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# "I am teaching myself to see what I cannot know in any other way"

Mary A. Armstrong

Sarah Westlake came of age as an artist during the 1940s and '50s, entering the heady, male-dominated world of abstract art. Over the years, abstraction would become the most authentic expression of her knowledge and experience. In 2003, Sarah wrote:

I have learned over time that while I am making a drawing I am teaching myself to see what I cannot know in any other way. I used to think that it was the other way around—that if I looked at something long enough and carefully enough I would be able to bring it to life on the paper's flat surface. But I know the process differently now and this is why I draw. I cherish the knowledge that drawing gives me and which allows me to weave that knowledge into an abstract idea.

Westlake and I met in the mid-1980s, long after her children had grown and had families of their own. When her two children were small, Westlake, determined to protect her working time and space, set up an easel behind the basement furnace. Later, her husband, architect Merle Westlake, designed a proper studio for her. The studio was a wonderfully airy room built up and cantilevered out from the third floor of their house. The main room, where Westlake worked, was designed with high ceilings, three major working walls, and a row of floor-to-ceiling windows that framed enormous white pines. The tops of these large pines, viewed at eye level, transformed the space into a magical tree house. Westlake filled two rooms adjoining

the workroom with her extensive art library and, in a third, furnished with an elegant chaise lounge, she rested. An early riser, she was often in the studio by five AM, and would not emerge until the evening. She often returned to her studio just before bedtime to tuck-in her work and to prepare her mind for dreaming.

In her very large art library, Westlake had affixed tabs, page after page, in most of the books. Her interests were far ranging. Japanese Art, particularly the prints and screens from the Edo period, profoundly and consistently inspired her. She admired and desired the seemingly spontaneous, deliberately unrefined beauty of Matisse, as well as the strict, minimalist elegance of Agnes Martin's spare, linear abstractions. The slices of rich patterns in the paintings of Edouard Vuillard inspired the lush, crisp-edged patterns in her work.

The discipline in making art is about showing up, keeping the studio door closed against the world and the soul's door ajar, just in case. Westlake was obsessed with maintaining a peaceful atmosphere around her work so that it could come into being. Until she was ready for it to be seen, she kept her work very private. In one of Westlake's first letters to me she wrote: "You have seen me and my work in keeping with my deepest sensibility. I treasure that and I trust it!"

In a letter from the early 1990s she addressed the intensity of her struggle:

In some ways we will probably always be at similar points of some battle. Knowing that it is necessary to step back and just breathe seems the

best defense, even if one can't always do that. It takes so much striving to remain aware and present to the work, often with the assumption that happiness is part of the goal. This last is mostly hogwash I think, but we are conditioned to feel we aren't being responsible if we don't have [happiness] too.

Perhaps at the expense of "happiness," Sarah Westlake was a fiercely self-searching and self-questioning artist. The rigorous nature of her search for the truest imagery and process gives Westlake's work tremendous authenticity and refinement. Her self-doubt, though painful, was vital to her creative process. When doubts derailed her, between bouts of great creative activity, she sought solace and inspiration in nature, her garden, music, and poetry. Westlake was battling for her work to become more fully itself through her. Comfortable with paradox, she had taped to her studio wall a quote that originally read: "The substance of space *should* = the weightlessness of volume." However, Westlake had crossed out "should" and had written "can." "Should" is a rigid statement of fact that may or may not be true. It halts action and curtails possibility. "Can" is more flexible, generous and forgiving. For Westlake, "can" opened up the space for a dialogue within her work, rich in possibilities.

Repeatedly, Westlake struggled to come to terms with the vicissitudes of the creative process: the fundamental disparity between the need for solitude and the desire for an audience, the long solitary hours in the studio, and the fickle nature of inspiration. Describing a particular painting that she had worked on for months, she wrote: "(It) is tantalizing me every day . . . I see more each day (tho [sic] I haven't painted on it at all) that I know has merit. Wish me luck when I finally touch it." In early 1990, she wrote:

I have been hibernating these past weeks adjusting to a decision to give myself a break from

painting. I stubbornly told myself that [my paintings] could have it all! I had not realized that the overload had blitzed my thinking machine. Some days I actually laugh out loud to myself when I realize my thoughts were behaving like some Rube Goldberg wonder machine which got out of control. Now the only thing that makes sense is to distance myself for a while from any expectation.

In the winter of 1993, she put her paints away and began to draw again, with charcoal, gray pastel, and rags with turpentine on huge sheets of paper stapled to the studio wall. She wrote about that process:

I hope to draw [fragments of natural things] sloppily without regard for color or composition or anything like a finished result. I don't work at it. Some days I go to the studio and just read poetry.

Waiting patiently was something that Westlake had learned to accept about her process. That year, mid-summer, she wrote:

Some small wall sculptures are emerging for me. I'm hopeful and excited by the way it is happening. I almost don't dare talk about it, but I will tell you more when I write next and really answer your letter.

With this letter she enclosed a poem by Mary Oliver, "Crossing The Swamp," which she thought expressed her "experience of the last many months." The last lines of the poem reveal the depth of faith and the joy she experienced with the renewal of her work.

—a poor  
dry stick given  
one more chance by the whims  
of swamp water - a bough

that still, after all these years,  
could take root,  
sprout, branch out, bud—  
make of its life a breathing  
palace of leaves.

Later that summer she wrote excitedly about her work's having taken on, literally, a new form. She was referring to the beginning of the wall sculptures.

Especially since these few weeks have been a time of real joy in the doing. This has not been so for a long time and I am reveling in it, wrestling with ordinary builder's materials to make shapes that hang on the wall and receive some paint to delineate them. They are rather peculiar shapes. They feel honest and strangely both intimate and distant. Whatever they are, I am not questioning them beyond trying to make them work. I will love showing them to you when we can arrange a visit.

These "shapes that hang on the wall" are the untitled sculptures in this exhibition that were made between 1993 and 1996 (nos. 13–18, 20).

In her poem "Reasons for Leaving the Studio," Westlake addresses her need to replenish herself and her work by sometimes turning her back on the studio. Nature, unfettered and untamed, appealed to her. But gardens, where she could experience the forms, colors, and design possibilities in nature on more intimate levels, inspired her throughout her career. In 1989, in the text for a catalogue, Westlake wrote in the third person:

For the past ten years the abstract work of Sarah Westlake has focused on the subject of gardens with allusions to the planned arrangement of flowerbeds and the often tangled growth within them. White space becomes an ethereal substance contrasted with suggestions of earth and

its organic yield, offering a challenge to conventional solid-void [sic] relationships which has been apparent in all of her work.

She often wrote to me about her garden, linking it metaphorically to her work in the studio. Many of her drawings and sculptures refer to garden spaces—her own garden at the Vineyard and those she had visited on her travels around the world with her husband. In September 1993, she wrote:

My garden has been a real delight to me this year, gaining in age and fullness. I see my fundamental task with it is to pay attention to the quality of the foliage I choose for the perennials. They must remain O.K. after the blooms are gone. Then I can be content with very little 'color.' Structure? Right! [sic] My garden has taken me through that looking glass and it is shaping itself.

Always in Westlake's work there is the dynamic tension between unruly, organic or natural forms and the planar structures of the artist's personal interior architecture. In April 1991, Sarah was working on pieces like *Light Wind*, *Inner Stream*, and *Salmon Run* (nos. 8, 10, and 12). In one of her letters from this period, she described the connections in her work among nature, spatial structure, movement, and design. She was choreographing space using strict geometry to define the boundaries of the movement.

I need to walk in channeled paths through the woods . . . or air . . . or wherever the natural world invites me. They seem most times to be diagonal ones, starting from my lower right side and stretching upward toward my left, or the center vertical divide may become a double path. It's sometimes hard for me to get back out of them, and I find this disturbing. The painting then develops a rigidity I must work against. But



if I try to accept what they suggest . . . a continuum . . . an experience of infinity, or a discipline that I must honor, I am less frightened and my confinement starts to work for me.

Looking at these works, one senses them in the body as did Westlake. Her letter continues:

I try to cross over the divides by making various connections between the spaces. I don't know where the channel comes from, or why its direction is such. I didn't invent it. It just began to appear in the work some years ago. When Wes and I faced a particularly difficult time with his health I found comfort in the diagonal one. It seemed a repository where all the love others showed us could be concentrated (consecrated?) for my benefit.

Moving the viewer along with the artist into her "channeled paths" are the rhythms of marks as they find their way up and down the strict diagonals and verticals. These lush, richly colored patterns of roughly hewn marks fasten the eye to the surface. Westlake refuses to allow a form to coalesce, for that would impede her movement and that of the viewer. These diagonals, shafts of light and delineators of space, thrust us into the picture plane. The strong verticals urge us back to the essential flatness. In the *Fantasy Gardens* series (nos. 1–6) and in other works like *Salmon Run* (no. 12) and *Whose Sleeves?* (no. 23), she uses this dynamic structure.

Westlake's appreciation for Japanese art had an enduring influence on her work. This influence is most striking in her final body of work. During the summer of 2001, she began this series and wrote that she was learning not to jump at the work, but to

simply pass by and wait. From that restraint, so full of breath and breadth, emerged the first piece in the series, *Breeze* (no. 21). It launched the others. She never attempted to obscure the influence that the screens and prints from the Edo period had on her work. In this series, she again relishes and celebrates the charged interface of the organic and the architectural. She appreciated the truth of the flat plane and the vibrant living presence of the human touch in these gorgeous patterned pieces of kimonos left draped casually on their stands. The sensuality of the draped cloths appealed to her. She said she admired the subtle combination of humor and sexuality. In these drawings on plaster she incorporated the slanted dynamism of the diagonals to deepen the space, embellishing it with pattern, texture, and color. The flexibility of the plaster surface and the collage elements allowed her to change her mind; the patterns etched into the plaster could be sanded out and the delicately placed bits of cloth, rearranged. Westlake was certain that the piece was finished when, paradoxically, she saw its existence as wholly distinct from her intentions. The work was complete when the richness of the physical space she had created held the ineffable.

In this last quote, she put all the struggle and self-doubt aside and stated a profound belief in herself and in her work:

The good news is I do not have to give up a studio life! Yes, I really did think I might have to. It seems ridiculous now to have been afraid, though I don't discount the misery I felt. You see what I have learned is that I *am* an artist. To have doubted it was to insist on proof. The proof I have is not what I thought it would be. It is simply a way of life (1993).