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For this painter, landscapes go beyond the merely beautiful

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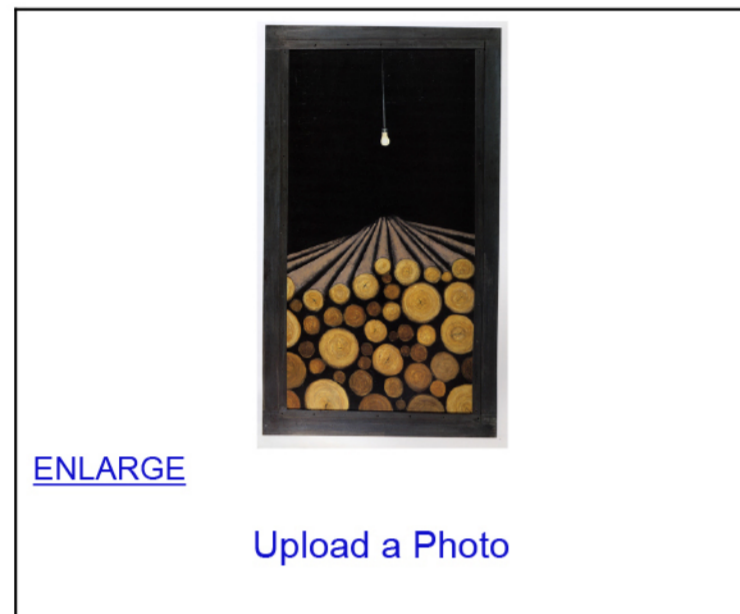
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By Pat Rogers

It's okay to say paintings by Adam Straus are beautiful. Mr. Straus doesn't mind.

In line with the "beautiful" modifier, his compositions can be bucolic landscapes, peaceful waters or craggy terrain. But Mr. Straus's art is much more than a pretty face. Implied treachery, irony or imminent demise are also part of the picture. Humor is never out of the question.

The lead frames around the artwork is one tip that an arresting vista may not be the entire point of his art. The



heavy metal, sometimes studded with rivets, provides a surprising contrast to the natural scenes it circumscribes.

Another clue is found in the compositions themselves. Yes, the natural scene is beautiful and expertly presented. But why are yellow lights beaming into the night? The lights originate from houses or a lighthouse or even from the research lab at Plum Island. It's not easy finding pristine stretches of land where no man has trod.

Titles can also help point the way. One painting on view in the current exhibition at Art Sites Gallery in Riverhead is a lush scene from the French countryside with water lapping at a nearby shore. The landscape is framed in a thick band of lead. The painting's title is "Normandy."

"You have to know a little bit of history, but most people know about what happened at Normandy in World War II," Mr. Straus said. "We visited France and visited Normandy. It was beautiful and I paint landscapes; that's what I do. But the land has a history. When you look at the view or at the painting, you can't help but think of its past and what happened here during the war. Its history changes the way we look at the landscape. You can't not think about what happened here."

"Normandy" is part of a mini-retrospective of Mr. Straus's work at Art Sites. A lecture and artist talk will be offered on Saturday, June 26, at 3 p.m. at the gallery.

For Mr. Straus, landscapes are not solely about capturing something beautiful. His art is a way to express his vehement concerns that people are destroying the environment. Mr. Straus's point is more political than environmental. Politics are too often the motivating force behind man's actions. Clear cutting, oil exploration and destruction of the natural environment are only a few of his concerns.

"There's always been this attitude that the ocean and the atmosphere are an endless resource and we can do anything because it's vast," Mr. Straus said in an interview at Art Sites. "The oil spill is not in the ocean, it's in the gulf. The oceans are not endless—it's not un-damageable. We can damage it, and we are."

As passionate as Mr. Straus is about the peril the environment faces, he doesn't believe in making his art harsh. His landscapes combine traditional presentation of nature with subtle nods to contemporary political themes. Mr. Straus is a big fan of the Hudson River School. Illumination and splendor are important elements of his paintings, he said. So is striving to bring meaning that goes beyond a beautiful view.

A series of ocean paintings ("Air and Water") aims to conjure the spiritual experience of being alone on the water and immersed in nature, he said. The 2009 series was meant to depart from art that always includes a political or environmental zinger. In light of the BP debacle, even these peaceful

ocean views have become ironic.

“Their meaning has completely changed,” he said. “I can’t help think of all the oil pouring in the gulf and the destruction that’s going on right now. That area will never be the same.”

The solo show of Mr. Straus’s artwork at Art Sites is designed to give viewers a taste of his career. The exhibition, “Adam Straus: A Little Bit of Retrospection 1992-2008” features paintings from different series. Sometimes a single painting is representative of a series. “Toxic Run-off” is from a series in which paint drips from the bottom of the composition onto the frame.

Three small paintings from his “Bunker Still-Life” series are meant to show the type of work that might be created by landscape artists if they had no natural vistas to paint. On view are still life studies of things that might be in a bunker after the apocalypse: a lemon, a cocktail shaker and a Campbell’s Soup can.

Paintings on view also depict East End landscapes, the Long Island Sound from Wildwood State Park and Shelter Island in a fog. Other paintings reveal Mr. Straus’s strong sense of humor. “Man Searching for a Garden” show a plant in a flowerpot set in the desert.

“Duck” gives a nod to art history in its depiction of sky and field. In this piece, a tiny hunter aims a shotgun in a golden field, but not at a duck in the sky: at a person in the distance. While the title could refer to the duck in the sky, it also references the hope that the person will “duck” before he’s shot.

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Great work!!! Thanks for the article.

Just in terms of art history, when, chronologically, did "beautiful" become a dirty word for describing art?

This fact amazes me.

By [elliott \(225\)](#), sag harbor on Jun 28, 10 11:36 AM

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