

VERMILION

Vermilion is replete with associations in the arts and culture from every part of the world and every spiritual tradition, from as early as the 9th century BC and as recently as the English translations of Pokémon. Once synonymous with the now archaic *cinnabar*, this rich, warm red pigment is, in its natural form, a mercury compound, materially toxic and symbolically life-affirming, mirroring the color of blood. First appearing in Neolithic cave paintings in what is present-day Turkey, it's also found in Chinese ceramics from as early as the Yangshao culture in 5000-4000 BC, as well as the Maya, Sican, Moche, and Inca Empires in the Americas. Far more recently, this evocative pigment can be found, too, in Roman, Byzantine and then Renaissance paintings in Western Europe. Ellen Ziegler encountered it first when her father gave her a Chinese seal and a small pot of vermilion pigment.

Writing during the Renaissance, Florentine artist Cennino Cennini described the making of vermilion pigment in alchemical terms, conjuring the medieval blend of chemical science and mystical philosophy that promised the transmutation of base metals into gold—evoking the mysterious and transformational, the ancient and contemporary.

Ellen Ziegler has been thoroughly seduced by the color. It runs through all of her work of the last several years, a metaphor for the interface between the psychological and physical, interiority and its expression in the material.

Ziegler's creative process mirrors that conjunction of interior and exterior, that place between the psyche, the body, and the world. The artist describes working intuitively, flat shapes rendered first without pre-visualizing, and then drawn into three dimensions with the overlay of white lines rendered rhythmically.

These forms are shapes and faces in the clouds as we lay on our back in the grass and watch masses of condensed vapor form and reform in the sky. They are Rorschach tests, metaphors for the messy and human. "Anger, attachment, isolation, greed," says the artist who cites her long-time study of Tibetan Buddhism, "All of this belongs to me."

The shapes might remind us of the moment we first see the molecular world rendered miraculous and otherworldly by an electron microscope. At another moment of encounter we might see instead a dance of erotic attraction, fecund and womanly. Alternately life-affirming

or more ambivalent—sinister even—the forms that dance both sinuously and playfully across Ziegler’s canvas might be mutated cellular forms or underwater sea creatures.

In either case they will likely inhabit your imagination as the artist describes the way they live in her own: accompanying her in her sleep, taking shape in daylight on the paper, instinctual and still dream-like.