

Art in America

WEST PALM BEACH, FLA.
SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD
Norton Museum of Art

—Franklin Einspruch



Sylvia Plimack Mangold: *The Maple Tree (Summer)*, 2011, oil on linen, 20 by 36 inches; at the Norton Museum of Art.

Sylvia Plimack Mangold is the sort of admirable artist who discusses cobalt violet oil paint as if it were as tasty as *crème fraîche*. This is only partly a matter of visual delectation. She has been drawing and painting the trees on her property for over three decades, and this simple yet consuming project has caused her to develop a masterful sensitivity to the materials she uses.

Plimack Mangold's work in the 1970s was laden with self-referential impulses that pushed her otherwise straightforward realist paintings into conceptual territory. *Landscape 1977*, the earliest painting in this 30-year survey of the artist's landscapes and trees, is a snowy view painted on paper that is held by masking tape to a canvas; rulers are adhered along its left and bottom edges. But what appears first as an assemblage is in fact *trompe l'oeil*: the tape and rulers are painted. While paying homage to artists of illusionistic tableaux like William Harnett, Plimack Mangold's own artifice forces the viewer into a philosophical mode. Are the rulers illusions, strictly speaking, if they are marking off literal inches of height and width? Does the tape refer to the artist's process or is it a fiction through and through?

Borders of masking tape persisted as an image in Plimack Mangold's landscapes into the late '80s. She painted them with astonishing verisimilitude; even upon close inspection, it's hard to tell that they are a canny manipulation of oils. Yellowing "tape" marks off an interior area in *Winter Writing* (1984), and the image within has yellowed along with it, seemingly with age, but this too is a painted effect. The band of sky above, however, has retained its freshness, as if hailing from a more recent time.

These maneuvers may have distinguished Plimack Mangold's work as more intellectual than typical landscape painting, but there's something arch about them, and she outgrew them. Dropping the commentary on painting matured her work in a great leap. In *The Elm Tree (Winter)*, dated 1990-93, wispy lines have given way to broad strokes, and limbs that were once silhouetted are now opportunities to lay down a rich range of muted colors. The anachronistic band of blue sky outside the masking tape in *Winter Writing* subtly reappears in the form of a painted line that follows along the edge of nearer branches, pulling them closer to the viewer.

This testing against visual experience brings Cézanne and Morandi to mind, but another important influence was Lovis Corinth, whose works Plimack Mangold began to acquire in the mid-'80s. Corinth devoted a suite of etchings and drawings to a single tree, and Plimack Mangold followed suit with her own drypoints and aquatints that presage *The Elm Tree (Winter)*. The probity and atmosphere in these are gripping. The same is true of her work in watercolor, which shares a similar precision, ensuring that her broader treatment in the oils has some discipline behind it. After years of emphasizing branches and the spaces between them, Plimack Mangold produced an image of a tree thick with foliage. *Summer Maple 2009* is a delightful tangle of verdure, put down with lushness and aplomb on a wide rectangle. *Winter Maple* (2012) contrasts the tree's limbs, bare again, against an evergreen pine behind it. A visual mode has supplanted the philosophical one, leaving the artist to work unimpeded with shape, color and the integrity of careful looking.

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