

Landscapes, mindscapes, dreamscapes

The artifice of nature through the eyes of 20 artists

'Landscape' • Allyn Gallup
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It's a simple, human response. When your eyes see natural beauty you try to capture it. If you're an artist and your hands are skilled enough, you do — in paint or graphite or photographic emulsion. What could be more natural?

But these days, nature herself has become unnatural. As Bill McKibben pointed out in "The End of Nature," what we call the wilderness only survives because of painstaking human intervention. Nowadays, a primeval forest is as artificial as a golf course.

All this tends to make a painting of a primeval forest a tad artificial as well. The scene's idyllic, but chances are there's a roaring SUV just outside the frame.

But the earth is still the earth and visual artists still try to capture it. Here, there are 20 of them.

At first glance, Greg Saunders' "Untitled" looks like a black-and-white photograph. It's a beach scene made from powdered graphite on paper. (I'm not sure how he actually applied it. By hand? With an airbrush?) It's right at the edges of fooling the eye. If he wanted to he surely could've, but he's left enough roughness and spontaneity that you know a human hand was involved.

Brady Dollarhide's vision of two pine trees diagonally slicing the corner of a canvas is fascinating as a formal composition. It's beautiful to look at, but you can tell it's the composition that fascinates this artist, not the trees.

Alicia Schmidt's "Monet's Garden Poplar" resembles a forest-green version of the monolith in "2001." A Monet-style landscape it's not; it's more like a witty commentary on the genre.

Heidi Edwards' "Orange Lake" shows a cool, placid vista in north Florida. It's a horizontal composition divided into zones of grass, trees and scrub leading back to purple haze and the distant lake. Tall cabbage palms slash across the horizontal forms at random intervals. Behind it all, the sky is a chaos of clouds on the move (you can tell the wind is blowing to the right of the painting) and patches of blue. You can see she has a very free hand, there's nothing forced or labored here. You can also sense her eye was paying attention to the world in front of her, not the ideas in her head. This was probably painted outdoors, on the spot, from life.

Luke Steadman's "Untitled" is a series of 12 beachscapes arranged in a grid.



No illusions — Trish Thompson's "Rose Bay Looking West"

With the exception of a day-glo lifeguard stand, they're all done in the same style — a loose, painterly hand showing confident powers of on-the-spot observation. While each panel is pleasant to look at, the sheer repetition subverts the prettiness of each individual image.

It's like Steve Martin doing 12 "a guy walks into a bar" jokes in a row. After awhile you stop thinking about the joke and start thinking about the joke mechanism, what it means, why it works, why a guy, why a bar. Steadman makes you think, why a beach, what's so pretty about it? His repetition of 12 beach scenes reminds you of all the other beach scenes you've seen before.

John Beerman's "Two Busted at Twilight," just two lonely trees in the middle of a field in the middle of nowhere, has a haunted quality to it. You feel, not just the beauty of the scene, but the sense of isolation of actually being in the scene.

Leslie Lerner's acrylic and pastel diptych, "My Life in France: Oceanside: Pink Day," and its companion, "Blue Day," has a Japanese quality to it, not so much in the style as the subject matter — nothingness, a preoccupation with empty space and what's left out. Only the bottom right of each canvas has any substantial image on it at all, just a tiny scrap of sand. The rest is mere colorfield, now pink, now blue. But what little glimpse of beach he shows is enough to evoke a world.

Trish Thompson's oil on canvas, "Rose Bay Looking West," shows a glimpse of water, spits of land, clouds like smoke. It's a tawny-looking vista. Everything looks

burnt and faded, all muted orange, burnt umbers and dark green fading into blackness. It's beautiful as a scene, but it's not just a scene. Look closely and you'll see she's marked up the painting with knife scratches and the whorls and dot patterns of various stamps. The markings force you to look at the painting on two levels. You're not allowed to get lost in the imaginary world inside the make-believe window of the canvas; she forces you to look at the painting as an object, for what it is. It's an interesting concept, but the patterns themselves aren't all that interesting. It's as if she's defaced the image, as if she couldn't bear to create something merely representational. On the other hand, I probably wouldn't have studied her image so long if that's all she'd done. My mental jury's still out on this one. I suspect she wanted it that way.

Going through this exhibit, you get a sense that the genre of the landscape itself is on trial. The artists here have all wrestled with what painting or drawing scenes of the natural world actually means in our post-modern, post-millennial world. Some attack your conditioned responses to the pretty postcard image; some are defiantly, anachronistically, romantic; some make you think not of the earth out there but the earth inside their heads; some play with form or make jokes. They've all wrestled with the contradiction of capturing a natural world that's not so natural anymore.

The other day, I took a photo of Sarasota Bay, a lyrical scene of mangroves and reflected clouds. There was a big ugly truck to the left of the scene. I cropped it out, of course ...

But I still know it was there. □



by Marty
FUGATE

