

NATURE IN PERIL

—The Art of Adam Straus

Adam Straus is an artist in the long tradition of painters of nature. But as man of his time, he is on a mission—a mission to heal the earth.

by Sara Evans

Adam Straus is a Florida boy, born and bred. But his Florida, the Florida he grew up in, has all but disappeared. When he was a boy, not so very long ago, Key Biscayne was still a place where a boy could run wild on the beach, spend hours exploring the wild mangrove swamps and fish on the ocean from a small aluminum boat. That was the Florida Adam Straus loved—and lost.

He moved to New York from Tallahassee in 1990. These days, in his studio in Riverhead on Long Island, he paints pictures of astonishingly luminous beauty. As an East End artist, Adam Straus really gets it—the way the rising moon casts its golden wake over the ocean in Montauk, how pristine snow fields catch and hold the fading light, the way the morning mist settles over the fields of the North Fork, the way an infinity of sandy pathways lead into the East End woods and black branches etch the winter sky. In less skilled hands, these would just be pretty pictures, traditional renderings of a beautiful landscape. But Straus is no Sunday painter. He is an



"Fire and Earth," 2008, oil on canvas - 2 panels joined and framed in lead, 48 x 33-1/2 x 2 in.

artist with the truest of eyes, an artist of surpassing skill. The world he sees around him is still a place of breathtaking beauty, but it is also a world that is dangerously imperiled.

For him, painting is much more than creating beautiful landscapes. His chosen place, Long Island's East End, is still a proximate paradise. After living in Tribeca and Brooklyn, he and his wife Nicole explored many different places to live before choosing Riverhead. For them, the area held the promise of living close to nature in an area still relatively affordable, relatively pristine and relatively underdeveloped. What clinched the deal for Adam Straus, a passionate fisherman, was the heady experience of swimming in the Atlantic breakers off Southampton. "All of a sudden, I was surrounded by large striped bass, actually swimming with them! That did it!"

As a painter, a resident of Planet Earth, a husband and a father, Straus subscribes to the ancient Hebrew notion of "Tikkun Olam," the responsibility of each individual to repair the world. He does his part through his work. Many of his paintings have a strong ecological message. Some are subtle, many not so subtle. There's the man by the shore speaking on a cell phone, tire tracks that have dug up a pristine beach and Monet's lily pond is covered with an angry, iridescent oil slick floating on its surface. Others are more insistent: an angry, toxic wave spilling over the edge of a lead frame, a landscape is so parched it is burning. One painting, "Man Searching for the End of Destruction," shows a lone figure in a ruined city, a vision at once so bleak and so apocalyptic that is actually difficult to look at. "Space Junk" is both scary and funny, with a Coke can, a Wonder Bread loaf, a Styrofoam cup, an alarm clock, and a paper bag all spinning through the cosmos. "The artist," Straus insists, "has a responsibility to be realistic, to show and tell the truth."

His most recent exhibition at the Nohra Haime Gallery on East 57th Street in New York, "Drill Here, Drill Now!" explored the cardinal elements of Earth, Fire, Water, and Air, as well as the great Void, or nature itself, and the myriad ways in which they are all being damaged and exploited. He makes his

points by focusing on just one aspect of the landscape in each painting, a single island or a roiling sea. The exhibition was a visual record of the interconnectedness of events in nature and the role of man in environmental degradation. In "Fire and Earth," 2008, Straus created a vision of destruction, a fire burning from the cracked and desolate surface of the earth, while in "Air and Water #2," the image is tranquil and restorative. "It's the ying and yang," the artist observes, "the painting "Air and Water" is tranquil and healing to me, while "Fire and Earth" is apocalyptic and disturbing, the result of our messing things up; you screw up the ocean and the atmosphere and you get more drought and fire."

The world beyond Long Island does not escape Straus's eye and brush. He paints craggy mountains, distant volcanoes and tropical islands, melting icebergs and the cracked floors of a parched desert. "I seek out places, atmospheres and landscapes that inspire awe in me and then attempt to translate all that into paintings," Straus explains. "I feel that a disconnect from nature, and a lack of appreciation of it, allows us to forget about what's happening to it."

Straus is a link in the chain of the old tradition of the artist as an early-warning system, the canary in our collective coalmine. Consider Joseph Wright of Derby, an Englishman who painted "dark, infernal mills" at the very dawn of the Industrial Revolution. Look closely at the work of some of the greatest painters of the Hudson River School, Thomas Cole and Frederick Church, for instance. There is an oxbow in the river, green hills spread all around. Now look closer: a train is steaming southward, its tracks scarring the landscape. And in the distance, factory smokestacks belch filth into the air, telling us that the inevitable forces of industrialization are now close at hand.

So why is Adam Straus so cheerful? His friend, dealer and muse, Nohra Haime, notes, "For him, there is still time, still reason for optimism. If we all learn to listen, to watch, to change, then it isn't too late. We can still do something to reverse the ravages of pollution and the damaging of the Earth." One of Straus's paintings, "9:12:01: The Morning After the Day



"Man On Cell Phone By The Sea," 2000, oil on canvas framed in steel, 21-1/2 x 29-1/2 x 2 in.



"Spoil Cay, Bahamas," 2008, oil on canvas, 58 x 63 x 2 in.

Before," seems to embody his amazing sense of resilience and optimism. Even after the apocalyptic events of 9/11, the sun still rose in the East and cast its bright, dancing light over the tranquil sea.

Haime and Straus share a rare and wonderful relationship. Before she represented Straus and sold his work, she was an admirer and a collector of his paintings. Since coming to New York in 1990, he has shown at her gallery. In the catalogue for one of his earliest shows, "Greetings from a Toxic Paradise" (1993), he sends visual messages from the place



"Moonrise: Long Island Country Road," 2005, oil on canvas encased in lead, 22 x 28 x 2 in.

"where the rainwater burns your eyes and the sunsets are always spectacular." One of Adam Straus's most recent shows at the Nohra Haime Gallery was a series of searing memorial paintings, each a somber elegy to the soldiers killed in Iraq. Using Xeroxed images overlaid with oil paints on lead panels, Straus created tribute paintings that are double paneled with the faint image of soldiers and burning white candles bearing silent witness.

One of Adam Straus's most powerful and recurring images is that of the lone figure in the landscape. This is an old and romantic artistic convention, one which in this artist's skilled hands takes on increased poignancy and meaning. A man searching the ruins of a city, a man alone on the peak of a mountaintop, a man reaching out to the universe on his cell phone while standing on an empty beach. There is the man who is trying to keep warm, the man trying to keep his head above water, swimming in a vast and empty ocean. He expresses aloneness, the essential solitude of each individual. The viewer becomes that figure; he is everyman, he is us. And he is the artist himself on his lonely

mission doing his bit to heal the earth.

Adam Straus is represented by the Nohra Haime Gallery, 41 East 57th Street, New York. For more information call 212-888-3550 or email galler@nohrahaimегallery.com. ♦



"Summit: Melting," 2001, oil on canvas and lead encased in steel, 64 x 64 x 2 in.