

WHEN YOU LOOK AT JOHN BEERMAN'S PAINTINGS, you might first think that they have a dream-like quality. But look long and your perception widens. Actual dreams are sharp-edged and violently imagistic. They move rapidly across a field of action, collapsing narrative, and letting events collide.

These paintings are not dream-like: they come from elsewhere, from the realm of the "holy and enchanted," as Coleridge wrote, the suspended state of a particular, poetic, magnified, and interior vision. There is a fragile sense that the image before you might disappear, or that, hovering for an instant, it suddenly might transfigure into something different. The tanker, the man in orange, the crescent moon—they're caught there on the canvas, but not.

Like a poet who masters all the traditional forms then goes his own way, John Beerman obviously absorbed the work of Asher B. Durand, Thomas Cole, Thomas Doughty and other Hudson River painters' work, then evolved away from it, while retaining certain qualities such as their mythic sense of the American landscape, the fascination with geographical forms, and a sense of nature's inherent, self-contained power. Beerman has said that he is influenced by the Luminists, the later painters of that school, who were more involved in effect than scene, who compositionally reduced the landscape rather than depicting it with infinite detail, and who took light as a grace.

It is fascinating to look at Beerman's *Tanker on the Hudson*, *Hook Mountain*, *Nyack*, *The Hook*, *New Moon*, *Ayr Mount*, *Grey and Green*, and *Maple View Tree #2* with the Luminists in mind. I'm thinking of those light and air paintings, such as John Frederick Kensett's *Sunset Sky*, *Eaton's Neck*, *Long Island*, and *Newport Rocks*. These and many others feel as though they share some strands of DNA with Beerman, as does Frederick Edwin Church's *The Highlands of the Hudson River*, Martin Johnson Heade's series of hay landscapes and his *Newburyport Marshes*, *Passing Storm*.

The connections are strong but the departure is stronger. Beerman tightens the telescope further, rendering the landscape more elemental in form and at the same time, he softens the focus, allowing the light full play within and upon his forms. What happens is that a sense of awe intensifies.

Light is the word that keeps playing around in my mind as I look at the luminous stripes of sunlight on *Occoneechee Path*, the airy-gold haze in the trees at *Ayr Mount*, *Grey and Green*, the intersection of butter yellow with saffron on the corner of *The Yellow House*, and the light-suffused palate of the three horizontal layers of *Tanker on the Hudson*. Fiat lux! All this light, where does it take us? Maybe a poet can tell us:

*There isn't a place we haven't
yet been that we haven't imagined not being there,
some holy ground to lie on, our bodies rooted,
pushing up something new, some light
we can see so clearly,
limpid air; there, there, there's
something ahead. I think I can just make it out.*

from "Newfoundlove" (Edward Mayes)

I've lived with these paintings on my screen and in my head for several weeks. They've become iconic in my mind, like actual memories of, say, night reflections in a Venetian lagoon, cypress shadows striping the road to my house, the thousand shades of green on the hill behind my house. That is, the paintings become intimate as I linger with them, as one solitude greets another.

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