

In Ominous Snapshots of the Natural World, Adam Straus Subverts the Landscape Painting Tradition

Bridget Gleeson | Jan 10th, 2017 12:30 AM



Adam Straus
An Early Spring, 2002
Nohra Haime Gallery



Adam Straus
Toxic Run-Off: Waterlilies, 1999
Nohra Haime Gallery

Across cultures, landscape painting has a long history. In imperial China, it was a means of escaping day-to-day life and retreating to nature. In early 19th-century France, it was a way of commemorating the beauty of surrounding scenery.

It wasn't until later that Impressionist painters like Monet and Renoir set up their easels *en plein air*, revolutionizing the landscape painting scene. The resulting works are iconic paintings reproduced right and left, printed on postcards and posters, hanging in apartments and dentist offices.

It seems, on first consideration, that the genre hasn't changed much in the years since. How could a contemporary landscape painter like Adam Straus build upon such a long-established tradition? It's a question the art critic Amei Wallach posed in an accompanying essay for "Adam Straus: Two Exhibitions," a new pair of shows by the artist, now on view at Nohra Haime Gallery and Adelson Galleries in New York.

"Think of the sheer pigheaded guts it took for as serious and ambitious an artist as Adam Straus to become a landscape painter in the 1980s," she wrote. "A century had passed since Cézanne torqued his trees into astringent meditations on the nature of painting; decades since the Abstract Expressionists swallowed the genre whole. The tradition into which Straus dared to tread... was sorely in need of reanimation."

How exactly did Straus set about such a daring task? By infusing his works with a sense of urgency. His paintings are not just representations of the world around him, they're explorations of social and environmental issues. Note the melting ice cap of *An Early Spring* (2002), the scorched landscape of *Fire and Earth* (2008), and the ominous title and bleeding edge of the otherwise picturesque *Toxic Run-Off: Waterlilies* (1999).



Adam Straus
Fire and Earth, 2008
 Nohra Haime Gallery



Adam Straus
McStop, 1993
 Nohra Haime Gallery

Even the pieces that seem simple and beautiful on first glance, like *Man on a Small Island* (2011) are vaguely anxiety-producing when you pause in front of them for an extended moment. Is that a cloud, or is it smog? Is the man trapped on the island? Is that rising water related to global warming?

Perusing Straus's works—more than forty pieces are on view at Nohra Haime Gallery, representing his oeuvre from 1979 through the present, including paintings, works on paper, and lesser-known photography and sculpture, while another 16 paintings from 2011 to 2016 are showing at Adelson Galleries—it's clear that the artist's "pigheadedness" paid off. His works don't just build upon an earlier tradition of landscape painting. They challenge the original concept. They don't represent an escape from day-to-day-life: they're images that force the viewer to consider human impact on the natural landscape, to turn back to our day-to-day life and consider how it affects the earth we live on.

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