

John Beerman and the Productions of Nature

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JOHN BEERMAN HAS MASTERED the most difficult aspect of the art of rendering, in paint, the productions of nature. Only the most gifted painters accomplish this feat, which is to locate the point of interaction between the physical properties of the subject and the artist's inner experience of it, yielding to the viewer the most concentrated re-experiencing of that scene.

Of course, choosing the right scene, knowing where it should end, and where the artist's internal version of it should take over, make up the critical first step. But much more is required. And in the very substantial body of work Beerman has produced since the early eighties—an array of landscape studies on canvas and paper that range from the intimate to the almost-monumental—we see his painterly skills, already clearly evident in his early work, grow steadily stronger. From his management of the fundamentals of composition, light, color, perspective, to his detailed command of the representation of shadows, the action of wind, reflections in water, mass and weight suggested through the most delicate brushwork, he stands equipped to undertake the most challenging interrogations of the natural world. The result of Beerman's industry to date is a distinct realm of images, meditative in character, all clearly by the same hand and informed by the same spirit.

Contemporary landscape painting is obliged to unfold against a new ontology, one to which John Beerman's particular sensibility seems to have adjusted sumbliminally. What I mean is that the classic landscape

masterpieces of the past delivered their moments of transferred tranquility, their intimations of order and purpose, through an unstated reliance on widely-shared optimistic ideas about the state of the world as it was then. I believe that the power of the classic landscape paintings lay in the alleviation of individual animal anxiety about impermanence, achieved by the viewer's identification with images of natural permanence, majesty, and self-renewal. And I believe that this profound effect was enhanced by an accompanying ironic perception that the images of permanence themselves represented a freezing of moments that were fleeting even as they were arrested by the genius of the artist.

But we have come to an extreme and different moment in the trajectory of landscape paintings: its subject matter is deeply menacing. *The poetry of earth is never dead*, Keats wrote, but that was then. Glaciers shrivel; blights take the oak forests of California; the radiance of our frantic cities bleaches the night sky; clear-cutting proceeds inexorably; the Army Corps of Engineers straightens our brooks and streams. Bierman's images celebrate nature even as they subtly accommodate our background anxiety. There is a valedictory tone to many of his works. And this tone is signaled by Bierman's framing—the use of antique gold frames for paintings and gold leaf borders for prints. Reynolds Price, writing about John's work, alludes indirectly to this quality of his work, I think: "...he lures us toward the beautiful brink, and only then leaves us..." This suggestion of apprehension is more evident in his most recent work.

All this is to say that Bierman's gaze is more complex than has been appreciated. He has been seen as a pantheist of sorts, a fundamentalist Transcendentalist looking at each piece of the natural world as one more

space in the great unrecognized cathedral of nature. Beerman, who is a native of North Carolina, a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, resident of the lower Hudson River town of Nyack since the early eighties, has been influenced by Luminism, by the Hudson River school, by Frederick E. Church, John F. Kensit, and Fitz Hugh Lane. He has evolved away from the more romantic inflections of his earlier period, without sacrificing his ability to bring the shock of authentic beauty through to the viewer. Beerman has traveled widely in pursuit of locales, many of them less yielding than the woodlands and lakes of the Northeast. There is no question that Beerman's reverential attitude toward nature is still intact, but I find hints of a more austere undertone, more muted coloring, implied sadness.

This brings us to Beerman's new paintings. Many writers have remarked on the almost-total absence of man and his artifacts from John Beerman's earlier works. But that is not true of these new images. In some of them, we see fragments of infrastructure and, in one case, a complete building. Some of these paintings present scenes that seem almost to be receding from the viewer, prompting a physical desire to reach for and hold on to the scene. Several strong paintings were created during the period when haze from the burning forests in Quebec overspread the upper United States. Beerman seems to possess, in these paintings, the power to paint atmosphere as discrete subject. I find disquiet in these paintings, presentiments of obscure dynamisms at work, along with the commanding presentation of the sweep and beauty of the productions of nature that has always been John Beerman's great gift.