

# Torii/Gate: Liminal Uncertainty

By Harry J. Weil

The paintings in Darla Bjork's new series, *Torii/Gate*, demarcate liminal states of being as described by Victor Turner, a cultural anthropologist, who wrote that in them individuals "are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony." In this indeterminate state, one moves to a transcendent state of being through a series of subscribed actions. It is physically and spiritually engaging, Turner explains, ungovernable often by the laws of logic and order, and the catalyst for Bjork's latest paintings.

Associated mainly with the Shinto religion of Japan, torii are traditionally constructed at the entrances to temples or shrines. As archways, they mark space and make the liminal possible, a threshold for the believer needing to cross from the banal to the sacred. At first glance, however, Bjork's torii are flat, with no formidable dimensions in which to pass through. Look again. Much like her preceding series, *Windows*, our attention is directed to that which lies just beyond what we see. Her torii are not grounded in a defined location, but rather floating in an unearthly landscape of black and grey encaustic. The waxy surface shimmers in the light, as if evoking the abyss of space itself – empty, immense, and with only a faint glimmer of life. Yet from this vastness emerges, in a vivid red palette, a structure, simply constructed, that holds together in its otherwise permeable state. Our eyes navigate into, through, and outside of it while being punctured by that which threatens to subsume it.

Bjork's canvases vibrate with bursts of color. Find the splashes of salmon paint bursting from the torii or the streaks of green that shake the surface, there you will find the liminal at its best. Her colors express a

very human inability to meditate for longer than a very brief moment, an anxiety of our senses to tune out the nuances of the day to day. This anxiety does not disrupt; it is an excited expression of seeing, feeling, and touching. Bjork is a tactile painter, and her surfaces are heavily worked, with layers of encaustic and oil stick that are scrapped, reapplied and scrapped again. This repeated working and reworking, much like the tension that is in each of us, speaks to a longing for a wholeness beyond ourselves. We are never settled, continually reaching out and moving forward then failing and moving on again. Where and when we arrive - if we ever do - is uncertain. Bjork's paintings direct us betwixt and between those uncertainties.

+++

Harry J. Weil is an art historian and curator living in Brooklyn, NY. He received a PhD from Stony Brook University and has contributed numerous reviews and interviews to American art publications. Currently, he organizes exhibitions at the historic landmark church of St. Ann and the Holy Trinity and teaches at Ithaca College's Manhattan campus.