Donald Beal's Memory Landscapes

By Anna Dempsey

DONALD BEAL, artist and Provincetown resident, has been exhibiting his paintings on the Cape for nearly thirty years. Beal resides in a charming house near the center of Provincetown, and his work reflects not only New England's light, color, and landscape, but also his own unique, invented places. Anthony Fisher, a painter who has known the artist for thirty years, remembers, "I first saw his paintings as sincere explorations of visual problems." Even today, Fisher states that there is no "artifice" or "embellishment" in Beal's work.

Like many other artists, Beal had a number of extraordinary teachers who profoundly influenced his artistic development. As a young man, he nurtured his Expressionistic style at the Swain School of Design in New Bedford (where he studied with David Loeffler Smith, a student of well-known Modernist painter and teacher Hans Hofmann). He earned an MFA in painting at the Parsons School of Design in New York, where his teachers included Paul Resika and Leland Bell. Today, he is a professor of fine arts who shares his educational and professional knowledge with visual art students at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.

Recently, Beal has completed a series of landscapes that subtly challenge what it means to be a Representational landscape painter. At first glance, this work may remind the viewer of Camille Pissarro's luminous Impressionist landscapes or Nicolas Poussin's Arcadian sylvan forests. Like these earlier painters, this Provincetown artist creates richly textured seascapes and timeless woodlands. However, unlike Pissarro's beachscapes and Poussin's classical pastoral settings, Beal's work can seem jolting and quixotic—his strangely familiar landscapes defy easy categorization and understanding. If we linger with them, we cannot help but be drawn into the artist's deceptively beautiful worlds, where traces of the past and present disjunctively—and yet somehow harmoniously—reside.

In *The Great Flood* (2014), Beal encapsulates the history of New England's stormy winters in a single image. Slender trees sway and topple over. Bridges, houses, and other human creations are no match for the cascading waters. Like Leonardo da Vinci's 1515 drawing of the deluge, Beal's flooded landscape is one that cannot be stilled or controlled. Trees, rocks, and man-made structures fragment and tumble into a chaotic vortex that punctuates a dynamic landscape in transition.

The Great Flood, 2014, oil on canvas, 20 by 20 inches

Though the artist depicts the power of nature, his work does not simply document it. Rather, Beal's landscapes illuminate a conversation between humanity and the natural world that occurs over time. He captures this unfolding conversation with thin layers of paint through which we can see material traces of the built environment. Clearly, these once sturdy structures are now frail and crumbling. In the image, they function as a visual synecdoche for human civilization—and for the painting process as well. According to the artist: "I'm at a point in my work where an aspect of memory has been leaking into unbidden places and becomes part of the process that shapes the painting as it seeks a form." That is, the artist attempts to represent our collective imprint on the landscape as filtered through his personal consciousness—a consciousness that emerges with each brushstroke.

In an interview from the *Paris Review*, Mark Strand, a poet whose words encapsulate the artist's process, lucidly describes creativity as one in which the sensory flow of the hand quells the rational activity of the brain:

> Well, I think what happens at certain points in my poems is that language takes over, and I follow it. It just sounds right. And I trust the implication of what I'm saying, even though I'm not absolutely sure what it is that I'm saying. I'm just willing to let it be.

For Beal, Strand's words articulate what happens as he paints: Initially, the formal visual language "suggests something. I try to cultivate it and foster it, and as I continue to work with the language of color, shape, and line, it becomes its own little world. All my experiences, education, and training start to seep in, in ways that I don't plan. But as I continue to paint, something starts to feel familiar."

Even in Beal's idyllic, pastoral landscapes, he populates the canvas with ambiguous, uncanny

(top to bottom) *Family Outing*, 2014, oil on canvas, 18 by 21 inches; *Bathers*, 2013, oil on canvas, 19½ by 18 inches; *The Smallpox Graveyard*, 2013, oil on canvas, 16 by 19 inches

forms that reflect this creative process. In *Family Outing* (2014), though a father and his two children appear to engage in typical outdoor activities, we soon realize they are also frozen in place. On closer inspection, we observe that they are transforming into something nonhuman. Like the protagonist in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis,* each will evolve into another organic form—in this case, the family will morph into trees and merge with the surrounding landscape. Eventually, these trees will crumble, decay, and merge with the earth—as suggested by the mini-landscape on the lower right. While the painting captures the natural ecological process and the passage of time, it materializes Beal's creative explorations as well; he captures an unfolding narrative, one that encapsulates the artistic and natural life cycles.

Beal's portrayal and distillation of time are also evocatively rendered in *Bathers* (2013). In this Impressionistic, jewel-toned work, sensual warm-pink nudes transform into trees and leaves. These, in turn, dissipate into the pure sunlit vapor that spills out of the frame on the right—or is it the other way around? Have the two figures emerged from a primeval sea to enter a Garden of Eden? Perhaps their sensual touch suggests that another story will unfold. Will we see a rebirth of the natural world? Is this painting about origins? Life cycles? And yet, the grey shadowy tree limbs, which topple into the watery abyss, remind us that the conclusion to these stories, or to any new story, is always the same. The artist's landscapes dissolve as though surrendering to natural forces (the "forces" that also compel his mark-making).

According to painter Anthony Fisher, "Don is more interested in the sensation evoked by the landscape. He thinks in terms of the dynamics and mechanics of visual phenomena." Beal's paintings are indeed "dynamic" and sensuously evocative, and yet, the artist's landscapes are quite unsettling. "As you lose yourself in nature," Beal explains, "it can shift from a pastoral and benign place to a violent and discordant one." Indeed, he adds, if we listen long enough, "the birds may start to sound slightly mad," as if the world is about to implode.

Death, memory, and transformation loom large in *Bathers*, as they do in most of Beal's recent paintings. This is especially evident in *The Smallpox Graveyard* (2013). In this work, the artist immerses us in a tangled, wooded landscape. Although we might expect to see the gravestones of those who died from smallpox during the nineteenth century, Beal refuses to represent the melancholic space in such an obvious way. Rather, we have to enter the wood and find these symbols of death for ourselves.

In this painting, the viewer must work hard to find the objects through which the dead speak to us in the present. But, with perseverance, we do. A cool, emerald-green branch reaches out to draw us into this haunted place. Although human trauma, horror, and death mark this site, Beal does not allude to the smallpox victims' histories, nor does he represent the appearance of the actual gravestones. Indeed, photographs of them pale in comparison to Beal's white feathery brushstrokes. As such, Beal's insubstantial marks metaphorically encapsulate a history that we cannot fully know or experience. Nevertheless, his *Smallpox Graveyard* does open a portal to the past—one to which he and viewers will return again. According to Walter Benjamin, the well-known literary critic and storyteller:

> Language [like painting] shows clearly that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre. It is the medium of past experience, as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging . . . he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter. (*A Berlin Chronicle*, 1986)

Just as Benjamin returns to the images and memories of his own past, Beal returns to landscapes and forms, real and imagined, again and again, and yet each of his paintings is distinct. Each marks a moment in time. With them, the artist gently turns our gaze to a past that is slowly drifting away from our continually changing present. But this is as it should be.

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