

Anne Wehrley Björk *Lost Canyon*

Margot Samel is pleased to present *Lost Canyon*, a new suite of paintings by Anne Wehrley Björk (b. 1948, Farmington, NM). Based between Charleston, South Carolina and Lexington, Kentucky, this is the artist's first solo exhibition with the gallery. The works in the exhibition take their point of departure from Chaco Canyon, a remote stretch of western New Mexico and the site of an ancient gathering place. Björk has returned to this landscape for more than five decades, working with a deliberately restricted palette and a focused vocabulary of forms. In *Lost Canyon* she engages this largely mysterious archaeological site to extract new meaning grounded in the land, while exploring the more esoteric task of deciphering the present in painted forms.

Anne Wehrley Björk grew up in Farmington, New Mexico, in the far northwestern corner of the state, where landforms stretch languidly across the vast San Juan Basin, encompassing the present-day Four Corners region. At the center of this arid depression, down a nearly dry river valley, lies Chaco Canyon, its monumental stone and adobe architecture marking what was once the epicenter of civilization in the American Southwest between 850 and 1250 C.E. This region lies within Diné Bikéyah, or Navajoland, and within the present-day boundaries of the Navajo Nation. It is the main site of the Chaco Culture, known to us through the remnants of its complex architectural plan and the imposing stone structures built into the sandstone walls of the canyon that remain remarkably intact. The ancient Chacoans left behind a vast constellation of petroglyphs that hint at their mastery of archaeoastronomy, their sophisticated trade networks, and artefacts that raise as many questions as they answer. In this landscape, the ground is rust- and shell-colored, and the canyon walls of sandstone—which is soft to the touch—are etched in the stark, high-altitude light. It is from this terrain, both majestic and enigmatic, that Björk's painterly sensibility emerges.

Anne Wehrley Björk spent time in this vast landscape as a child, camping at Chaco Canyon with her family. The wide-open spaces and remnants of an ancient civilization embedded themselves in her imagination and formed an early visual and emotional imprint that she has returned to throughout her practice. However, to say that she paints this place, or that she paints the landscape, is not quite accurate. Although she draws on recollection and refers to the canyon walls as the "bones" of her compositions, her subject is the emotional impact of a place as it transforms over time. Her paintings function as spaces of remembrance, spiritual resonance, and states of being. The spatial qualities created by swathes of parchment white are the spatial qualities within a canyon; they are the experience of the canyon. This interior landscape continues across her work as a rigorous process of trial and error.

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In the late 1970s Björk enrolled in the Master of Fine Arts program at the University of New Mexico, further developing a practice already rooted in the memory of this landscape. There was an existing history at UNM

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of artists seeking to enrich their practices in relation to the New Mexico landscape, from Raymond Jonson, who was part of the locally formed Transcendental Painting Group, to Richard Diebenkorn, who attended the program in the 1950s. Björk's contemporaries included Emmi Whitehorse and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, who were simultaneously pushing abstraction as a way to communicate indigeneity, sense of place, and, in Smith's case, to relay complex political themes. During Björk's time there, Agnes Martin, already canonized as the desert's contemporary sage, taught that inspiration must supersede intellect, and that intuition, when honored, becomes its own kind of knowledge. This period had a significant impact on Björk, and her approach to translating the phenomena of her life into images.

In *Lost Canyon*, animals—real, fantastical, and symbolic—have an intensified presence in her new suite of works. Their integration hints at the influence of both Chaco Canyon and her immediate surroundings, particularly the fauna of Charleston, South Carolina, where she spends half the year. In some paintings, she layers animal silhouettes upon one another, adding repeated features of turtles, birds, crabs, lizards, and rabbits. The petroglyphs of the ancient Chacoans served as inherited forms of record-making and celestial calendars, and in *Moon Chorus* (2025) the rangy similitude of animal silhouettes that overlap and interlock takes on a primordial quality, emphasizing the subtle relationships being turned over in her mind. As in many of her works, parchment-white space allows the viewer to enter and cohabit the painting's interior. Björk views these areas of negative space as places to rest the eye and as "spirit ways," channels through which energy moves between forms. While her paintings offer such spaces in which we can pause and feel their impact, the forms are forms we cannot mold. A picture may reference a landscape, and just as we often shape actual landscapes to match our idealized visions of them, we may try to close in on a sloping landform in Björk's compositions. But her images resist such access; instead, they invite us toward a provisional forming of place—toward process.

There is something in the formal quality of these works, in their capacity to provide a window into the emotional and physical sensibility of existing within vastness, that conjures the artist in her childhood, taking in her surroundings. When she paints, she creates this space for herself again, making room for the synthesis of past and present. As an adult, Björk returned to Chaco Canyon with her own family, making the journey back to know the place again. In her new presentation, it is the wellspring of her color and her ever expanding lexicon—where it rises up from the land and, in its own way, finds her.

—Anna Yates

Anne Wehrley Björk (b. 1948, Farmington, NM) received a BFA in Painting and Drawing from the University of Oklahoma, studied at the Alliance Française, and earned both an MA and MFA in Painting from the University of New Mexico. Recent solo exhibitions include *Les Animaux*, Fernberger Gallery, Los Angeles, CA (2025); *Uncommon Light*, Ross+Kramer Gallery (2020); B.Deemer Gallery, Louisville, KY (2017); *Chaco*, B.Deemer Gallery, Louisville, KY (2015). Selected group exhibitions include *This Is Now*, Ryan Campbell Garrett Art Advisory, Rancho Santa Fe, CA (2025); *Dream Plane*, Fernberger Gallery, Los Angeles, CA (2024); *Different Paths – Nothing & Everything In Common*, Lexington, KY (2019); *Figuratively Speaking*, The Artist Attic, Lexington, KY (2019); *Feeling Blue*, Lexington Center for the Arts, Lexington, KY (2018); *Bicoastal*, curated by Lara A. Björk, Meyer Vogl Gallery, Charleston, SC (2017); *Gallery Wallapalooza*, Meyer Vogl Gallery, Charleston, SC (2016); and numerous exhibitions at the University of Kentucky's Barnhard Gallery (2007–2014). Her work is held in public collections including the Fine Arts Museum at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM, and the corporate collection of the Sears Tower.

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