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**Shane McAdams & Christopher Saunders: *The Fair and Open Face of Heaven***[**Allegra LaViola Gallery**](http://allegralaviola.com/Exhibit_Detail.cfm?ShowsID=45)**January 6 – February 4, 2012  In *The Fair and Open Face of Heaven*,**

**By Kris Scheifele**

Shane McAdams and Christopher Saunders intermingle landscape and abstraction in unsettling, depopulated vistas which conjure the complicated relations humans have with the land they inhabit. The title of this two-person show at Allegra LaViola Gallery is from Keats for whom escape from the city to the great outdoors provided rejuvenating contemplation of religious proportions. The prescription for the nineteenth-century industrialist/capitalist unable to make the trip was meditation on the next best thing — a landscape painting. Members of the Hudson River School who made these works, and who often accompanied the dangerous westward expeditions, did more than offer soothing, picturesque reflections. By chronicling the land shaped by dramatic geological events and other natural forces, they became the ad men for nation-building and economic exploitation, events which would also leave their mark. Since then, cross-country excursions have become infinitely easier, but the scenes encountered along the way offer weightier ruminations—the increasing cost of civilization. All this is the territory explored by McAdams and Saunders meant, perhaps, to have a different kind of curative effect.   In selections from his *Synthethic Landscape* series, McAdams samples sights encountered on the classic American road trip: exotic rock formations, Native American landmarks, and the open highway as well as Disney theme parks and other pockmarks of commercial consumption. While he based his painted (and in one case drawn) landscapes on photos he took himself, many almost identical shots of places like Window Rock and the Grand Canyon’s North Rim Lodge can be found online. Having entered the avalanche of digital information, these once hard-to-access natural wonders have been reduced to blasé stops on the well-beaten tourist trail. However, their link back through staggering stretches of time is still available, for those so inclined, to lend perspective on our place in the universe.   Blending the primordial microcosm of Terry Winters with the variegated macrocosm of Thomas Moran and others like him, McAdams obscures many of his expansive scenes with a clustered cellular lace; whether encroaching or receding is unclear. The process-derived overlay, created by reactions between materials such as PVA glue, correction fluid, and resin, stands in stark contrast to the more controlled areas produced, with varying degrees of precision, by McAdams's hand, a contrast similar in severity between a gorge and a pit mine. In other instances, ballpoint pen ink bleeds under a slick coat of resin creating colorful psychedelic streaks hanging vertically in the white background or pulsing outward from a central portal. These areas of abstraction feel artificial, even toxic, suggesting everything from Apple products to chemical spills to peyote-enhanced visions. This artificiality is nowhere more evident than in *Synthetic Landscape 52 (Tree of Life)*. The bizarre branch structure emerging from the stubby, over-sized trunk is an immediate tip-off that this is not simply a lush paradise. This is an attraction at Disney World, a fourteen-story, man-made structure open for business for your highly-regulated entertainment, a quiet clash between nature and culture.

Saunders takes this clash to another level, one of insidious emissions. Infusing his paintings are themes from Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, named for the ubiquitous buzz of human chatter, technology, and information threaded through everyday life. In the novel, this drone is interrupted by an accident, "the airborne toxic event.” This lethal chemical cloud brings both a heightened fear of death and fiery, technicolor sunsets, a combination of the apocalyptic and the sublime which permeates Saunders’s abstract atmospheres.

With far darker inflection, Saunders shares the same fascination with the sky as Claude Lorrain and Byron Kim. In vertical compositions, heavy celestial blocks press down on low, carefully taped-off reductions of roads, fields, runways, and parking lots. The brush that created the smooth, icey surfaces seems to have been made from the same feathery material as the whisps of cloud and color. The vaporous splotches and weird gradations feel otherworldly because they are mutant mash-ups, blended samples of sky, pollution, smoke, explosions, and swarms.

These images are silent but deadly. In *Whitenoise no.14*, a wave of magenta rains a faint haze far below where a raw, muddy light meets an ochre plain. In *Whitenoise no.11*, a misty, pink swath infiltrates a gray smog illuminated on the left by a powdery flash. The lower band of green, yet unaffected, contains a contaminating encounter. This is the empty cosmic darkness, the abyss, that no amount of clutter, no amount of white noise can protect against. This work, like that of McAdams, successfully harkens both backward and forward to a world without us. This show was frightening and beautiful.