



JULIAN HATTON

CURIOUS TERRAIN

When a painter is surrounded by the vicissitudes of nature, he is confronted with the seemingly impossible task of capturing an evanescent experience in its totality on a two-dimensional surface. One can look back to Monet and Bonnard, and beyond to Samuel Palmer and Turner, to witness the remarkable transformation of the natural world in the hands of artists who were possessed sufficiently by its beauty to remake it according to their vision.

Julian Hatton has sketched and painted from nature for some twenty years, a process that has led to much experimentation and discovery. Whether making small studies or drawings to be used for larger works, Hatton has sought to simplify, condense and distill experience, a reductive procedure that ultimately serves a more complex objective: the extemporaneous painting. He has gradually developed a vocabulary of painterly equivalents that stand in for the various elements and events in nature, be they material or phenomenological. Shapes emerge and dissolve, ground planes flatten out, perspectival views collide and commingle. One

can explore these spatial ambiguities, contemplate the work's formal construction, or just savor the profusion of inventive shape and rich color that comprise a Hatton painting.

Within the process of abstracting from an initial study from life, the remnants of earlier images (artifacts of the slow evolution of Hatton's paintings) contribute to its otherworldly appearance. Take, for example, the deceptively simple composition of *Flap Jack*, in which the "readable" landscape—foliage, a path in the foreground, a field and hills in the background—is interrupted by a large, hovering floral shape that contains four yellow pods. One can discern other organic forms beneath the surface, evidence that Hatton has pushed the painting through several stages that together evoke a more poetic realm. The title reinforces the notion of layering that is so much a part of Hatton's mode of working: one thing on top of another, space being created by overlapping forms and a shifting perspective. We are left with the image of a mythical place, an amalgam of experience, memory and dream, with landscape as the vehicle for the sensual pleasures of shape, line and color.

In *Black-Eyed Susan*, the color and scale of things are exaggerated or reduced according to their importance or significance, as in a medieval painting. Hatton insists that we suspend our disbelief, enter a mysterious garden of stems, roots, hybrid flowers, branches and trunks of what look like trees, and be transported by his palette of deep greens and blues, pinks and reds. Nature is subverted and transformed by the demands of pictorial necessity as well as the artist's desire to capture the emotional equivalent associated with a particular time and place.

A smaller painting like *Shortcut* suggests a much larger space, one that is both inviting and strangely uninhabitable, at least physically. The reduction in scale and shift in color harmonies underscores the artist's range of invention and his ability to meld the natural with the abstract. Hatton's paintings demonstrate a refreshing freedom from convention, both as lyrical paeans to nature and playful diagrams of the artist's fertile imagination.

Robert G. Edelman

Plug, 2000–01
Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches