

With John Beerman, in Heaven

There is a secret history of the art of painting, which like most matters arcane and occult, is no secret at all but as plain a fact as the sun ablaze in the noonday sky. To wit, the history of painting is the history of painting heaven. That being the case, it is clear that the lineage of its most accomplished masters—Fra Angelico, Altdorfer, the Bellinis, anonymous muralists in the Austrian Alps, J.M.W. Turner, several American luminists, Helen Frankenthaler—has been notably enlarged by the presence of John Beerman, whose paintings of Heaven bear incontestable witness to his residence there, in that company. .

From the moment his paintings swam into view, when Beerman was 24, his work has commanded the reverent admiration of the whole art world. Even those who felt it improper for a contemporary (or a competitor) to be painting canvases that would have been acknowledged as masterpieces in Victorian England or quattrocento Italy could find no way keep from gazing into Beerman's skies, as into the eyes of a hypnotist.

And when it's not his skies it is, as with Turner or Monet, his expanses of still, shimmering water. He lives in Nyack, a block away from the Hudson River (the Seine of the Luminists), and he returns to the Hudson virtually every day. As much as heaven it's his dwelling place. Theologians say that the contemplation of God is Heaven's chief reward, one that will continue to compel our interest and delight through all Eternity. Beerman's Hudson is like that. Witness this year's [title of painting]. How does he do it? How does he lay this brushstroke over this wash of color and finally come up with his own confounding Creation? There's no answer to

the question because Beerman himself accomplishes his most splendid effects in his own private audience with his Muse.

The heaven of painting, as rendered by its resident painters, is by and large as unpopulated as those ideal beaches one sees in ads for tourist destinations, but interestingly, since 9/11, Beerman has made it clear that saints and angels do inhabit his scumbled clouds. First, in a series of paintings of Central Park, where, beyond the scrim of trees, great gray apartment houses loom like ancient monuments, a vision of the Celestial City. Then in this season's most recent harvest he has added portraits of the paradise next-door, views from his studio window that are further proof that the Kingdom of Heaven is within.

Stepping back just a few hundred miles, there are scenes from Everywhere, U.S.A., luminist oils of streets of that transcendental ordinariness that has become the lodestone for contemporary photographers. As though Beerman were to pull over to the side of the road and say, "How about that then?" and Zing! the scales fall from your eyes and there's your own daily habitation under the aspect of eternity. And here, because there are walls and roofs and a long orange fence (such a fence!) Eternity includes tangible evidences of Disegno and geometry and all those sublime intricacies that make us believe sometimes that Cezanne is more than a match for Monet.

The final and nicest thing about Heaven is that it is a perfect democracy where you don't need a college degree to enter. A Beerman would be as transcendently beautiful for Elvis as for Bernard Berenson. Sublimity needs no footnotes. It's just amazingly here and now, like a flash of lightning and a thunderclap. What can one say but Wow!

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