

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: *Summer and Winter*

by David Rhodes, July 14th, 2017

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In the first room of Sylvia Plimack Mangold's exhibition, the visitor encounters the summer section of the exhibition's title. Later, on moving through to the second room, the winter section. The cyclical progression of the seasons defines the rhythm of life in a climate that sees weather changing through the months, as well as vegetal and animal response. It's impossible not to think concurrently of mortality and a celebration or acknowledgement of transformation. Just such experiences are meditated on, without pretension, in the observational paintings of Plimack Mangold's oeuvre. Trees and plants seen from, or near, the artist's studio and home in Washingtonville, New York have been a subject for Plimack Mangold since the late 1970s and are here depicted during two seasons. The contrasts are extraordinary, like two states of being, experienced consistently by ourselves through the passage of time. The paintings are conceptually subtle and not at all of plain verisimilitude. What is recognizable—leaves, bark, flowers, for example—is recognizably felt, recorded, and communicated through a process of painting. The presence is painting, the evocations of light, time of day, and season, from an experience of seeing, feeling, and thinking, transformed rather than mimicked. There is also a sense of movement, sometimes in the distance between things, as in looking up at a tree, or coming closer, in looking at or through a cluster of leaves. The sense of how our vision patches together both surface and space, combining them as color and density of texture is rendered wonderfully in Plimack Mangold's paintings.

The heat and scent of warmed foliage is tangible in *Summer Maple 2016* (2016)—at 40 by 50 inches, one of the larger paintings here. The tree of the title is framed by the painting's edges, which contain the tree and emphasize its expansive leafiness.



Sylvia Plimack Mangold, *Winter Maple 2017*, 2017, oil on linen. 30" × 45"
(Photo credit: Joerg Lohse, courtesy Alexander and Bonin, New York)

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One is able to see sky at several places lower in the composition—a clear sky, pale rather than ultramarine, close in tone to the yellow-greens of the tree. This is, the bright, clear light of New York State, not, for example, the deep resonant space of the Mediterranean. The characteristic shape of a maple leaf and its shadows repeat throughout this painting, and the brush marks fluidly push against shape, the strokes creating an uneven mosaic of marks that explore the leaf and the negative space that surrounds it, as well as the complexity of falling light and local shadow. *Fall Maple Detail* (2014) depicts exactly its title. The verdant tones of the summer maple are joined by the russet tones of leaves in the early fall. It is an image that acts as a hinge between the two seasons of the title, though attention is not brought to this conspicuously by, say, positioning the painting by itself. The view is from up close, the leaves alter shape in the painting as their different orientations on a branch change from the artist's point of view, and so are reproduced as different shapes in the painting, the irregularity and singularity of each leaf a spur to invention in itself. The leaves flip this direction and that, recalling James Joyce's remark in *Ulysses* that the leaves observed on a tree were "sunny blinking."

Winter Maple 2017 (2017) represents the structure of the tree now bereft of any leaves but just as beautiful, as a reaching, linear structure, dark gray branches spreading against a light sky. Each branch is painted in ascending lengths of gray, changing luminosity as the branch turns and catches the subdued light at varying angles. Again, temperatures and humidity are registered through color—the air now cool and damp, absent the humidity and heat of summer. The graphite and watercolor on paper works presented with the paintings are reactions to the same subjects as the paintings, combining the qualities of immediacy and transparency to look further at the same motifs, like the difference between Cézanne's oils and watercolors. Plimack Mangold's paintings make clear the continued efficacy of concentrated and thorough observational painting—when repeated over time, as both work and meditation, the artist exposes herself to the unceasing reality of both unrelenting sameness and continuous change.