

The Dreamy Scent of Thyme

Andrew Nixon and the Internalization of the Landscape



I've been in Provence this summer, possibly the most beautiful place on earth, well, certainly to me the most beautiful place on earth, where I've been doing nothing scholarly. Far more delightfully, I've been musing on the pictures and drawings of New England artist Andrew Nixon, drafting this introduction in fits and starts, usually during the early mornings or drowsy late afternoons, when my companion and I could cease consuming the sensual abundance of our surroundings and head indoors.

These small paintings and drawings, soaked in stillness, couldn't have been made by anyone but Andrew. I met Andrew only shortly before I had the opportunity to see his art, when I recall saying something like, "*Ah*, these are really you." Yet on the pages that follow, I find myself reveling in how the images are really me, too, in the sense that hearing a phrase or two can intimate the music that envelopes those stolen fragments.

Andrew's serenely attentive and present art had to live within me before I could say what there was to see – before, that is, I could see what it was I had to say.

With delicious serendipity, this happened in Provence, where I walked through endless fields of wheat and saw stars floating over bronzed rooftops; where cicadas played a resonant coda; and where I breathed the perfume of laurel, lavender, olive, and fig; where I felt moistened by the humid, aged, and ruined stones; and where I waited oh-so-ferverently for the sun to set and the moon to rise escorting me toward the intimacy of somnolent nights, whose sweetness was cadenced by the bell sounding out each hour, each half hour, like the steady breathing and beating of the human heart nearby.

I write this at a little desk with a view onto the *Place de l'Église* of Fox-Amphoux, an old village perched on a hill among the many of the Haut-Var: a perfect place, it happens, to wonder about why the tenacious physical honesty of Andrew's art is so stirring. Being in Provence I found myself able to throw open a window onto the real quality – and the real qualities – of Andrew's images.

Like the landscape of Provence, Andrew's paintings and drawings are of hills and valleys, trees, fields, a flower here and there, and clouds, lots of clouds -- the very stuff of any ordinary countryside. As phrased by my consummate companion during those contented summer days, what is captivating about Provence is how 'the extraordinary' lives within 'the ordinary' – how the extraordinary is drawn out of the other, breathed and consumed by ordinary people doing ordinary chores – living, to put it plainly, their unruffled quite ordinary lives. That is simply wondrous, and, given my particular sensibility, I find it also very magical. Andrew's images show an artist working in just this mode of enchanting, earthy, and implacable honesty.

Andrew, who just turned 50 years, is an unpretentious artist leading a quotidian life in a New England mill town with his wife, a brilliant, and just as unpretentious, writer. He has a smile that seems about to erupt into a toothy grin, yet never does. He projects an air of stillness wherever he goes. I cannot imagine Andrew shouting or boasting, especially not about himself. Yet he has a kind of determined selfhood, serenely and softly present. Although I have only been in his presence a handful of times, when I am with Andrew, my voice and limbs draw in, reflexively quieting themselves, as though were I to move or speak something fragile would shatter. Andrew's pictures too induce this response. They feel like that. They don't come to you the way so much art does these days, demanding, "Look at me!" You have to come to them, quietly, intensely, mindfully.

The question is, are you in the frame of mind to do this sort of looking?

Of course, you could just hang these pictures and let them be the effortless and agreeable decoration most consumers of artwork presume smaller pictures like these to be. After all, they have no pretension to belong anywhere else but near us, in that place where we enjoy our daily lives, doing ordinary things, attending to the quotidian – at home. It may seem odd to say, but I really do believe these objects are not unhappy with their fate. If the spirit of the artist dwells within them at all, and I am utterly convinced it does, it lives there undisturbed by aspirations of grander settings. These pictures don't keep an overnight bag always packed. These are not restive pictures; they are perfectly suited to the domestic milieu, where they remain as content to be at home as their owners.

So what sort of frame of mind is needed to look at them, if not the everyday one that has us relaxed at home? These pictures ask something more of us, and I don't mean in the way of a specialized skill or competency. What they want is our alertness to – I would say readiness for – the very mystery that saturates the ambience of the common places of life we call home. The word I give that relationship is 'intimacy,' which as a frame of mind for looking at Nixon's pictures means becoming vulnerable to their nature – to letting that nature, their true nature, simply . . . well, simply *be*.

As with any living thing – which a picture is, if it has any aesthetic merit at all – intimacy comes into being not as a thing we put on and take off as we do our clothes each day. Intimacy springs

from desire. Yet like anything that nourishes the fullness of life, intimacy takes patience. Above all I think it takes practice, the sort of ingrained habits that arise from daily routine – something that happens most predictably, it turns out, at home.

I have been lucky enough to live with a couple of Nixon's works at home, where day in and day out I could see them hanging happily; yes, as the contented pictures they at first appear, inhabiting my study wall. It's such a simple point really, but I realized that each day I saw them, I saw them first from a distance and then up close. They were but flat painted objects on the wall as I walked in to sit down at my desk and then there they were, close to me, not more than an arm's length away. This observation is certainly not profound, because we do it all the time with things at home, but for me it became something of an aesthetic revelation – for out of this most mundane routine, the aesthetic intimacy of which I speak had been, unconsciously, set in motion quite forcefully.

Having been induced into a frame of mind for looking, what I saw was this: standing back Nixon's images look uncanny, thick, obdurate, heavy with paint, as though building slabs were used for surfaces. Approaching them, coming nearer I saw obsessive drawing, with loving, cautious, tender attention to surface and to the touch, as though Nixon were weaving a rug out of rare fabric, or caressing the surface with pigment, marks laid down as if any one of which could break or shatter the otherwise unyielding surface they occupy.

We are talking about landscape here. Nixon doesn't paint or draw nudes, which is telling for an artist as committed as he to searching out the visual through tactile analogies. Matisse loved using his brush to lay on his lusty color in the curves of his model's hips or in the hollows under her breasts – his brush seems naturally to situate itself where paint can caress and model naked flesh. Nixon is more Cézannesque, avoiding that genre altogether, with its potential for the brush or charcoal stick to disclose, however innocent or unwittingly, an erotically-charged corporeality. It seems rather the medium of the surface, what Robert Motherwell once called the "virgin canvas," which is what I think quickens Nixon's creative pulse.

You see a bit of the sculptor at work in these pictures. The one who loves to dig out the contours of hills or score deep shadows in trees. Nixon made sculpture as a graduate student at Indiana University in Bloomington and kept at it for a while after that. Massive monumental pieces they are. Though not modeling much any more these days, Nixon carries on that craft in painting. And so his touch is sensitive to the painted or drawn-on surface as though it's a chunk of unclothed stone, a slab of sun-dried earth, all voluptuous potential that he can model, with scores of little indentations and gouges that tease out the contours of the natural forms.

The commonplace landscape ends up being something loftier than an imitation or copy of trees and fields and sky. OK, so what I mean is, it's more artistic. Yet Nixon's art of landscape is not sweetly agreeable or even mildly fun to look at the way so much of what passes under the broad rubric of "landscape" photography and painting is. You've really got to get intimate with these paintings and, as I wondered earlier, are you in the mood to do that?

These paintings are rather dry, flat uniform zones of color. And what's more, no one's there – no shepherds, no farmers, no children frolicking. It's as if we've landed in Oz, minus the curious inhabitants. And so if you aren't willing to be patient about seeing them, these pictures could easily come off as amiably generic if somewhat dehydrated replications of nature.

The irony is that Nixon has literally put his hands on a couple of nature's secrets. Dutch painters discovered a whole lot of these secrets several centuries ago. It remains a big accomplishment for little pictures – something art history still hasn't quite managed to 'get,' with its categorical diminutives such as "little master" for geniuses like Netherlander Jan van Goyen. And most people tend to find the pictures, frankly, though I hate to admit it, pretty dull.

Yet to see landscape, what I mean is to envision it the way artists do, is a near magical thing, precisely because we ordinary folks believe we've got eyes to see it, and all the artist does is record what's there, with a dash of skill and a pinch of leisure time. Monet said as much, didn't he, in his down-to-earth way, "I paint nature as I see it." Funny, it doesn't look like that when I see nature, but nature comes to life for me after I've been visiting some Monets. And the life that's there is all new, all glowing sensation, my eyes made to move here and there as though tethered to a line and cast into pools of fresh and frenzied colors, quirky outlines, ragingly wild sunsets, and – to my ordinary eyes, at least – outlandish earth tones.

The point is not an easy one, but it's the one that matters if we want to have any insight into these pictures of Andrew Nixon. The artist sees the landscape for what it is, but the fact of the matter is that the seeing is conditioned by an aesthetically cultivated eye – an eye that's been looking and painting and drawing and looking again for a very long time. And what happens is that the placement of the horizon, the density of the values of the clouds, the setting of a tree, alone or in a grove, the greenness of green, the blueness of blue, the ruggedness of the earth tones – all these things of nature we mere mortals take for granted when we look at landscape have been laid down not as formulae or conscious pre-selection but as intuition, in the sense Emerson meant it. And we are the beneficiaries of the artist's aesthetic intuition.

What I see in these paintings is the way Nixon sees the vastness of the landscape. He sees it, oddly, by evoking its sound – by evoking actually a sort of serenity, the tranquility of the open field, something not typically associated with paintings. But Nixon's are quiet and you must be very still to see them. No breeze stirs; no figure breaks the sound of that near-silent stillness of the endless meadows and vaulted skies.

And then there is the matter of placement, not composition – that pedestrian technique students have to acquire in the arid setting of so many art studios found in schools. Placement is sublime; it is the sign of a living thing, an imperfect living thing, like a birthmark or the blemish on an otherwise perfect peach. If you believe in God, then the Divine has a sharp artistic eye for such details. But I believe in artists who know by intuition how to capture the chaos, the nearly incomprehensible extent of nature, through placement – of a tree, a lonely flower, the height of the sky, how much open sky, the outline of the mountain, how much mountain, how much field and river, how much green, and how much gold, how light and how dark to render what is near and what is far, and finally where it all begins and ends, both landscape and the picture that frames it. Are these things really there in nature? Indeed they are, but the artist is the one who gives them their place – their placement – as gift to our vision. This is the marvel of Nixon's art – that for our eyes it is a sort of visual *espalier*.

You learn, then, to see edges; you learn to see a broad swath of color as both flat and rounded; you learn to understand how a single tree punctuates and arranges the sky. You learn to love clouds as vessels, containers and shapers of air, makers of bowls in the sky. You learn to soak up color, the simple color seen when hiking or moving about the roads – a golden field, a stand of

green trees, clouds tinted with pink and mauve, lavendered distances, and the ever-changing cornflower-blue sky. Nixon shapes the color without detail, except for his affectionate brush. The details? These are in the imagination – inside the wheat fields, where countless stalks of grain sway and ruffle like toile or moiré, like limbs under ballet clothes we can't quite see but which the costume stirs in our imagination.

How ordinary, how extraordinary is this ordinariness, that calls us to what is outside ourselves. These images are not about ego or psyche or any other form of self-indulgent play of the inner life. Nixon shows us – and I mean that word, “show” – how to be attentive to what is great in nature, what is extraordinary by lavishing his aesthetic affections on what is small, on the oft-hidden details, that is, on what is but very, very ordinary.

This is the art of landscape, and what captivates us is that Nixon gives us the real thing, without any embroidery.

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