

ADAM STRAUS: *SOS for the Sublime*

AMEI WALLACH

«The most important tool the artist fashions through constant practice is faith in his ability to produce miracles when they are needed. Pictures must be miraculous: the instant one is completed, the intimacy between the creation and the creator is ended. He is an outsider. The picture must be for him, as for anyone experiencing it later, a revelation, an unexpected and unprecedented resolution of an eternally familiar need.»

—Mark Rothko¹

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. 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.

“I am nature,”² Jackson Pollock declared in 1942, leaving room only for Fairfield Porter, intimate interpreter of the Abstract Expressionist circle, to render lawns and shadows as swaths and strokes. If it hadn’t been for the art critic Clement Greenberg, blustering about how nowadays only abstraction counted, and asserting that “You can’t paint figuratively,” Porter once recalled, “I might have become an abstract painter.” But Porter, in a spirit Adam Straus would have recognized, thought “who the hell is he to say that?”

A handful of painters like Jane Freilicher, Jane Wilson, and Robert Dash transposed variations on Porter’s domestic cadences into inlets, dunes, and country roads. Alex Katz refreshed the beholding eye through subtraction and slabs of saturated hues. Rackstraw Downes searched out unlovely afterthoughts of urban sprawl. On the West Coast, Richard Diebenkorn distilled the saturated greens and blues of ocean and sky into reductive homages to Matisse. As for David Hockney—well, he did it all with élan and a virtuoso touch.

And that, with an exception or two, was pretty much where the art of landscape painting was stalled in this country when Straus took on the challenge. By then the contemporary landscape had been ceded to photography, while generations of would-be Courbet or Monet impersonators hijacked the paint-

ed scene with an embarrassment of corny third-and-fifth-hand recaps of views that once, long ago, had been rooted in authenticity.

The tradition into which Straus dared to tread in the 1980s was sorely in need of reanimation. His disruptions in the years since have unsettled received assumptions as much through dark humor and bravura painting as through offering a reassessment of what it means to paint the beauty of nature in ugly times. It is important to him that his paintings are accessible, that any visiting fireman can enter them at some level. But that is only the first, skin-deep level, and it is animated by compound subterranean layers of passionate conviction, cosmic yearning, and comedy. As the writer Vladimir Nabokov once noted,³ “The difference between the comic side of things and their cosmic side relies on a single sibilant”—the sound of the letter s.

Straus’s eye and hand are informed by the metaphorical opportunities he finds in the ability of oil and brush on canvas, wood, or lead panel to transmit the grandeur, degeneration, and absurdity of the world in which he lives. That world is both subject and source of his art—not only the natural world, not only art history, but the myriad aspects of the culture in which he lives. He’s as willing to take a hint from a Coen brothers’ movie or the aftereffects of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill as from his own lived experience, lost in the fog or contemplating the sky over a Target store.

It didn’t take Homer for sailors to revel in the poet’s “rosy-fingered dawn” or J.M. Turner for just about anyone to perceive a sunset as vaporous color, though what poets and artists see and how they see it has always affected our impressions. Then again,

as Straus in his paintings so pungently points out, so do the sunset the cowboy rides off into as the music swells at the end of all those movies, or the video-game-inspired jungles of *Avatar*.

An understanding of the “rich deposit of myths, memories and obsessions” that we project on nature, the historian Simon Schama has written, constitutes our best argument for its protection—“a way of looking, of rediscovering what we already have, but which somehow eludes our recognition and our appreciation.”⁴

In a landmark exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art four decades ago, the curator Kynaston McShine first explored this nation’s homegrown deposit of myths and obsessions in the bicentennial exhibition *The Natural Paradise: Painting in America 1800-1950*, which charted the relationship between the landscape traditions of the 19th century and the Abstract Expressionist paintings of the 20th. The connecting links lay largely in a shared attitude towards light and the sublime. The landscape painter Thomas Cole in 1835 was “overwhelmed with an emotion of the sublime, such as I have rarely felt,” as he contemplated the lakes, woods, and surrounding mountain crags at Franconia Notch, New Hampshire. The abstract painter William Baziotis in 1948 never felt better “than when I gaze for a long time at the bottom of a still pond.”

But even during his era, Thomas Cole was all too aware of the threats to the nature he celebrated, as “the ravages of the axe are daily increasing—the most noble scenes are made desolate, and oftentimes with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a civilized nation.” Already in the 19th century the art historian Robert Rosenblum pointed out for the exhibition’s catalog, all those painted “vistas of luxuriant paradises, magical sunsets . . . and turbulent seas seemed to provide relics of a primeval past that could locate the American continent at the origins of a grand cosmic scheme, whether biblical or Darwinian, that could offer a symbol of purity and timelessness to counter the unceasing pollution of these American Holy Lands by the inroads of modern industry.”⁵ After Hiroshima in the 20th century, it seemed as though the Abstract Expressionists “needed to re-experience the first days of creation.”

To Rosenblum, “American painters have all sought a wellspring of vital forces in nature that could create a rock-bottom truth in an era when the work of man so often seemed a force of ugliness and destruction.”

By the 1970s, this obsession with nature and

place had shifted off the canvas and into the landscape itself, where Earth Artists such as James Turrell and Walter de Maria moved mountaintops or challenged the elements with lightning fields. For the viewer this experience of art in nature might approach the sublime, but nature was in extremis by then, and that wasn’t the point of the exercise.

It is to Straus. He chose painting as the medium best suited for an exploration of his contradictory legacy of wonder and despair. He’s after the miraculous in painting, and he likes the old ways of getting there. It’s the 19th century he looks to: German Romantics like Caspar David Friedrich, American Luminists like George Inness, and, yes, French Impressionists like Claude Monet. He’s haunted by their light, though his take on light is filtered through all that came next, particularly the Abstract Expressionist painter Mark Rothko’s enveloping luminosity and installation artist Robert Irwin’s environments, which are neither paintings nor sculptures but surround-experiences in which light becomes a tangible atmosphere.

Straus manages that miracle with painting alone, and, as the critic Barbara Pollack wrote, his light, like theirs, “produces mystical overtones.”⁶ He appreciates that so many of those memories that myths and artists have handed down are also imbedded in the seascapes and mountaintops that have become the most prized clichés of pop culture. Straus isn’t afraid to wander into cliché territory, because he knows he can wield his gifts of irony, authority, and derring-do to evoke just what it was about that scene that made it cliché fodder in the first place. For Straus,

*I have always felt that clichés are clichés for a reason, being that they are accessible and communicate to a large number of people. They kind of represent a universal beauty or universal awe, and I have a real yearning and nostalgia for the sublime, which I feel is missing from most of the art of our time.*⁷

Straus can convey concepts like “paradise” and “the sublime” without a stammer in his paintings. But laughter is his customary response when he talks about oil spills, “the McFranchising of America,” as he puts it, and the proliferating threats to what the comedian John Oliver characterizes as “you know, Earth—that blue thing Bruce Willis is always trying to save.”

This is gallows humor. It’s the bleak humor of the true believer, because, for Straus, this is personal.

In the 21st Century, every ocean reverie carries within it intimations of ultimate destruction as icecaps melt and tides and temperatures rise. Ruthlessness and greed threaten what Straus values most:

*I believe in nature as God, the transcendental qualities. It’s a kind of pantheism. At the same time, I’m Jewish. We love our black humor. The Jews have this long history of humor.*⁸

That humor—Straus’s “post-apocalyptic chuckle,”⁹ according to *The New Yorker*—wasn’t always evident in his work, but it didn’t take long to surface, however deadpan, however subtle. Straus’s themes were there from the first, awaiting excavation. “You yourself are like a big stew,” the painter Willem de Kooning once told me, as we sat contemplating his day’s work in his East Hampton, New York, studio, across Peconic Bay from the converted garage where Straus now paints. “There’s a lot in there already, but the stew doesn’t know that. Somebody has to pick it out. So you start doing it

In there already when Straus started making photographs, and then sculpture, and finally paintings in the 1980s, were boyhood memories of uninflected hours spent out on the waters of South Florida, alone in his 12-foot aluminum boat. That realm of vastness and amazement has always resided as a subtext in the paintings, even when trumped by other aspects of his biography, such as his heritage as an activist. He was the third generation in a family that had fought the good fight for voters’ rights, against segregation, for Israel, against the Vietnam War. During his three decades as a painter, the socially conscious comic and the cosmic-haunted boy have jostled for ascendancy.

He didn’t make the obvious connection then, but it seems palpably clear that the memory of a single experience one night in 1979 both instigated and informed his sculpture and earliest paintings. He was 23, studying marine biology and mathematics at the University of Florida in Gainesville, and beginning to make photographs. He himself tells the story in this book: how, in 1979, John Arthur Spinkelink became the first person in the United States to be put to death against his will since Florida’s 1976 reinstatement of the death penalty. Straus was shocked and shaken. He joined the University of Florida activist group Students Against the Death Penalty, keeping watch by night with candlelight vigils at detention centers. In particular, Straus recalls one nocturnal protest that took place across a

cow pasture from the prison in Starke, Florida, where death row prisoners were incarcerated.

The inmates, who could hear our shouts across this field, had lit their mattresses on fire and were throwing them out the windows of their cells. I still remember exactly what it looked like.

Think of the eerie drama of that scene: the space of the pasture, the dark of the night, the looming prison towers, the distant blaze of burning mattresses. His sculptures—sembled from found fragments and torched lead and steel—were fortresses, too, hanging towers and totems, ominous and often dangerously spiked.

These are very lethal, seriously; these are steel railroad spikes that have been sharpened to really sharp points. I got gored by one of these when I was moving it.

It was the Reagan years. The U.S. was mired in a seemingly endless Cold War against what President Reagan characterized as “the Evil Empire” and had inserted itself into conflicts in Nicaragua and El Salvador. The soundtrack of a rebellious generation was Punk, the look Goth, with Mohawk hair and bullet-case-studded belts. The Minimalist artist Robert Morris had erupted into rococo invective against the infinite varieties of inhumanity. He was mounting scored, creased, and smothered photographs from the Holocaust, Hiroshima, or the bombing of Dresden onto aluminum supports, which he framed elaborately in thrusting blackened fiberglass thickly encrusted with the toys of horror and destruction.

The aesthetic of the *zeitgeist* made its way into Straus’s towers, together with the requisite young man’s angst. But from the first, there’s been an obstinate allegiance to tenderness at the heart of the work, and the giveaway is in what his towers housed: precious cloisonné enamels that a jeweler girlfriend had taught him to craft; fool’s gold; tiny photographs of vast landscapes. The fortresses were at once prison and protection.

Viewers often had to brave surrounding moats studded with spikes in order to peer within through a tiny opening, which, when placed at eyelevel for the six-foot-four-inch Straus, was out of reach for the rest of us. It was as though Straus were channeling the view from within the prison. Those photographed vistas and the objects, both precious and

faux, could only be glimpsed through an inaccessible slit, the way inmates might see the shimmer of afternoon light on a guard tower, or a sliver of sky.

However, when Straus turned to painting in 1986, he broke through the walls and went outside. In those early paintings it is as though he were on the other side of the pasture, watching as prison mattresses flared briefly into flame. In museums and galleries, the '80s were the decade of the big brash Neo-Expressionist paintings of Julian Schnabel, Eric Fischl, David Salle, and Jean Michel Basquiat. But Straus started quietly and small, painting his blacks with enamel house paint at first, because he'd been earning money as a housepainter. The brush-tip bursts of inadequate orange or yellow light emerging out of a darkling landscape come from a crematorium fire, from the headlights of a car, from a flashlight inadequately searching the water, a city horizon, a watchtower, the end of a tunnel, from the pun in paint of a man roasting a marshmallow in the fierce light of a forest fire, and over and over through the years, from those McDonald's arches. By 2002, in the painting *Migration*, those "icons of corporate America," as Straus calls them, had become the golden goal of the tiny fugitive figures racing, like so many of the migrants in the news, across a wasted land against the ironic glow of a color-stained sunset sky.

Sometimes, in that first decade, he went Day-Glo, as in his *Man on the Edge of Paradise*, 1994, its birds, butterflies, and flowers inaccessible to the diminutive figure advancing through an orange landscape towards a fiery sun. He did a lot with paradise that year, as wars raged in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Bosnia, as Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, violently protested the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement. *Soldiers in Paradise*, 1994, foregrounds the requisite birds and butterflies, flora and fauna, the clouds in the sky, with the barely discernible soldiers advancing on this idyll that they will destroy.

The style of many of these paintings could best be described as crossover folk. Straus himself was far from displeased when someone called it "outsider art." He thought of himself as an outsider, with much on his mind to impart and only instinct and an aptitude for invention to rely on at first. He was drawn to a loose movement that New Museum founder Marcia Tucker had named "Bad Painting"¹⁰ in an exhibition of that title. "Bad Painters," such as Neil Jenney, Joan Brown, and William Wegman in his pre-Weimaraner days, had attitude and a sense of humor. They weren't afraid to look goofy on canvas, they were full of irrepressible ideas, and they didn't

play by the rules. In art schools across the U.S., then as now, the emphasis was conceptual; those rules privileged thinking over making. Like the "Bad Painters," Straus wanted it all. From the first, the power of his paintings resided in their perspicacious interplay of artistry, ideas, and absurdity.

Most of all, his paintings have always been *about* something. They are also, as it happens, a delight to behold. Straus was from the first a canny picture-maker, capable of deftly composing the planes of the picture, the sources of its light, and the declensions of its blacks, from roseate to lavender. But that was hardly enough for him. He was becoming as interested in the means of picture-making as the meaning, and he was teaching himself to paint as he went along by visiting museums and galleries. The 19th- and early-20th-century paintings to which he was drawn were elaborately framed, and Straus took the hint from them as much as from the extravagant menace of Robert Morris's constructions and the sardonic folksiness of Neil Jenney's thick casings, which often had titles inscribed on them, like *Meltdown Morning*.

Straus was still safeguarding what was most precious, so he framed his paintings in lead. He'd learned from his lethal towers to appreciate the gleam of that dour material, even when he distressed it; he liked its contrast with the sheen of the paint. And, as with the towers, the implications of those frames were paradoxical. Lead may protect your innards from X-ray radiation or Superman from kryptonite, but its particles in flaking paint are toxic to small children who eat them, not to mention anyone at the receiving end of a bullet.

Sometimes Straus studded his frames with screw heads, and the effect of these, the critic Ellen Fisher wrote, "is like looking out of an armored car or through the porthole of a steel-hulled ship."¹¹ Straus was not yet inviting viewers into his landscapes; he was creating a distance from them, as he taught himself to render the natural world with sufficient verisimilitude to evoke it.

I know it might seem kind of passé but I became more and more enamored of the American landscape painters of the 19th century, primarily the Luminists and the Hudson River school. When I would wander around the Met, they were the ones that would take my breath away.

It wasn't spectacle he was drawn to when he

visited museums; it wasn't the majestic set pieces of Frederick Church or Albert Bierstadt, the sunsets over Yosemite Valley, the California sequoia groves or Niagara Falls. Those paintings had helped inspire a nation to create the National Park system before such wilderness marvels were lost. But Straus has always preferred the grandeur of the ordinary, which is no less in danger.

I liked Kensett because he was so much simpler. I find him much more sublime than Church. The other thing I liked about the Luminists, like Innes and Heade, was that they didn't go out west to paint spectacular things. Innes painted his countryside in Montclair, New Jersey, and that's what I found I responded to more than anything else in painting.¹²

A brief pause here to muse on the Sublime a concept reaching back to the first century A.D., when the word applied primarily to speechmaking that inspired lofty and elevated thought. In the 18th century, Edmund Burke defined the sublime more in line with what Church and Bierstadt were up to: "The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence, reason on that object which employs it. . . . Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence, and respect."¹³

Not quite a hundred years later, John Ruskin drained the notion of its *sturm und drang*: "Yet it is not in the broad and fierce manifestations of the elemental energies, not in the clash of the hail, nor the drift of the whirlwind, that the highest characters of the sublime are developed. God is not in the earthquake, nor in the fire, but in the still small voice."¹⁴

Of course, there were the Transcendentalists, who transposed Emanuel Kant's sublime of awe and terror into a doctrine of spiritual transcendence. And there was Thoreau: "He will get to the Goal first who stands stillest."¹⁵ Not to mention Muhammad Ali: "The worshipper of nature is the lover of God."¹⁶

Straus is after that indrawn breath, that sense of immanence. Particularly in that first decade of painting, he transmitted heightened emotion through his choice of landscapes experienced at the eerie edge of

twilight, just before the seen world is subsumed in the unfathomable dark. There is horror there, too—not the horror of whirlwind and hailstorm, but of the havoc that man has wreaked, on the landscape, particularly on the ordinary beauty that Burke dismissed as worthy only of the "inferior effects" of "admiration, reverence, and respect."

Man is a character in these paintings, as both surrogate and scourge. Caspar David Friedrich often inserted a man into his vast vistas. The man might be rather large, blocking the viewer's entrance into the experience; or he might be small, a stand-in through whom to imagine that it was you yourself standing there at the edge of mountain or sea, a device that American painters appropriated.

In Straus's paintings, the man is more subject than subjective. His earliest appearance is in paintings like the 1990 *Man in the Dark*, as a silhouette just large enough to interrupt our view of the sunrise he admires, and as a hanged man in the 1991 *Dawn*, suspended vertically to disrupt the lovely light tinting the horizon. After that, man became tiny, a nearly indiscernible blot on the scene, like the soldiers in paradise, or a fleck at the top of a peak in the 1993 *Man Peeing off a Mountaintop*, a tiny figure fouling nature's splendor—or by extension, his own nest—or, looked at another way, proving that he was just part of nature. Even when Straus enlarged his tiny man somewhat and placed him at the forefront of the scene, he's more likely to be one of the armed and dangerous *Soldiers in Paradise*, in the later 1995 version of the subject, as surrogate for us, the viewers, in contemplation of the universe.

Even my paintings about contemplating the universe are kind of tongue-in-cheek, because I don't think we can begin to contemplate the universe. I think it's a ridiculous assumption. I'm just playing with the cliché.¹⁷

The joke on Straus by the time he painted that 1995 *Soldiers in Paradise* was that increasingly his attempt was impacted by the remarkable evolution of his proficiency as a painter. His acid green grasses, blue hills, and rose-tinted clouds had acquired a delicacy and innate beauty quite at odds with the cartoony hyperbole of the 1994 version. He was learning to open an inviting space in the painting, and the view. The art critic Greenberg once said of Edward Hopper that "if he were a better painter, he would, most likely, not be so superior an artist."¹⁸ What Greenberg, that great booster of Abstract Ex-

pressionism, objected to was that “Hopper’s painting is essentially photography, and it is literary in the way the best photography is.” While Greenberg’s views had long been widely contested and narrative painting had become commonplace, Straus was still something of an outlier in his unabashed pursuit of verisimilitude.

He had moved to New York in 1990. For five years he’d been enrolled in a self-made tutorial in the history and the making of art. He’d been prowling the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Frick Collection, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, as well as sampling the city’s galleries. He’d looked closely at how other artists had resolved the problems of representation that intrigued him, and he was becoming increasingly confident in his ability to experiment with his own solutions. Nohra Haime likes to say “he learned to paint at the Metropolitan Museum.”¹⁹

His November 1995 exhibition, *Not Quite Utopia*, was his fifth at her 57th Street gallery, and the power and range of his artistic inquiries at once enrich the commentary and alter its effect. *Man Trying to Keep Warm* introduces what would become a central theme for Straus—the futility of small gestures in the face of overwhelming calamity. Its insignificant twig of a figure beside a puny fire hasn’t a chance in this limitless wintry landscape. The painting may have started as an homage to Monet, but it’s the sheer beauty of its rhapsody in whited-down pastels and bleached junctions of snow and sky that steals the show.

For much of the second half of the 20th century, beauty was a concept no self-respecting artist dared to speak. But in the early 1990s, the renegade critic David Hickey changed the discourse with the essays gathered together in his 1993 book, *The Invisible Dragon*.²⁰ He lamented how the insistence on flatness in painting had sent contemporary artists fleeing into “the less nuanced realms of performance, dance, text, photography, video, sculpture, and installation design as they attempted to “only crudely approximate effects that were effortlessly available to Titian on his worst day.”²¹ He rehearsed the economic, social, political, and aesthetic uses and misuses of notions of beauty by dictators, tastemakers, and artists. And he equated the search for beauty with the pursuit of happiness. “We brave crowds to gaze at paintings on the walls of museums. We gather on scenic overlooks just off the interstate. We cheer as the jump shot swishes or the skater lands smoothly. We sit attentive as the solo or the aria concludes,

and occasionally, in our delight, we mutter this involuntary vocalization: ‘Beautiful!’ . . . Then we look around for confirmation or argument. Either will do, since the only qualifications for arguing about beauty is a shared experience, and we share a lot.”²²

In his paintings, Straus was clearly becoming more comfortable with expressing the beauty to which he had always been drawn. He was finding ways to stack horizontal Minimalist rectangles in order to expand the space in his paintings that he showed in the 1995 exhibition, *Not Quite Utopia*, at the Nohra Haime Gallery. In the vertical *Descent*, 1995, those horizontals separate not only city and sky but time and place. The sodium vapor lights of town are Pointillist pricks; the moon in the sky that they stain purple is dense with Albert Pinkham Ryder’s light.

In his catalog essay for the *Not Quite Utopia* exhibition, Craig Adcock focused on the “ecological implications” of the work. However, even as Straus’s work continued to lament the ills besetting earth and man, from clear-cutting to the all-American gun culture, he was showing his painting chops. By the 1997 *Space Junk* and the 1998 *Blast* and *Wrecking Ball*, he’d mastered the foreshortening and illusions of Baroque space in order to hurl his rocks, Coca-Cola cans, and wrecking ball forward towards our faces, as Nicholas Poussin once did with his bacchanals. On the other hand, he’s just as good at Modernist flattening, as in the 1998 *Handgun in a Field of Flowers*, in which the weapon of the title is hidden in a close-up, all-over painterly field, upended to fill the picture plane.

Like an athlete at the top of his game, as the 20th century drew to a close Straus married form to content in paintings that succeed in implicating the viewer in the sorrow and beauty of what is about to be lost. The paintings in the 2000 *Somewhere Between Here and Disaster* exhibition at the Nohra Haime Gallery are as horizontal as the immeasurable horizons they portray, and man so negligible a figure that it’s easy for a viewer contemplating the impervious roll of the waves to miss him in *Man Trying to Keep His Head Above Water*, 2000. The bands of parched earth and leaden sky make their own impression, even before the eye lights on the single minuscule man bearing yoked buckets on his shoulders, a vertical punctuation mark on the horizon in *The Water Carrier*, from that same year.

The balance in the paintings had shifted from commentary to contemplation. It was beginning to feel as if beauty was sufficiently eloquent to tell

the story, even without the punch line of destructive, inconsequential man. With his *Toxic Run-Off* paintings, Straus found a way to allow the landscape itself to tell the story, as both subject and emblem of artmaking.

His inroads into art history had, from the first, focused on how paintings were put together as much as how they looked. He puzzled out for himself the means by which Inness communicated immensity and stillness, or what it was that linked the abstract painter Jackson Pollock and the painter, sculptor, and epic prankster Robert Rauschenberg in his estimation. One thing Pollock and Rauschenberg shared was the drip, that heedless Modernist splatter of pigment with ancient roots in Chinese ceramic glazes. For his *Oil Spill* series, Straus liked the pun of dripping oil paint off the froth of his churning waves and down onto his metal frames. The water lilies he painted in homage to Monet dripped medleys of aquamarine and amethyst, suggestive of the run-off from garden pesticides, which pollute the streams that flow into the ocean. In the process he made Monet new again.

Nohra Haime is convinced that the September 11, 2001, destruction of the World Trade Center had much to do with his ultimate surrender to beauty. Straus was at home in Brooklyn that day, just a river across from the destruction. He experienced it all, up close and personal: the burning towers, the smell of death, the crematory soot. And then, like everyone else, he watched television. Straus wasn’t the only artist in New York who tried to paint those images in the weeks that followed. He kept tearing up what he’d started, until, like the small boy he once was, he escaped out to sea.

The seascape he completed is serenely capacious, except that there is something horrifying about the pink glow suffusing the horizon. “Day after day when the sun was setting, the light would catch all that dust and debris,” Straus recalled. He inscribed the day-after title into the waves, like the camera calendar notations on a photograph: *9 12 01*.

“It’s an optimistic painting. It’s a painting that’s saying, life goes on.” Haime takes a deep breath and exhales. “Life goes on. There’s a new beginning in the world, and the world is continuing. Everyone else was in panic mode. And after that, he decided that all along he had been painting all these tough things, and now he was going to show the beauty we might lose if we don’t do something about it.”

Once or twice in the year leading up to his *9 12 01*, Straus had jettisoned references to the human

presence, and in paintings like *Dune in Fog*, 2001, he’d eliminated everything inessential to the evocation of a fog-shrouded Montauk, Long Island shore.

“I want to get people into the picture. It’s a kind of a Don Quixote belief in the picture,” he told Gail Gregg for the catalog of his 2003 exhibition, *Sublimis Interruptus*, at the Nohra Haime Gallery. “I can go to the Met and look at the Hudson River School, the Luminists, or the Impressionists and go into the picture.” Painting offered access to the sublime, but 9/11 was only the latest horrific example of what man was capable of inflicting on it.

For a time, Straus continued to enlarge on his customary strategies, continued to deploy his little man into paintings such as *Man Pointing to Something Outside the Picture*, 2002, which is as much a statement of purpose as a rumination on the efficacy of grays in pumping up the ecstatic sunset afterglow of the sky. He had become dexterous at drawing the viewer into his paintings, but it was important to him that this same viewer keep in mind the “something else” implied about the real world outside. He was not quite yet ready to trust the landscape itself to carry the entire double weight of experience and inquiry.

Man Pointing to Something Outside the Picture is set on a rocky outcropping at the edge of a sea too sullen to reflect the sunset’s hyped-up pastels. The image originated with photographs that Straus shot on the Maine coast during his first trip with his wife, Nicole, after 9/11, and it has the aspect of a mountain plateau. Mountains and water have been fundamental to landscape painting since the fifth century Chinese *shan-shui* mountain-water views, which are among the earliest landscapes, and are almost wholly imagined. For Straus, paintings now began to oscillate between what he knew and what others imagined. Straus knew the ocean well, as the boundless backyard of his boyhood.

But the mountain majesties which now took their place in his repertoire were something else. Straus knew them mostly secondhand, not only as the operatic effusions of Church and Heade, but imprinted on popular consciousness as a stock-footage backdrop for generations of cinematic thrillers, Honda motorbikes, and the likes of Wella “luscious long” hair conditioner.

Straus’s mountains are snow-capped, soaring, and steeply peaked. They render the presence of man ridiculous, as with the infinitesimal conquering figure outlined against an infinite sky in *King of the Mountain*, 2002. In *S.O.S.*, 2002, a hapless man

makes his presence known only through the Morse code flashed from mountain clefts, with no hope of competing with the sun-grazed slopes.

Straus didn't know mountains, but beginning in 2003, when he and Nicole moved to the North Fork of Long Island, they—and their newborn son, Noah—have been in intimate communication with the ordinary grandeur of its marshes, woods, and country lanes. The North Fork consists of an elongated peninsula bounded on the south by the waters of Peconic Bay and on the north by Long Island Sound. An incursion of box stores and chain restaurants jostle its bucolic delights, but for a time Straus pretty much kept the human presence down in his paintings of this quiet landscape he had come to love. In *Moonrise Long Island Winter*, 2005, and *Moonrise Over Country Road and Trees and Field*, 2007, the light comes from the moon and, yes, maybe out there at the edge of the fields, from a little house or six.

The quality of light had become the *raison d'être* for his paintings—the nimbus of light halting the mountain peaks in *Cold Mountain Artifact #5*, 2007-8; the dissolution of shape in light, in *The Next to the Last Iceberg*, 2006-7. In *Winter Sunset From Indian Island Woods*, 2006, an icy mist vaporizes varieties of light as it emanates from the moon, from snow, from distant headlights, from windows. There's a nod in this painting to the myth-infected woods that the German artist Anselm Kiefer often painted in the 1970s and 1980s, though Kiefer was more interested in the landscape as allegorical exhumation of his nation's blood-soaked history and his own quest for redemption than in the natural world that engrosses Straus.

Straus had for some time had the dexterity to do anything he wanted with paint, and what he wanted, he had discovered, was “to make a painting that was just beautiful to look at, that just had that awe, that had that mystery and escape. It took me a while to realize that that was okay.”²³

That permission, too, came out of the internal stew that de Kooning talked about, from the 19th century philosophers who had inspired Inness, and from the photographers whom Straus had studied long before he dreamed of being a painter. There was Ralph Waldo Emerson, in praise of the moment when he became nothing but “heavily laden thought in the midst of an unknown and infinite sea . . . where are all riddles solved, all straight lines making their two ends to meet, eternity and space gambling familiarly through my depths.”²⁴ And there were Alfred Stieglitz and Minor White, for whom

transcendence resided in the act of seeing.

Straus threw himself wholeheartedly into realism—not the hokey polished surfaces of the Photo-Realist painters, but the fraught, expressive observations of photographers from Stieglitz to Andreas Gursky or Bart Michels.

“Is not prayer also a study of truth—a sally of the soul into the unfound infinite?”²⁵ Emerson had asked.

Straus communicates his truth in the humped spit of land floating somewhere in the gauzy ether where sea evaporates into sky in *Shelter Island in Fog*, 2009; in the varieties of pink that tint sky, ocean, and shore in *Montauk Point Sunset*, 2012; in the infinite spill of pixelated light in *Star Cluster*, 2012.

He painted atmosphere as tangible and enveloping as the light in an Irwin installation. “For me, space is where I can feel all four horizons, not just the horizon in front of me and in back of me because then the experience of space exists only as a volume,” Barnett Newman once wrote.²⁶

Straus's shimmering palettes of grays evoke the fogs in which he lost and found himself. These are grays intermixed with gray-blue, mauve, brown, and chartreuse; and most of all these grays are translucent, lit from within by the light ricocheting off the water it rakes.

He had learned to trust the hidden cultural codes within a painted scene, or in its title, to carry his message of environmental emergency, as early as 2009, when he painted *Evening off of Plum Island*. In popular imagination, Plum Island was menacing. Hannibal Lecter called it “Anthrax Island” in *Silence of the Lambs*, because of the government's experiments in deadly animal diseases there. Straus didn't need to spell it out, anymore than Seurat did when he set his *Bathers at Asnières* right at the spot where raw sewage flowed into the water.

All along, Straus continued to frame his paintings in lead—and then in the white of the big landscape photographers—making a separation between the reality into which he invited reviewers to submerge and the fact that a painting is, after all, art, as in artifice.

“I love the fact that out of a white canvas,” he says, “you can actually make a place, and that's the magic of painting.”

Lately he's been painting on jute to rough up the surface and make its artificiality more apparent. He's been painting with oil on rice paper that he glues to the canvas so that the light will seem to radiate from within. Now that he's got the grammar of

picture-making down, he's experimenting with ways to twist it to his own ends.

He's been revisiting his themes, from puny humanity's capacity to foul the sublime, to the abstraction within representation—readjusting their pitch, texture, and rhythms. He wants to capture the way people actually do experience their world, which so often now is secondhand on television, or separated from the sunset by the smartphone with which they are photographing it and the arrows with which they share it and send it on its way.

He'll frame an incandescent sea with the black bands and arrows of an iPhone camera, or corrupt it like the static breakup of a satellite TV image during a storm. He's always used combinations of photographs like notes or sketches in remembrance of fleeting moments. Now he's experimenting with ways to distort and distance his scenes by submitting those photographs to a program called Glitch, for ominously beautiful paintings like *Volcano Glitch*, 2016.

*I've been thinking about the breakup of the picture on TV as a metaphor for the breakup of something outside the picture.*²⁷

It is not only the sorrow and the pity of what we have done to our world that he paints. It is also his joy in what we have left.

*Here I am, 59 years old, paddling around on this little kayak, and I'm catching fish over 30 inches long on my little fishing rod. I'm somehow getting them into the kayak. They are slipping and flopping, and I am holding them down with my legs. I bring a big sack of fish home, and I crack myself up. It's like being a kid again.*²⁸

He doesn't paint the action of that scene. He paints his elation and his awe so that we too can join in what Simon Schama calls “a journey through spaces and places, eyes wide open, that may help us keep faith with a future on this tough, lovely old planet.”

Straus may not think that art can change the world, but he certainly believes it is his job to try.

NOTES

1. MARK ROTHKO, “The Romantics Were Prompted,” *Possibilities* (New York), vol. I (Winter 1947-48), p. 84. Quoted in *The Natural Paradise: Painting in America, 1800-1950*, exhibition catalog (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976), p. 123.
2. LEE KRASNER, Pollock's wife, quoted him as saying this on many occasions, including to Amei Wallach, and in her 1964 interview with Dorothy Seckler for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art.
3. VLADIMIR NABOKOV, *Nikolai Gogol* (New York: New Directions, 1961; orig. pub. 1944), p. 142.
4. SIMON SCHAMA, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Knopf, 1995), p. 14.
5. ROBERT ROSENBLUM, “The Primal American Scene,” in *The Natural Paradise*, pp. 35-37.
6. BARBARA POLLACK, review, *ARTnews*, January 2012, p. 109.
7. Adam Straus in conversation with Amei Wallach, Riverhead, NY, studio, March 3, 2016.
8. AS to AW, Riverhead, August 2010.
9. Unsigned review, *The New Yorker*, October 20 and 27, 1997.
10. *Bad Painting*, New Museum, New York City, 1978.
11. ELLEN FISCHER, “Moody landscapes show artist's love of northern climes,” *Vero Beach Newsweekly*, October 11, 2012.
12. *Ibid.*
13. EDMUND BURKE, *On the Sublime and Beautiful* (New York: Hurst, n.d.), pp. 40, 60, quoted in *The Natural Paradise*, p. 74.
14. JOHN RUSKIN, *Modern Painters* (New York: John Wiley, 1868; orig. pub. 1843), vol. I, p. 202, quoted in *The Natural Paradise*, p. 79.
15. HENRY DAVID THOREAU, *Selected Journals*, ed. Carl Bode (New York: Signet, 1967), p. 50, quoted in Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape Painting 1825-1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 18.
16. MUHAMMAD ALI in *Muhammad Ali, the Long-Lost Movie*, 1973-74 (video footage by Anton Perich in collaboration with Victor Bockris and Andrew Wylie).
17. AS to AW, Riverhead, March 3, 2016.
18. Greenberg is widely quoted as having said this in response to a painting Hopper exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1946.
19. Nohra Haime in conversation with AW, New York City, April 27, 2016.
20. DAVE HICKEY, *The Invisible Dragon: Essays on Beauty* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993.)
21. HICKEY, “Prom Night in Finland: Gender in Works of Art,” *The Invisible Dragon* (rev. ed., 2012), p. 37.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
23. AS to AW, Riverhead, March 25, 2016.
24. RALPH WALDO EMERSON, *Selected Journals* (August 13, 1838), pp. 33-34, quoted in Novak, p. 197.
25. *Emerson: A Modern Anthology*, p. 147, quoted in Novak, p. 197.
26. ROSENBLUM, p. 117.
27. AS to AW, Riverhead, April 30, 2016.
28. *Ibid.*