Claire Rosenfeld: The Changing Earth. Monotypes

Claire Rosenfeld, California Fires 1, 2019, encaustic monotype collage, 22 x 22 in.

Claire Rosenfeld: *The Changing Earth. Monotypes*
Revelation Gallery
April 5 through 28, 2022

By ERIK LA PRADE, April 2022

Landscape painting has been an important visual source for viewing the beauty and power of nature for thousands of years. The origin of this genre as we know it today essentially stems from two different cultures: the Eastern tradition, which dates to the sixth century in China, and in the West, wall paintings of landscapes and gardenscapes, created by the Greeks and Romans.

> "After the fall of the Roman Empire, the tradition of depicting pure landscapes declined, and the landscape was seen as merely a setting for religious and figural scenes. This tradition continued until the 16th century when artists began to view the landscape as a subject in its own right. The artistic shift seems to have corresponded to a growing interest in the natural world sparked by the Renaissance." (1)

The number of styles of landscape painting proliferated after the Renaissance, ranging from the German, English and Italian schools, to French Impressionism, to the American Hudson River School, and landscapes in all intervening and subsequent periods. However, they all generally fall into two categories; realistic/representational, or stylized/abstract.

An essential difference between traditional Eastern and Western styles of landscape painting was in the basic style of representation, which extended to other genres as well. Western painting in general evolved away from Medieval and Byzantine symbolic tendencies to embrace highly realistic, optically "correct" methods of depicting the natural world. Most notable was the adoption of two-point perspective in the early 1500's, as well as anatomically correct depictions of the human body. Thus, Western artists returned to the earlier Greek and Roman traditions, which had tended always in the direction of greater realism. Eastern painting, on the other hand, developed a more abstract or stylized formula for depicting natural forms and scenery, which does not aspire to optical verisimilitude. This formula includes a flattened picture plane, stylized landscape features, and a "timeline" presentation. These features began to be used by certain French Impressionists in their own works, after exposure to contemporary Japanese prints, and gradually entered the Western painting vocabulary.

Two further important influences on Western landscape painting came about within the last hundred to hundred-fifty years. The discovery of photography in 1826, and its growing popularity over the next few decades began to somewhat diminish the raison d'être for realistic landscape painting. They were no longer a primary source for viewing nature. Drawings, paintings, engravings and etchings, which had once provided a picture of the world in detailed accuracy, were now superseded by scientific photographic images of the natural world; a new and different way of looking at landscapes and natural phenomena.

A second related influence on Western landscape painting was the late nineteenth to early twentieth century rise of Expressionism, especially German Expressionism, as seen in Der Blaue Reiter group, including artists Wassily Kandinsky, Franz Marc, August Macke, Alexej von Jawlensky and others. Since images of nature and landscapes were no longer tied to realistic representations, artists were now free to explore different ways of depicting the natural world, and their personal reactions to it.

In the last fifty years, various environmental changes and distresses have become every day topics: global warming and the subsequent melting of icebergs resulting in a rise of sea levels; the decline and borderline extinction of a range of wildlife animals and insects; the absence of seasonal rainfalls and uncontrollable fires resulting in the loss of millions of acres of forests and widespread destruction of property and homes. Environmental factors have seriously altered and influenced our thinking about the landscape and nature, as well as substantially altering many of those landscapes forever.

The artist Claire Rosenfeld was introduced to dance and the visual arts when she was ten years old by her mother, who was a dancer. Claire studied oil painting with the French artist Elaine Journet, until she was fifteen years old, and credits both dance and painting with "her kinesthetic sense of visual and spatial movement, gesture and her approach to plastic space." (2) She received a BFA in painting from Carnegie Mellon University, and an MFA from Queens College in 1973, studying with Robert De Niro Sr., and Mary Frank. After graduation, she continued to study painting and print making at The New York Studio School, working with Philip Guston, David Hare, and Nicolas Carone. She travelled extensively, spending a year in Europe in 1964/65, and time in Greece, Israel and England as well. She also made frequent trips to and resided in a variety of exotic locales, most notably in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, Bali, and Ceylon.

Claire's current show at Revelation Gallery at Saint John's in the Village, is a kind of culmination of her years as an artist who has constantly experimented in the creation of paintings and prints. The exhibition is not a retrospective since it focuses mainly on the artist's monotypes and collages with a few paintings also included. The works range from small-to-medium-sized matted prints to larger, framed works. The majority of the works are ink or encaustic monotypes or encaustic monotype collages. The artist has listed

short definitions of the three types of works in the gallery handout, which helped me to understand the different processes used to create each unique work.

There are thirty-seven works and the title, THE CHANGING EARTH, sets the theme of the show, loosely divided into three categories: prints of volcanos; prints of earthquakes; prints of glaciers; with a fourth group of paintings showing images of female and male figures, many set in landscapes.

Upon entering the gallery, you step into a large room, with works displayed on four walls. There are nineteen works on the right-hand wall, hung salon style. The first work in the show, to which I had an immediate response, is "Burning Mountain 1 and 2*."* It is a work in two parts with the top image being the plate or collagraph, while the bottom image is a monoprint pulled from the plate. The colors in the plate are darker and denser in their forms than those in the monoprint, which displays the same image, only rversed and in lighter colors. This work presents a before-and-after effect of the process the artist works in. Another pair of works that reveal this process are ink monotypes. The first print, "Fire in the Mountains," is the original print. The second print, "Fire in the Mountains/Night" is called a ghost print. Whatever residue is left on the plate after the first print is made, gets transferred to the second piece of paper. The difference between a print and its "ghost," is striking, since dark areas are now muted, creating unexpected contrasts in the colors of the image. And, whereas an etching, collagraph, or lithograph can be inked numerous times to create an edition, a monotype is a unique work with occasionally one or two ghosts, and creating one is generally a fast process. As the artist mentioned, "the print finds you."

In her ability to manipulate colors and forms Rosenfeld reveals herself to be an artist who works between abstraction and figuration - in what might be called a Neo-Expressionist style.

The artist credits her many years of traveling, living in different countries, and the works of other artists she admires, as her strongest influences. She admires the Group of Seven, a Canadian group of landscape artists who were active in the 1920's to early 30's, as well as the American modernist Marsden Hartley, for his use of forms and strong faces.

The artworks hung on the opposite wall reveal a stronger influence; The German Expressionist artists of THE BLAUE REITER group. The ten works on this wall are portraits or people in landscapes. Most are ink monotypes, and reminiscent of German Expressionism, particularly a woman's portrait titled "Blue Woman," a direct reference to Franz Marc. A few works on this wall – "Man in the Forest," "Yellow Man," "Dark Woman," and "Woman," – have a subdued sexuality, and without reading the titles, you might find the figures of men and women to be visually fluid in appearance.

The largest works in the show are three works hanging to the right of the gallery entrance. They all present powerful images of wildfires, and it is Rosenfeld's handling of this material that reveals her ability as an important printmaker. All three works capture the visual power of a landscape being transformed by an uncontrolled force. The first work, #35, "Mountain Fire," is an encaustic monotype. The next two works, #36, "California Fires," and #37, "Fires," are encaustic monotype collages. Looking at Rosenfeld's ability to handle beeswax and pigment reminds me of another artist who also uses beeswax in his pictures: Jasper Johns.

Rather than trying to pigeonhole these works stylistically, it is worth suspending one's critical sense to see each work as one artist's interpretation of the natural world; a world that is under attack by various man-made situations and stressors. These prints are open to a political interpretation, but Rosenfeld claims she is not making a political statement about global warming or the way California wild fires have devastated millions of acres of land because of a lack of rainfall. Regarding her sources, the artist told me:

“The images of the fires, volcanos and glaciers were loosely inspired by some of the incredible photographs of these events that are in the public domain. The figures are basically invented from my drawings or occasionally photographs, but mostly they arise from the painting process.” (3)

These works may remind you of images seen on newscasts or in color photographs, revealing the loss and destruction people have suffered and endured. In her landscapes, the artist has skillfully brought out her feelings about her subject material, and ultimately, has indicated how we may also feel about it. The work is strong and it is timely.

Endnotes

1. Landscapes, Classical to Modern Curriculum (Education at The J. Paul Getty Museum.) www.getty.edu.landscapes.background.

2. Claire Rosenfeld narrative statement, written by the artist, 4/2022.

3. Email from Rosenfeld to author, 4/2022.