

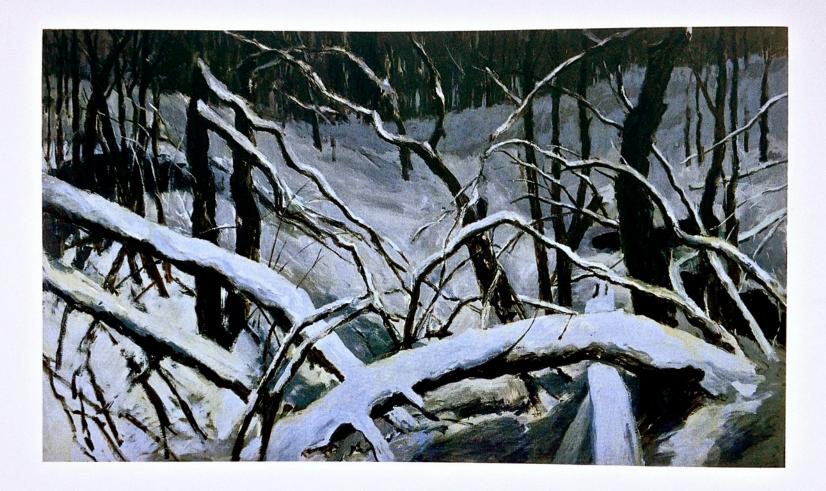


The choice of landscape as a subject in contemporary painting requires a visual investigation that includes an ongoing reevaluation of accepted conventions. To affirm the validity of such an enterprise at the end of the millennium is to take a position in direct opposition to the defining art movement of this century, non-objective abstraction, by embracing an even more entrenched tradition.

However, there are many reasons for the longevity and vitality of landscape painting among today's artists, particularly those in the U.S.



Initially, it offered North American painters of the late 19th century a means of breaking with European precedent (American Impressionism notwithstanding), the kind of formal, academic training that Thomas Cole and others found so confining. What began as the Grand Tour of Europe was reconfigured as a key to the invention of an American painting style, epitomized by the luminous canvases of the Hudson River School. It represented a theme for both a national and regional identity, a vehicle for the painters of the Stieglitz circle, for example, to indulge in cubist theory without falling prey to the Picasso/Braque gang. It offered continuity, an alternative to the constantly changing face of cities,



leaving the latter to the domain of the more elucidating medium of photography (even the Precisionists seemed to prefer grain elevators to skyscrapers). For the Abstract Expressionists, it was a point of departure, even as it remained an underlying visual and spiritual source of what Robert Rosenblum identified as the "abstract sublime" within the work of Still, Pollock and Rothko. More recently, in its latest phase of transformation, landscape has suddenly become an endangered motif, thereby having unwittingly conferred upon it a new status as politicized subject matter.



The wide range of approaches to landscape painting gathered together in this exhibition gives one pause about the very notion of representation. Several painters of this group share a fascination with effects of light, both from an external source as well as a mysterious, internal illumination. Both Katherine Bowling and Janie Paul introduce an intense light that dissolves the edges of form, minimizing detail. The identification of the particular is subsumed in a pervasive luminosity, the accentuation of essence rather than form. Bowling's paintings are particularly reductive, resembling a kind of Minimal Impressionism, as transparent veils of color are employed to describe the most



evanescent of woodland scenes. In Bowling's *Portrait*, green branches reach out like human veins, accents of light coming from an unknown, distant source. Paul has in her recent work gradually eliminated the identifying minutiae of her landscapes, employing the medium of monotype to simplify her compositions. *Passage* is a schematic depiction of a clearing in a row of trees reflected in a pond, as Paul filters the image through two stages of translation. Loose brushstrokes and ambiguous description leave much open to interpretation, shadow and

Berlind has produced a series of works of felled and standing trees that form a "natural" grid. Often the trees are snow-covered, adding to the formal complexity of shape, projection and space. There is a stillness, almost to the point of silence, in *Damaged Woods I*, in which large dark trees form a Mondrian-like pattern against a deep snowfall. Berlind here eschews color to focus on stark, formal relationships. Gill uses a similar structure to Berlind's in *Forest # 9*, but the linear pattern based on trees and branches is far more abstract in conception. Gill eliminates the ground plane, his meandering white lines crisscross in front of a dark, infinite space. Although Gill has pushed his imagery to the edge of abstraction, reminiscent of the spatial explorations of Brice Marden, he manages to maintain a connection with the essential forms in nature, keeping the dialogue open.

The landscapes of Louise Hamlin, Lucy Reitzfeld and Jeremy Foss are paeans to particular places, though one senses the artist's intercession (and therefore their intention) in the mood conveyed. For example, Hamlin's pastel *Djerassi Hills* evinces more than just the artist's penchant for sensuous, organic forms in nature. Like Edward Weston's boldly erotic photographs of sand dunes, Hamlin focuses her attention on contrasts of texture and shape to heighten the suggestion of human form in the overlapping hills and dense forests. Reitzfeld divides her attention between place and a point in time; her gaze parallels that of the camera's eye, selecting the right moment. There is a buoyancy, a lightness of touch in paintings like *The Watering Place*, in which the contour of the distant clouds reiterates the silhouette of the bushes in the foreground, a result of the artist's search for harmony. Foss is preoccupied with the relationship between land and water, between liquid and solid form. Color is adjusted to a slightly elevated key, at times to an almost Fauvist intensity, contrasts of pure hue and opacity and transparency activating the surface. *Three Trees* is an introspective work, suggesting Foss' ability to adjust the mood of his paintings to suit his response to the subject.

Julian Hatton, Nancy Brett and David Lowe all use different methods to fragment and then reconstruct the elements of the landscape, often in a playful fashion. Hatton takes in a lot of territory with what appears to be a bird's eye view, though he in fact crowds his simplified, naive plant-life into a single plane tilted toward the viewer. His choice of a skewed perspective and his use of off-beat color, recalling the late works of Marsden Hartley, lend his small paintings a gem-like brightness. In Hatton's intimate *Untitled*, trees resemble huge flowers, a pond could be a mirror; these fanciful, animated images take on a life of their own. The artist's humorous take on nature pervades his work. Brett chooses a vertical format to suspend bits of nature in a painterly field, foliage and flowers taking flight, like hieroglyphs blown through a turbulent space. In *Scatter*, Brett employs gestural flourishes to suggest a glimpse of the landscape in flux, perhaps attempting to parallel the process of constant change within nature itself. This kind of dramatic activity is somewhat atypical for Brett, whose large scale paintings of wooded fields are

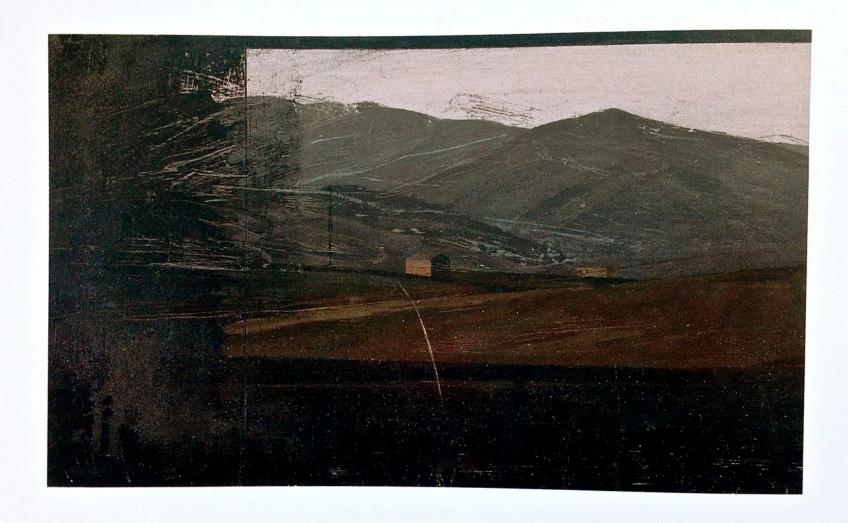


relatively gravity bound, causing one to speculate where this process of fragmentation might lead. Lowe, who often paints the Tuscan landscape, uses cropping and techniques like sanding or scraping away layers of paint to either isolate or modify the geometry of northern Italy. This procedure generates shadows of underpainting that alter the texture and content of Lowe's images. In *Once Upon a Time in the West # 57*,



Lowe incorporates an interior rectangle that functions as a framing device, seeming to freeze the landscape in time and space. His precise delineation of form enhances these evocative settings that are both cinematic and dreamlike.

To experience these multifarious approaches to landscape painting is to realize that the examination of nature is neither exhausted nor 🔝



drained of potential. On the contrary, this exhibition demonstrates that the history of painting's profound involvement with nature in many ways parallels the stubborn survival of painting itself. It is said that Monet, late in his life, remarked that he could see all the world he needed to see in his pond at Giverny. If the artist looks deep enough, it's all there.