



# Gael Stack

American, born 1941

## *Untitled, 2008*

Oil on canvas, 84 x 64 inches

Acquired 2011

University of Houston

Eudora Welty commented in 1983, “The events of our lives happen in a sequence in time, but in their significance to ourselves they find their own order, a timetable not necessarily—perhaps not possibly—chronological. The time as we know it subjectively is often the chronology that stories and novels follow: it is the continuous thread of revelation.”<sup>1</sup> Like Welty, Gael Stack has pursued the thread of revelation that time and memory can offer. Over a career that has spanned more than four decades, her work has made duration visible, from scumbled surfaces that attest to the process of painting to fragmentary texts and images that record past events and future commitments. However, it would be a mistake to regard Stack’s compositions as closed systems, alluding only to the artist’s own biography. Questions of representation and how to make one’s way through the postmodern landscape also occupy Stack, as she negotiates the forest of signs that beckon the viewer into her compositions.

Stack’s untitled painting from 2008 is part of a larger series that began to dominate her work in the mid-1990s. These compositions are unified by a cobalt blue ground, a color that suggests a deep, indeterminate space. Blue also acts as a vivid foil for the artist’s notational motifs, which include images lifted from Hokusai’s nineteenth-century *Manga* woodcuts. Another common element—also seen in this canvas—is the vertical scrim of calligraphic marks that run down the left half of the composition. These are Stack’s renderings of a fragmentary text she discovered written (and overwritten) by a young woman suffering from an obsessive-compulsive disorder. Impossible to decipher, these poignant scrawls nonetheless convey the urgency and agency of the written language.

Stack has always been generous in identifying her pictorial sources. However, her paintings ultimately resist any fixed narrative. Rather, each canvas renews Stack’s commitment to the practice of painting, celebrating the iterations and reiterations of the creative mind.<sup>2</sup>

**Alison de Lima Greene**

<sup>1</sup> Eudora Welty, *One Writer’s Beginnings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 69.

<sup>2</sup> An earlier, expanded version of this essay appeared in *Gael Stack* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 15–25.