

The Transformative Vision:

Contemporary American Landscape Painting

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Landscape has always been a subject that has acted as a buffer against the isolation of the American artists, from their European counterparts, and from one another. Traced back to the 1850's, when Thomas Cole, Frederick Church and Albert Bierstadt, among others, searched for the ideal in majestic unspoiled vistas, to the haunting, introspective and brooding seascapes of Albert Pinkham Ryder and the late works of Winslow Homer, landscape has served as a crucial point of departure for the development of a uniquely American style of painting.

In the 20th century, there has been a continuing preoccupation with the interpretation of landscape and natural form in the work of painters such as Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, Georgia O'Keeffe and Charles Burchfield, which constitutes some of the most original and powerful work ever created by American artists. In a sense, American landscape painting would seem to have reached its fullest realization in the heroic-scaled canvases of the Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock and Clifford Still, a size and breadth that resonated with the vast expanses of the American landscape, as it broke with the European easel painting tradition. To assume that "action painting" came solely out of European automatism and Surrealism (by way of Arshile Gorky) is to ignore the equally important influence of Thomas Hart Benton, and the American landscape tradition.

Recent developments in American painting have indicated a return to the landscape tradition, but not without the profound impact of the major movements in the 20th century art. In truth, American artists have never completely abandoned the landscape as a source, or resource, but the upheaval of every traditional tenet of Western painting (geometric and aerial perspective, the object and any suggestions of 3-dimensional space) has forced the artists to reevaluate the cherished relationship with their favored subject. It would be difficult, if not impossible and undesirable, to attempt to turn back the clock to the time of Impressionism, and totally ignore the laborious struggle of Cezanne to forge the landscape into a newly constructed language of painting.

It is armed with this knowledge that American landscape painting has come full circle. Avoidance of the motif is no longer sacrosanct, and American painters are not inclined to hide their desire to work from nature, in any case. However, these painters are also aware of the need to inform landscape painting with the issues and questions of the late 20th century; if we are to come to terms with nature in our time, for either its preservation or ultimate destruction.

What distinguishes American landscape painting in this decade is its stubborn unwillingness to indulge in the picturesque. For reasons that have become all too clear, the disjunction between human society and nature is all but irreversible. Artists who choose to paint *from* nature, by that very choice, are faced with profound questions, both social and personal. The only possible resolution is the imposition of the artist's point of view upon the landscape motif, as it is made to serve a larger vision than the merely idyllic. Not that landscapes can no longer give solace or respite, but that it cannot escape the harsher realities to which it has been subjected.

And so the American painter approaches the landscape with passion and trepidation. Very little would seem to be taken for granted. That which is pleasing to the eye is to be somewhat distrusted, as if it represented only a half-truth. First and foremost, the landscape is there to

serve the final construction of the painting. The chosen motif is not accepted as a given, but is considered a vehicle for the artist's approach to the act of painting. If landscape painting is to be a viable alternative to the more readily accepted symbol of 20th century art, non-objective abstraction, then it must be subjected to the same formal and spiritual consideration, if it is to be embraced as a true reflection of the time in which it is made.

The paintings in this exhibition reflect the significant developments in landscape painting in America in the last decade. The painters' approach to their subject is as varied as the landscape itself, be it forest, harbor or arid desert. However, all of these painters share a preoccupation with the landscape as a vehicle of expression. Several painters use nature as a formal, often geometric substructure. Neil Welliver's choice of a densely wooded forest and felled trees is calculated to convey a solidity of construction much like that of a wood frame for a house; beam by beam, with little that does not serve the compositional structure. Yvonne Jacquette employs the grid of a glass-facade building, the faces of which distort the harbor that is reflected in its mirror-like windows. Robert Berlind uses the massive branches of an oak tree to subdivide the sky in almost geometric sections, much as Mondrian had in his landscape-derived abstractions.

Sylvia Mangold creates the illusion of masking tape and paper sheets to define the boundaries of a winter tree, as if to test the relationship between reality and pictorial invention. Rackstraw Downes provides a panoramic view of a seemingly conventional scene, only to distort the perspective in such a way as to question the nature of perception. Even more illusive is a lone kleenex packet floating in the sky in Greg Drasler's painting entitled *THE END II*, an image that is both haunting and comic; an event happened upon with no apparent explanation, and yet strangely foreboding.

Jim Denney, Gregory Crane and Karen Gunderson all portray the raw power of nature, either used, abused or otherwise overlooked by, or for human endeavor. Altoon Sultan and Mel Pekarsky present a startling visual precision that seems to contradict the laws of perception, thereby focusing attention on the telling details that combine to convey a heightened sense of reality. A feeling of mystery and romantic nostalgia permeates the paintings of April Gornik, Jeff Joyce, and Tracy Grayson, seemingly an attempt to recapture the enduring tradition of landscape painting that started with the Hudson River School, which has resurfaced in recent years. Nevertheless, the choice of imagery that is dream-like and decidedly not picturesque suggests that these painters are influenced as much by a personal vision as they are by historical precedent.

The recent enthusiasm that has generated a greater interest in landscape painting is likely to perpetuate a spate of exhibitions and articles devoted to the subject. While this can only enhance the opportunity for dialogue, it can also promote a situation where the uniqueness of the artist's vision is overlooked. It can be hoped, however, that this renewed interest will bring with it the kind of insight and investigation that has been given so generously to the history of 20th century abstraction. Only then can we discover how infinitely rich and intellectually rigorous the American landscape tradition truly is.

Robert G. Edelman
New York, 1989



Greg Drasler
The End II, 1988
Oil on canvas
70 x 50 inches
Courtesy Shea and Beker Gallery, New York



Rackstraw Downes
BMCC, 1985-87
 Oil on canvas/board
 9 x 29 inches
 Courtesy Hirschl and Adler Modern Gallery, New York



Yvonne Jacquette
Reflected Facade II, 1987
 Oil on canvas
 Triptych, 62 7/4 x 46 inches each
 Courtesy Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York



Sylvia Plimack Mangold
The Chinese Scholar, Summer Winter 1987-88
Oil on linen
60 x 80 inches
Courtesy Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York



Robert Berling
October Oak, 1986
Oil on canvas
59 x 75 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Tracy Givens
Landscape, 1988
Oil on paper
21 1/2 x 21 1/2 inches
Courtesy of the artist



Jim Denney
Barrier, 1988
Oil on canvas
69 x 96 inches
Courtesy of the artist



Gregory Crane
Talks with the Mockingbird, 1986
Oil on canvas
60 x 80 3/4 inches
Courtesy Edward Thorp Gallery, New York



April Gornik
Fresh Light, 1987
Oil on linen
74 x 96 inches
Courtesy Edward Thorp Gallery, New York



Tracy Grayson
Untitled, 1988
Oil on board
22 1/2 x 22 1/2 inches
Courtesy Christine Burgin Gallery, New York



Karen Gunderson
Beginning, 1987
Oil on linen
134 x 36 inches
Courtesy of the artist



Mel Pekarisky
High Ground, Low Ground, 1987-88
Mixed media on panels
Triptych, 36 x 16 inches
Courtesy G. W. Einstein Gallery, New York



Altoon Sultan
After Rain, Pawlet, VT, 1988
Oil on canvas
50 x 72 inches
Courtesy Marlborough Gallery, New York



Neil Welliver
High Water Mark, 1984
Oil on canvas
96 x 96 inches
Courtesy Marlborough Gallery, New York



Jeff Joyce
Europa, 1987
Oil on canvas
68 1/2 x 60 1/2 inches
Courtesy Elizabeth McDonald Gallery, New York

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