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Paradise Lost?

Artists Reinvent the Landscape

PLUS Vermeer's Youthful Discretion
Pop Goes Takashi Murakami
A New Look at Jacob Lawrence



Reinventing the Landscape

From the spiritual to the technological, the sublime to the revolutionary, today's landscape painters are transforming the genre **BY HILARIE M. SHEETS**

“With a genre as strong and long as landscape, it would be really hard to make landscape paintings that don't either consciously or unconsciously relate to the tradition,” says Peter Boswell, senior curator at the Miami Art Museum.

Indeed, the legacy is monumental, dominated by such sublime and ominous icons of nature as those by artists ranging from Jacob van Ruisdael to J. M. W. Turner to Albert Bierstadt. But how does their time-honored view jibe with our precarious contemporary moment, when technology and modern habits have so altered the landscape?

“You can't look at those previous formulations of the awesome spiritual beauty of nature and get off on them in the same way, because we now know these sites are often not what they appear to be,” says the



David Deutsch's #22, 2000, like many of his paintings, focuses intently on the American habitat.

artist Frank Moore. “We need to update the image to make that sublime accessible to a new generation.” Whether using landscapes to comment on the state of the world or the state of painting itself, artists are finding ways to reinvent the genre and reexamine its relevance.

In his painting *Niagara* (1994), lifted directly from a Frederic Church painting, Moore adds to Church's vision of nature's splendor images of the chemicals and bacteria that flourish in the water. He frames the painting with copper tubing and a faucet—underscoring the fact that the planet's water supply is a closed circuit and what we pollute today we drink tomorrow. “All the earliest descriptions of the Falls talked

COURTESY: GORNEY BRAVIN + LEE



COURTESY KOPLIN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

California's many correctional institutions are set in paradisaical landscapes, as Sandow Birk reveals in *San Quentin State Prison, San Quentin, CA, 2000*.

about the terrifying spectacle and the awful noise of this natural wonder," says Moore, who will show his latest work at Sperone Westwater in New York this fall. "I transferred those adjectives to what human intervention has done. It's terrifying and awful when you realize that billions of tons of pollutants are flowing down the Niagara River every day."

Moore, in his painting *Oz* (2000), satirizes the way genetic engineering has transformed America's heartland, as does Alexis Rockman in his painting *The Farm* (2000). Against the benign backdrop of a manicured soybean field, Rockman presents farm animals as they are and then as they might be bred in the future—a cow with an extra set of udders, a pig so bulbous that its head and feet are practically nonexistent. Both works are included in the exhibition "Paradise Now: Picturing the Genetic Revolution," which opened last fall at Exit Art in New York and travels this month to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, and in the fall to the Tang Museum in Saratoga Springs, New York.

"One of the things we learned in working on this exhibition and in trying to understand how the landscape and nature are changing as a result of genetic modification is that this is the continuation of a long line of man's intervention in nature," says Marvin Heiferman, who organized the show with Carole Kismaric. "People have always tried to beat out nature, feed themselves more efficiently, and, in recent centuries, more profitably. Things like broccoli and cauliflower didn't exist a hundred years ago. We made them. So the notion that the landscape is this divine environment is a fantasy."

That fantasy is dispelled in other ways by artists who appropri-

ate the style of Hudson River School painting to make pointed social commentaries. Peter Edlund, who shows at Jack Shainman in New York, modifies the grand Romantic landscapes of the 19th century with narratives that were absent from the originals. In his majestic view of Yosemite, based on a Bierstadt painting, which he tinged lime green to underscore its artifice and its appeal to nostalgia, Edlund inserts at the periphery a scene of the brutalization of Native American women.

At a glance, Sandow Birk's edenic views of California could have been painted 150 years ago, but look a little closer and you might see San Quentin State Prison or any of the state's other 33 correctional institutions. "California's record of prisons is staggering," says Birk, who lives in Los Angeles and shows at the city's Koplin gallery. "All the explorer artists like Thomas Moran, Albert Bierstadt, and George Catlin helped create the myth of the West as this sort of paradise, but California is fast becoming a landscape of imprisonment. It just seemed so ripe to be reexplored." All 33 paintings in the series will be on view in July at the Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum.

The ways in which technological disasters can mirror the sublime fascinate Joy Garnett. She was first inspired to paint mushroom clouds—as delicate and luminous as Turner's skies—while watching clips of atomic-bomb testing at the end of the movie *Dr. Strangelove*. "It started what has become an obsession with this weird relationship between beauty and apocalypse and landscape," says Garnett, who now finds source material at Web sites that post declassified government images.

"The soldiers taking the photographs during the tests were seeing them as transporting pictures. In letters I've found, 18-year-old guys were writing home to their moms about the coral tones of the clouds and the extraordinary light and how it changed them—before their hair fell out." Her newest series, about rocket science gone wrong, will be shown next month at Debs & Co. in New York.

William Steiger also looks at man's impact on the landscape, but his viewpoint is one of wonder. Bridges, water towers, and Ferris wheels rise up heroically from the heartland—industrial relics of a predigital age. In *5 sept 10*, a beautiful, elongated dirigible hovers over the simplified patchwork terrain spread out below, underscoring how, at the time when air travel began, this perspective of the land that we take as commonplace was anything but familiar.

The landscape of the mundane—be it the gas station, the supermarket, or Home Depot—is explored by Marc Trujillo, who takes his cues from Corot in the way he structures his expansive perspectives. "In a Corot, you can sort of walk around in the painting, and the light to shade is so well articulated you can almost feel it. In a lot of landscape painting, there isn't a single focus, so you're invited to do more than one thing," says Trujillo, who lives in Los Angeles but was raised in Albuquerque, where, he explains, "the 2,000-foot variance in altitude always makes you realize you are very little." This translates in his paintings into very small-scale figures who make no contact with the viewer as they mill about hills of supermarket produce receding deeply into the picture plane or fill their cars with gas under the artificial light radiating against the dark horizon.

An exhibition of Trujillo's recent work opens this month in



COURTESY JACK SHAWMAN GALLERY

Peter Edlund calls attention to what wasn't shown in the landscapes of the past, as in *Majestic America: Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 (after A. Durand), 1999*.

San Francisco at Hackett-Freedman, which shows many landscape painters, including Steiger and Robert Birmelin. Director Tracy Freedman says the market is strong for landscape painting, particularly among urbanites and corporations. She believes it always will be. "It really goes to something primordial," she explains. "There's some programming inside all of us that is very receptive to the way light falls on land and hills and water and the shadows and the nuances of the colors, and it doesn't have to be done in a terribly romantic way. I think that really resonates for people."

Robert Storr, senior curator of painting and sculpture at New York's Museum of Modern Art, finds that landscape does seem to be on the minds of quite a few artists at the moment. "The biggest division I see is between artists who are making a kind of symbolist or storytelling painting with the landscape as the setting—and it's usually a play on the peaceable-kingdom ver-



L. C. Armstrong's *Romantic Landscape, 1999*. Armstrong says, "I like to take things that are discredited and reevaluate them," like the idea of women painting flowers.



Priscilla, 1998, by Joy Garnett, addresses the way technological disasters can mirror the sublime.

sion of the world made toxic or somehow ominous—and those who use landscape to explore how the expectations of the viewer are brought into play and then are not satisfied at all in conventional ways.”

An example of the latter type is Gerhard Richter, the subject of a retrospective Storr is organizing for February 2002. “He’s almost baiting people by using explicitly romantic or pretty kinds of setups and then painting them in ways that give you distance on them,” says Storr. “He doesn’t necessarily remove those qualities, but he certainly doesn’t give them to you free. There’s one piece, for example, where he paints a sky and then flips it at the horizon line so that what you think is the water is actually the sky repeated upside down. That’s a kind of conceptual art. But it’s also a version of the sublime.”

“Landscape is such a defined painting genre; it’s almost a default mode of painting—it’s something to then do something to

or do something within,” says Merlin James, whose fragments of landscape and architecture would also fall into Storr’s second group. “It’s a way of interrogating painting itself. Dutch 17th-century landscape is very important to me as being a kind of painting that historically came along to replace grand narratives. Meindert Hobbema and van Ruisdael managed to be much more about painting by seemingly being more neutral.”

James, who lives in London and shows at Andrew Mummery gallery there, generally works from memories of photographs and paintings—the opposite, he points out, of artists who live in a certain landscape and make work about that. “It’s a much more synthetic activity, and I think that’s true for a lot of painters now who are using landscape,” he says. Peter Boswell concurs. In “Landscape Re-Viewed,” a show he organized a few years ago at the Walker Art Center, he included artists such as Joan Nelson, John Beerman, and Mark Innerst, who use a variety of framing and cropping devices to accentuate the artifice of landscape painting.

“Artists understand that when you paint a landscape it’s as much about landscape painting as it is about landscape,” says Boswell. “It’s impossible to get out from under it.”

Like James, Peter Doig uses photographs and existing images as a kind of map—not as a tracing, he emphasizes, but just as a way of giving him a foot into a

landscape that then, in his hands, turns hallucinatory. Heightened, beautifully garish color schemes, reminiscent of Pierre Bonnard, take these placid vistas to another realm, as does the sense of foreboding that impregnates the images. Shadowy figures cluster in the trees around the periphery of a picturesque house in the woods; a woman slumped over in a canoe, trailing her fingers in an acid green lake, could be either dead or daydreaming. Doig, who lives in London, where he shows at Victoria Miro, suggests that landscape is almost synonymous with painting in *Figure in a Mountain Landscape* (1997–98), where an artist painting the idyllic view is pictured from behind, his body itself dissolving into topography.

David Deutsch has been investigating the contemporary American landscape by photographing it from a helicopter and reworking those images in paint. “I’m taking these pictures and then thinking about backyards and roofs, where cars are parked,

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COURTESY HACKETT-FREEDMAN GALLERY



William Steiger examines our impact on the landscape from a position of wonder. Here, in *Ess Bend*, 1999, he presents a familiar perspective that was far from common before air travel.

types of windows—everything a surveillance camera would pick up but that the police officer wouldn't be looking for," says Deutsch. He recently showed his paintings, which position the viewer as voyeur, alongside his photographs at Gorney Bravin + Lee in New York. "I'm not interested in dead bodies or crime evidence. The paintings are studies of the American habitat—everything that goes into the makeup of suburban culture."

While his paintings may end up resembling aspects of historical landscapes, Deutsch says he consciously avoids the picturesque. "I'm trying to get away from sentimentality and certain types of color and pastoral settings," explains the artist, who emphasizes that he wants his work to have meaning in the present tense. L. C. Armstrong also cites the challenge of working in this genre. "I felt it was almost forbidden territory, especially for a woman, to do flowers, but I like to take things that are discredited and reevaluate them," says Armstrong, who shows at Postmasters in New York. Her oversize blossoms—exotic and menacing, with coiling stems made from spent bomb fuses—float surreally in the foreground against traditionally painted backdrops of waterfalls, mountains, and sunsets.

Armstrong, who grew up in Southern California, says she originally came to this imagery through pop culture. "I put myself though school painting vans in the 1970s; people would request sunsets with a few camels and snakes thrown in for good

measure," she recalls. "I didn't know where it came from, and they didn't either. They just thought it would look cool." It wasn't until Armstrong turned to nature as her subject in the past decade that she educated herself in Northern European Romantic and Hudson River School painting. "This imagery has passed from Romanticism down to Westerns and Disney and

COURTESY VICTORIA MIRO GALLERY, LONDON



British artist Peter Doig turns realistic views hallucinatory with his garish color schemes, as in *Canoe-Lake*, 1997-98.

science-fiction films, to advertising and album covers, and then to these guys who want it on their vans!" Armstrong muses. "For me, it's really been a reclamation project." ■

Hilarie M. Sheets, an ARTnews contributing editor, recently wrote on Paul Pfeiffer.