

Spotlight

SECTION 4 APRIL 23, 2000

Sunday Star-Ledger

Worlds of wonder: Rethinking the modern landscape

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STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Of art's five great academic subjects — history, portraits, genre scenes, still life and landscape — paintings of the land around us were the last to emerge as entirely sufficient unto themselves. Aside from the occasional rock or blasted tree, Michelangelo never bothered with landscape. Hordes of big-name painters through the centuries simply contracted landscape out to specialists, men whose names are entirely lost to all but a few scholars.

It wasn't until after Romanticism in the 19th century that landscape was elevated to a kind of poetry all its own, perhaps because, in Europe anyway, by the end of the Napoleonic era the unspoiled vista was fast becoming a vestigial remnant of what once had been. By the time of the Impressionists it became hard to find a valley without a smokestack in it, so they

started painting the smokestacks. Paint too many of them, and the definition of a beautiful landscape has to change if the form is to continue at all.

"On the Horizon: Landscape at the Millennium," the new show at the New Jersey Center for the Visual Arts in Summit, brings together the work of 17 contemporary artists who work in what can be called the modern landscape. Nowadays the category, often enough, includes things like Christine Karkow's "Red Tank," an assemblage of photocopied sheets that make up a rusty roadside gas storage tank when put together (and painted red), or Jan Stoller's Cibachrome print "Elizabeth, New Jersey," a handsome color photo of a culvert lying in a field of ash.

Well, maybe that's not entirely fair. As curated by Nancy Cohen, Jen Doninger, and Perijane Zarembok for the NJCVA, you might argue that, rather than rubbing our noses in the reality (or should we say

artificiality) of the modern landscape, "On the Horizon" actually goes to a great deal of trouble to find fragments of traditionally beautiful landscapes wrapped in contemporary frames.

The most striking, and most beautiful, examples are by Alison Moritsugu, who has painted conventional 18th-century idylls — a brilliant sunset over a verdant forest, a valley lake reflecting clouds and a blue sky framed by a copse of trees — on the smooth-sawn surfaces of broken tree limbs and the center-cracked top of an old stump. The sunset is parsed over dozens of 3- to 4-inch diameter circles formed by the cut tree limbs, which are arranged in a vague oval on the wall, so you have to assemble the picture in your mind, but it is all there.

Moritsugu, who was born in Hawaii and works in Brooklyn, really has all the grace notes down. Not only is her "straight" landscape meticulously well-done, and clearly nostalgic for the Hudson River School of Dutch-influenced color, but the dead limbs score big points on the vestigial question. It's a win-win about loss.

Moritsugu's paintings are, again, very beautiful, if eccentric. The same might also be said of Paul Waldman's high-pastel-toned paintings on thick layers of sanded gesso, like "Twilight," and Adam Straus' view of Monument Valley framed by street lamps titled "Moonrise Real Estate." Lynn Geesaman's filmy photos of parks and tended forests, and especially Tula Telfair's "Spatial Devices Can Take Any Form," three long, low landscapes banded one above the other and separated by strips of metallic paint, would fit comfortably on the wall next to the 18th century beauties of a Corot.

Richard Misrach is showing photos of the Golden Gate bridge in four

different states of weather — often suffused with the gold-red color that makes California sunsets so precious — each taken from the front porch of his enviably well-placed home in the Berkeley Hills. He says in his accompanying text that he never intended to make professional pictures out of his "view," until he became so fascinated with its variations each morning that he just had to start documenting it; which, in turn, forced him to contemplate the state of economic privilege that merely having a "view" like his implies.

This last thought is a sort of conceptual frame that elevates Misrach's pictures above the Sweet 'N Low beauties of pictures taken of the Golden Gate and sold with calendars or daily organizers. At least, so he seems to hope.

Even Rayburn Odom's C-prints taken from the backgrounds of video games — easily the most original found-source for landscape in this show — are kinda nice, really. In fact, they seem more nice, even more interesting, when you learn they're just quotes from some guy's digital noodling, done as a backdrop for some virtual skull-popping amulet-hunt, and never intended to be studied as art-on-a-wall.

What is so forbidden about a beautiful modern landscape that the very term so often has to be placed in ironic quotes? You could make the argument, after all, that landscape is still the most popular form of fine art, at least judging from all the Impressionist posters sold every year and the long lines to see the endless stream of Van Gogh exhibitions flowing through America (the latest is "Vincent Van Gogh and the Painters of the Petit Boulevard," now at the St. Louis Museum of Art).

Probably it's the very popularity of the genre that makes it the third rail in painting, particularly here, in New Jersey. After all, art galleries in New Mexico, L.A., and Florida have no problem with dreamy (and tightly blinkered) interpretations of their natural beauties.

But then, no state has a more schizoid conception of the word "landscape" than Jersey: The bosomy green hills of horse country and the upscale suburbs vie with the industrial wasteland along the Passaic River, a sort of mental videotape of Tony's weekly drive from the Turnpike to his manse in Caldwell during the opening credits of "The Sopranos."

You suspect that more contemporary artists mine the industrial muck for images than the other way around. English-born painter and critic Rackstraw Downes has made a name for himself painting long, low landscapes of nameless New Jersey highway intersections, and there are a thriving number of local artists who work the same field, from painter Valerie Larko to Michael Ashkin, originally from Morristown and now working in New York.

Ashkin has submitted three landscape miniatures here, one with a pair of N scale (ask your hobby modeling son) truck trailers parked in the middle, that look sort of like a fragment from some train set switching yard, plywood-mounted, painted and varnished binder-sized squares of rocks and dirt.

In the end, a show like "On the Horizon" is bound to make you wonder where to put the quotes on Earth Day.



Adam Straus' painting "Moonrise Real Estate" is a vision of Monument Valley framed by streetlights.