

Julie Langsam on Frederic Edwin Church

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Frederic Edwin Church, *Twilight in the Wilderness*, 1860, Oil on canvas, 40 x 64 inches, Collection Cleveland Museum of Art

I first saw Frederic Church's "Twilight in the Wilderness" in 1996 on my first trip to Cleveland; I was wandering aimlessly through the galleries of the Cleveland Museum of Art when this painting stopped me dead in my tracks. I had never been particularly interested in landscape painting or the landscape as subject, but the high drama of this particular painting affected me deeply. I felt a bit used and manipulated in the same way that certain sappy songs can choke me up no matter how obvious the formula, or the way a scene in a movie can bring on an intense emotional response even when there is no logical reason why I should be so affected by a fictional narrative. And yet.... and yet I felt an excitement about the possibilities this painting presented. It was bold and it was daring. It was syrupy and obnoxious and all the more thrilling in the way that only the forbidden can be. It was so OBVIOUS. Yet I kept coming back to this painting time after time, visit after visit, never fully understanding *why* it was getting under my skin even though I understood how.

I could describe Church's use of high key color, the juxtaposition of both complements and neutrals, the meticulous brushwork, but these formal qualities are not what interest me about the painting. In fact the surface of the painting is quite cold, hard, and calculated.

What does interest me is the daring on display: unapologetic, upfront, in your face, think what you like, take it or leave it. *I am telling you a lie and I expect you to believe it.*

In fact, it is the fiction of Church's painting that fascinates me—the impossibility of the moment combined with the elaborate mechanics that he uses to convince me of the impossible. "Twilight in the Wilderness", as with many of Church's paintings, is filmic and theatrical. As a scene it sets the stage for *something to happen*, yet we are suspended in both the now-ness and the forever-ness of the painting. It is not particularly large (though not small) and not particularly wide or expansive, yet it demands much of the attention in the room where it is displayed, despite sharing company with works by Bierstadt, Cole, Heade, Gifford, and Kensett to name a few. The melodramatic mood of the painting speaks to a longing for a past and/or a future that is only partially imagined, creating a desire, which, though not fully articulated, is both painful and titillating. *It hurts so good.*

As a painter seeing this work for the first time, I felt liberated; liberated from the strictures of 'good taste', liberated from the introspection of much of 20th century art and liberated from the self-reflexivity of 'painting as image/object'. Church, in many ways, was a maverick. His work speaks presciently to the 'society of the spectacle' described by Debord where representation replaces reality. Its strength as a painting lies in its grand gesture(s), its confidence and conceit, but most of all in its fabrication of a believable fiction—a fiction that becomes a reality only within the context of painting.



Julie Langsam, *Gropius Landscape (Master's House Kandinsky / Klee)*, 2014, Oil on canvas, 42 x 42 inches

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