



Adam Straus, *An Early Spring*, 2002,
oil on canvas encased in lead, 59 x 74 x 2".

ADAM STRAUS

NOHRA HAIME GALLERY

The title of Adam Straus's recent exhibition of landscape paintings, "Sublimis Interruptus," suggests that something has gone radically amiss in a moment of great import. What is interrogated in this case is nature at its most magnificent. A dozen works, portraying wide-open spaces and elemental terrains, suggest that, as in Poussin, there's death even in paradise. In Straus's landscapes, this implicitly funereal idea is usually personified by a minute human presence. In the witty *An Early Spring*, 2002, as painterly drips represent thawing ice, a long thin pole with a small red flag marks oil supplies for future explorers. The pole's figurelike presence serves also as a *repoussoir*, but in many works all we are given is space in its utter vastness.

In the landscapes that have no human markers, huge lead frames suggest a certain morbidity. More, even, than a figure, these grim supports indicate a deadening inertia in the landscape, a poisonous undertow in the empty space. The fog in *Montauk Morning Dune in Fog*, 2002, is not entirely natural: Pollution appears to be the culprit. Again and again, in a variety of subtle ways, Straus calls attention to nature's approaching end. His point is not that death haunts nature but that nature

itself is dying. The polar ice will finally—and in the not-too-distant future—melt completely, raising the level of the ocean Straus pictures until it engulfs the land. These paintings are implicitly apocalyptic: In destroying nature, humanity will destroy itself.

Straus may be a moralist, but he's no ideologue. There is an air of passive inevitability to his pictures: They note the thwarted desire of puny humans to be independent of nature. Painted with masterful clarity, these works are forlorn without being bitter, strongly felt without being sentimental. Straus is a detached witness of the nature to which he is deeply attached.

Indeed, Straus's work brings the history of landscape painting full circle: The sublime is once again embedded in the experience of nature. (The abstract sublime is "over" because the reality of nature has forced itself upon us.) If Straus is a romantic, he's an ironic one: He knows the romantic wild is gone, however hard his art tries to restore it. Indeed, he seems to be laying out its corpse with all the care a painter can muster. Displayed at its cosmetic best in an artistic coffin, it almost looks alive.

—Donald Kuspit