, and simultaneously re-enter, the phallocentric canon of American modernist painting, at a time when appropriationist artists such as Sherrie Levine and Barbara Kruger were rejecting the medium of paint altogether. In her paintings' shared title, Nagasaki is not primarily a reference to the 1945 atomic bombing of the Japanese city (although the association is unavoidable), but to the setting of Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (1904). Cio-Cio San, the eponymous protagonist who takes her own life at the climax of the opera, is one of countless tragic female characters in an art form dominated by male composers. It was the artist Elizabeth Murray who, in the mid-1980s, recommended to Weatherford the French philosopher Catherine Clément's book *Opera, or The Undoing of Women* (1979). The ideas it contained catalyzed Weatherford's explorations for years to come.

Weatherford stopped using oil paint in 1991. 'I wanted to leave that history behind', she later reflected. Instead, she took up combinations of liquid acrylics and velvety-matte Flashe. At first, her stained canvas grounds carried silkscreened motifs — in the thinly stained *Third Riddle* (1991), whose title references Giacomo Puccini's *Turandot* (1926), a chrysanthemum blossom — but later, she began simply to stick objects directly onto the paintings. In *10²⁶* (1998), she fixed painted starfish on a subtly modulated sky-blue ground. Later, she wrote that she was thinking of the silkscreened and glued-on additions as 'stickers on a sliding glass door that stopped you from flying through, stopped you at the surface.'

Weatherford first painted a cave in 2000, a year after she returned to her native California from New York, where she'd lived since 1980. The small work *cave* (2000), titled in humble lower case, shows the moon (or perhaps the sun through haze) suspended in a smooth-edged oval. On the face of it, the piece has little in common with the large-scale, vigorously expressive canvases that Weatherford has produced in recent years, including many that depicted caves. Its focus, however, on the void framed by the rock walls was pivotal: it is one of the first of Weatherford's paintings that describes the sensation of being in a space, rather than looking at it. While *cave* was informed by the memory of a sea cave Weatherford knew in San Diego, it soon led to a habitual practice of *plein air* painting that she continues today.

It might be a stretch to describe Weatherford's neon paintings as landscapes, even if almost all are derived from the artist's experience of particular places, some wild and some urban, many of which make their way into the paintings' titles. What becomes abundantly clear from an exploration of the bodies of work that preceded them is that what makes her neon paintings so resonant — despite their apparent simplicity — is that they contain multitudes: figuration; gender politics; musical and literary references; appropriationist irony; a sincere reverence for art history; and, most of all, a defiant, celebratory insistence on the power of painting to generate newness. Neon, which should hinder transcendence, here only augments it. As Weatherford has said, 'Electric light is always now — it has no past.'

1
Mary Weatherford, Installation view, *Neon Paintings*, 2020. Courtesy: Aspen Art Museum. Photograph: Carter Seddon.

2
Mary Weatherford, *Nagasaki*, 1989, Oil on canvas, 82 × 82 in. Collection of the artist.

3
Mary Weatherford, Installation view, *Neon Paintings*, 2020. Courtesy: Aspen Art Museum. Photograph: Carter Seddon.

4
Mary Weatherford, *Her Insomnia*, 1991, Flashe and silkscreen ink on canvas, 72 × 120 in. Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, CA.

5
Mary Weatherford, *Third Riddle*, 1991, Acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 107 × 78 in. Collection of the artist.