

Space and Spirit in the Paintings of John Beerman

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Those few artists who still look across a river at the setting sun – and unimpeded by every previous depiction – tell us something fresh about all that, are so brave as to be crazy, heroic. It is a feat to achieve your maturity and yet remain as purely psychological as you are retinally receptive. Add to that the gift for showing all you see or wish to see. How does one stay un-ironic in our age so corrosive with irony and its rust?

“Whenever people talk about the weather,” Oscar Wilde wrote in the 19th century, “I always think they mean something else.” And, at our troubled front end of Century twenty-one, we might feel that way on hearing the word “landscape.” Despite this, for two and a half decades, John Beerman’s mission has been to wrest continuing spiritual vitality from a genre that seems based on that most transient of categories: location location location.

Landscape, once a staple in our galleries and a buttress in our lives, once the patriot’s means of praising our nation’s vastness and variety, can today feel like some sample wedge of shoreline kept in zoological captivity. Given our world of sprawl and tangled phonelines, given our plundered national forest, any patch of pre-industrial woodland can now appear as antique as it does “desirable” (to use the real estate ads’ pet phrase). But Beerman keeps finding new ways to import urgency, grace, and meaning

to his distilled renderings of a natural world we like to say we know, or knew. His restricted palette of hues and subject matter – earth, water, trees and recent distant outcropping of manmade structures – goads the artist deeper into his Whistlerian control of tonality, his mastery of the quicksilver temporal effect.

He deletes all that is additive, mere MSG, the carb for carb’s sake. We are left to confront tableaux purely protein. Some painters are novelists; Beerman is a poet. The artists’ gift for simplification can resemble Corot’s – an insight into the bare planes of land or water’s contours, a gift for finding those anomalous forms that, while seeming to defy convention, actually make a given prospect feel unique, personal. Note how, in a row of serried shoreline trees, two seem fused, a double-header out of sequence. This very coupling transforms a view into a vista and on up toward being a latent poem. By using those fused monogamous trees, Beerman has rendered the space peculiar enough to grow universal. Our critical faculty must decide if this single oddity seems sufficiently “real.” Once we say yes, the work instantly becomes more fully ours, adopted, attached.

Studying Beerman’s work, we soon recognize that he is really painting anything but “views.” (“Panoramas are not what they used to be,” Wallace Stevens told us years ago.) Instead, these paintings are occasions for direct longing. Beerman’s

pictures do not appeal to us by showing familiar marvels of geography like Frederic Church's Andes or Niagra. Instead the fragments of land Beerman offers seem a bit featureless, if calming. The emphasis is not on geological picturesque-ness, it is more concerned with light, time of day, the eye's route to the horizon and back. The observer finds himself pulled into a sort of committed trance; he soon becomes the willing equal-sign balancing a transaction between "right here" and "way out there." In Beerman, the horizon becomes our goal, then our dessert. Robert Louis Stevenson once titled a child's poem "The Faraway Nearby." I recall the old joke about a fellow shouting across a river to some stranger, "How do I get to the other side?" only to be answered, "You're already on it." Beerman's sense of suppressed ardor, of sigh-worthy longing, his understanding of our appetite for solitude, these enlist us all (if singly). His work quietly calls forth our whole involvement. We become his collaborators in hatching the illusion he has offered us: of standing alone somewhere, at last. We have turned toward Beerman's painted landscapes. In doing so, we have gratefully turned our backs on all else. Even the person we came in with!

We would do well to recall that the very word "evening" implies a race about to end: Day is finally drawing alongside Night, shoulder to shoulder for the photo finish. A strange concord is implied in this guard-change of the swift shift. Many of John Beerman's works take place at that serene hour. He seems to delete from his work any overt autobiography or even technical braggadocio, however supple the brushwork itself. He paints in

the third person, but it is a third person that writers call a "close-third," meaning it anticipates and attends the viewer's emotions. The cubes of light he offers become transfixing opportunities for meditation. In the gallery, we half expect to find directive footprints drawn onto the floor before each canvas. Beerman has anticipated our being here, our standing before these invitations to speculate, these outward manifestations of private inward pining. If Beerman were a Psalm, he would be the vernal Twenty-third. He hath prepared a tablet before us in the presence of our enemies. A feast to assuage our peckish spiritual hunger. The sunset runneth over. He has preceded us into the landscape and has returned to us with evidence: his own skimmed purified findings.

If anything can make poets of us all, it is the horizon. No one can live long without its mysteries and news. The earth is still constructed so we can – if allowed – see clear ahead to the outermost erogenous zone of knowing. That forefront edge of our own eyesight we endearingly take to be the earth's very end. Beerman shows days dying in glory at the sky's lowest edge. Surely the artist who best addresses the horizon occupies a supreme position. John Beerman holds that place of honor. He anticipates us where land greets sky, greets us, forming a new element, a spirit oxygen: the possible. He goes on and on refining a craft that was subtle to begin with. He keeps creating spirit icons for a godless age. John Beerman knows that what we seek there – balanced at the razor-blade horizon – is everything we know we've lost already, is everything we still hope to find.