JILL NEWHOUSE

A Contemporary Perspective
The Roots of the Modern Landscape 1820 – 2020

The genre of landscape, as much as the institution of painting itself, has endured the tectonic changes of modernism and beyond. This essay will discuss how contemporary artists have been newly inspired by the art of the past and particularly of the 19th century, to go beyond the simple illustration of nature – when artists are depicted what they saw in a conventional way. It will identify a new Realism which goes beyond the literal and seeks to go beyond the visible to map man's own constant desire to measure his place in the world.

Contemporary artists' landscapes in this exhibition create a multivocal dialogue with the 19th century works of the masters of the genre from Eugène Delacroix, Théodore Rousseau, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, Victor Hugo, and Paul Cèzanne. For these earlier artists, the landscape outside Paris was the center of the world and Nature's unmediated presence was the main protagonist of their art. It is these artists' pursuit of immediacy in representing their surroundings that is one of the key impetuses for the modern transformation of the visible. By exhibiting these works alongside that of contemporary artists, we can see how the traditional is transformed into the modern and the contemporary.

Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot,
Rider Under a Tree (Cavalier sous un arbre), c. 1870-72
Oil on paper mounted to canvas
4 7/8 x 11 1/8 inches

As confirmed in the recent ambitious art history publication *Landscape Painting Now*, a global survey of landscape painting in the 21st century, the landscape genre is newly relevant in contemporary art.[1] Moreover, it is positively thriving in the 21st century. The author Barry Schwabsky's introductory essay argues that this genre has arguably never felt as vital as it does today, as art struggles to react to our increasingly digitally mediated existence and to threats of imminent environmental collapse.

Our choice of artists in the exhibition encompasses a range of contemporaries who explore the landscape genre, its immediacy, its structure, and the changing points of view. Their works create connections with exquisite examples by 19th century artists in their search to go beyond what is visible when depicting the space before the artists' own eyes. This point of view is suggested by the protagonist of landscape

painting **Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot**, with *Rider Under a Tree (Cavalier sous un arbre),* of c. 1870-1872. His rider, a thoroughly modern character situated on the left corner of the composition, implies an opening of a vista – an unobstructed view of the canvas's expanse stretching from left to right. Corot creates a modern vision that is cinematic before cinema was invented -- as he foretold the inescapable human desire for moving images.

The unfolding constellation of works in this exhibition have the goal to trace several, often overlapping trajectories of modern innovations in landscape art. One of the main trajectories is a post-pop tradition in practices by artists such as David Hockney. His many landscape drawings possess a kind of "present-ness" and immediacy first seen in the 19th century. In seeking to portray this immediacy, landscape drawings by British artist **Tom Fairs** allow the viewer's eye to grasp marks in different ways: the shapes that the viewer encounters in his compositions are Fair's way to illustrate how the mind sorts out the vision through the recognition of familiar shapes. His drawings *Untitled* (c.2000s) and *Kenwood* (2005) possess a quiet, skillful urgency and a strong sense of structure in their compositions. His oeuvre was filled with travel and constant drawing from nature, in the tradition of his 19th/early 20th century predecessors. His training in the work of post-impressionist artists such as Pierre Bonnard can be observed in his all-over patterning and his shapes suffused with light. It is said that his soft-pencil draftsmanship conveys a sense of space that goes beyond realism, and that he was inspired by Cézanne's impulse to translate the visible into more abstract images.

Following this line of close coordination of observation and mark making, Danish artist **Per Kirkeby**'s landscapes show keen interest in geology and natural environments. Entrenched in the conceptual understanding of structures, Kirkeby worked within specific parameters to contain the urgency of mark making. "A structure-less painting is, to me, a painting that does not matter. Structure mirrors your degree of responsibility toward the work," he explained. "You can't just let it float around in pretty colors. It needs a kind of core." His work on paper, *Untitled (Laesø)* of 1981, does not impose one way to perceive the composition, nor does it anticipate viewer's reaction. It has been said that his paintings are non-narrative, non-conceptual, non-ironic in nature. It is intriguing to define its being simultaneously non-abstract and non-figurative, as it is not concerned with illusions of space, figure and the background. Further, his compositional devices have been influential for generations of younger artists. The critic Peter Schjeldahl posited that Kirkeby did employ compositional structures, "which he terms "architectones" or simply "motifs" that derive from representational conventions (figure-in-landscape, tree, cave) and even from specifically art-historical models; but in themselves the motifs are palpably unimportant, functioning (as synthetic "memories," Kirkeby says) as a guide for the painting process, which is the main thing." [2] Even if we accept the painter's lack of interest in the picturesque (or even representational) elements of the

landscape genre, his keen imposing of the order within the composition brings us back to his act of the direct observation of nature.

Shara Hughes's work on paper *Main Terrain* of 2018 represents an intuitive way of evoking natural elements (here colorful, lush plant life) to solve compositional problems – dynamic balance, contrast, and tension – of the image. Her landscapes evoke early 20th century abstraction within an idiosyncratic mix of invented formations. In this context, they can be linked to earlier feminist artists working in abstraction. However, they also signal to the viewer elements of imaginary landscapes – the horizon line, for example – to link it to a more hospitable terrain. As the curator Mia Locks recently noted, the artist herself asked, "Who doesn't like landscape?"[3] Hughes's colorful landscapes defy conventional depictions of space and light while still adhering to a pictorial logic. "Texture, pattern, and perspective is something I like to use to describe a space in ways that maybe don't always make sense," the artist has explained. In this way, Hughes paints "backwards" into her landscapes, finding representation by experimenting with abstraction.[4] In the last decade, the artist painted hundreds of landscapes. Hughes's landscape can be reduced to evocation of the expressive brushstroke and decorative impulse of Matisse and the Fauves, but it is important to note her seemingly inexhaustible persistence to work and rework the images within the painterly parameters that confine the genre. Within her conscious limitation of the parameters – vivid color palette, stylization of the forms, expressive brushstrokes – she creates a significant body of work that undoubtedly transcends the genre's (perceived) literalness.

Left: Paul Cézanne, *Tronc d'arbre et fleurs*, c. 1900, Watercolor and pencil on paper, 16 5/8 x 12 1/2 inches
Right: Cecily Brown, *Untitled*, 2018, Monotype in oil on Lanaquarelle paper, 23 x 31 inches,
Courtesy of the artist and Two Palms, NY.

Cecily Brown's landscapes are exquisitely sensual as their fleshy saturated surfaces oscillate between figuration and abstraction. Brown's monotype landscape *Untitled*,

2018 betrays remnants of bodies signaled by fleshy pink surrounded by the lushest early spring vibrancy of a green field's surface. Her painterly approach has been interpreted as a feminist reworking of macho Abstract Expressionism. It is important to note that her painterly methodology allows the artist to achieve balance between tight compositional control and loose energetic brushstrokes. Her manner of working is painstakingly obsessive in her effort to achieve the dynamic balance of her compositions, always in a state of flux. Brown's choice of vivid colors evokes pleasure in viewing and underlines her interest in emotionally connecting with the viewer. The liveliness suggested in her process of making work is mirrored by the act of viewing itself. The figures in her compositions merge with their surroundings in a charged moment guided by painterly instinct – this is when consciousness and the physical world become one. This merging echoes the great Romantic yearning for the self to find its place within Nature.

David Scher's new painting *Clare* (2020) offers a dynamic vision of a landscape that is all about movement and energy, while inviting viewers to think about its influences. The title guides us to a specific envisioning of nature by evoking the English poet John Clare (1793-1864). Now considered one of the greatest 19th century poets, Clare had been neglected because of his lowly birth status and lack of education. Considered a "peasant poet," he often disdained grammar as seen in the absence of punctuation in many of his original writings. Writing about nature that he experienced as a laborer himself, he was freely reworking Romantic masters such as Byron. It is not hard to find parallels with the Barbizon school's interest in the immediacy of experience, as well as the alienation of the modern self. In the painting, *Clare*, formal organization echoes Rousseau's ingenious overall compositions comprising of plant motifs, and then also Matisse's simplifications. Scher's own idiosyncratic way of composing is to set up a centrifugal dynamic that permeates the composition. This particular compositional methodology can be interpreted as a painterly translation of Clare's disdain for punctuation and grammar. To the painter, Clare's poetic attention to the particular and his deep feeling for nature was utterly moving: "he literally gave himself to his landscape and the landscape was all he had." Clare's famous poem *Autumn* embodies the notion of Romantic transcendence, of becoming, in a very unassuming way, as his inspired descriptions bring the reader face-to-face with the highest of metaphysical ideals:

Hill-tops like hot iron glitter bright in the sun,
And the rivers we're eying burn to gold as they run;
Burning hot is the ground, liquid gold is the air;
Whoever looks round sees Eternity there.

John Clare, (Poems Chiefly from Manuscript)

Patrick Jacobs's miniature landscape dioramas are very much in synch with the 19th century Barbizon school painters' acute desire to provide the viewer with a *vista* – a specific entryway to the vastness of nature. Jacobs's three-dimensional landscapes are embedded and confined within gallery walls with sizes averaging only a few inches in length, yet the works are endless and expansive when viewed through the intimate glass lens. The tight fisheye view combined with creative lighting techniques draw the viewer in instantly, urging him to explore the work from all angles, satiating the modernist, humanistic urge to "own with the gaze" – to explore and discover. His work is painstakingly detailed: it is precise, meticulous and exact, while its materials are both artificial and natural. Its hyper-real status is provoking the sense of dread – the nature that is represented is mundane and yet, it is otherworldly. The work's slightly heightened palette has an emotionally charged, transportive quality. Jacobs's dioramas provoke in the viewer the feeling of *the uncanny*, the psychological experience of something as *strangely familiar*, yet removed from the ordinary. The notion of *the uncanny* may describe incidents where a familiar thing or event is encountered in an unsettling, eerie light. In these dioramas, it is possible to interpret its atmosphere as foreboding of our imminent environmental catastrophe. And at the same time, they hold a strange sense of promise: Jacobs's three-dimensional landscape asserts itself as something more than yet another flat image, it offers a glimpse of a refuge from here and now.

Despite modernist and post-modernist debunking of the sublime, many contemporary artists continue to explore the paths of Romantic era transcendental visions. The recent exhibitions and publications dedicated to Romanticism (*The Critique of Reason: Romantic Art, 1760–1860,* Yale University Gallery) puts emphasis on the movement as critical of the Enlightenment's faith in reason as the main tenet of humans' meaningful existence. They seem to argue that specifically the philosophy of the sublime led artists to explore more personal visions of the world.[5] In this vein, our last-year exhibition *Eugène Delacroix and 21st Century Art* investigated the enduring power of image as created by **Eugène Delacroix**. His landscapes' materiality, seen here in *Landscape near Champrosay*, have always been emotionally charged. He has shown that even a mundane vista can be imbued by vibrant and loose gestures that invite the break with the traditional representational schema. Similarly, **Victor Hugo**'s extraordinary small-scale seascape drawing titled *Marine* provides a charged night-vista filled with a sense of sublime. Pen and ink with wash marks create a scintillating darkness. It is a formidable example of the landscape genre as a laboratory for philosophical inquiry, a site for artists to test out new concepts such as the picturesque and the sublime. A recent series of four woodburytypes enigmatically titled *In vain produced, all rays return, Evil will bless, and ice will burn* (2015), by Matthew Barney signal that these investigations are still not exhausted. The second in the series, *Landscape* echoes Romantic vision at its most noble – unsettling, yet searching, opening paths of vision amidst the prevailing darkness.

Matthew Barney, *In vain produced, all rays will return, Evil will bless, and ice will burn*, 2015.
Four Woodburytypes on copper mounting with electroformed copper, nickel and 24 karat gold, in red oak frame. 11 ½ x 15 ½ inches, edition of 12. Courtesy of the artist and Two Palms, NY.

The relationship between Image and Reality have been in turmoil throughout the modernist epoch. Artists of the 21st century continue to reimagine the contested realm of the landscape genre. Seen through the works in this exhibition, such new visions of landscape go beyond representation to convey new ways for artists and viewers to engage with Nature, rather than being naively one with it. If painting can chart this complex stance, there is some hope for humanity.

Jovana Stokic. PhD

Jovana Stokic is on the faculty of the MFA Art Practice, SVA and NYU Steinhardt Department of Art and Art Professions. Stokic is a former fellow at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York; a researcher at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the curator of the Kimmel Center Galleries, New York University; and the performance curator at Location One, New York.

---

[1] Barry Schwabsky. *Landscape Painting Now: From Pop Abstraction to New Romanticism*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2019.
[2] Peter Schjeldahl. "The Kirkeby Effect," catalogue essay in *Per Kirkeby*: 7 June to 28 June 1986. New York: Mary Boone, 1986.
[3] Mia Locks, "Painting Backwards: On Shara Hughes's Landscapes," in Mia Locks, and Ian Alteveer. *Shara Hughes: Landscapes*. 2019.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Art history has established this connection between Romanticism and Modernism as early as the 1970s: for example, in an influential study by Robert Rosenblum. *Modern painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition, Friedrich to Rothko*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.