

## ARTS &amp; THEATRE

# Moody landscapes show artist's love of northern climes

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A reverent hush customarily prevails at the Vero Beach Museum of Art but the silence can't be taken for granted at the current exhibition of landscape paintings by Adam Straus in the Schumann Gallery.

This time, viewers are acutely aware of the silence, as if it were emanating from the paintings on display.

Straus's distant peaks, tranquil expanses of water and fog-shrouded islands insinuate themselves so stealthily on the senses they seem to materialize, rather than hang, on the gallery walls.

The pictures are painted in a subdued palette that varies little from painting to painting.

Bluish gray predominates in the 24 works on display, which were executed between 2002 and 2011. Light flickers uncertainly in these paintings. Whether moonlight, hazy sunshine or a faint blush in an overcast sky, Straus's atmospheres seem to be delicately bal-



anced on twilight's edge.

The artist was neither born on the moors of Scotland nor raised on Newfoundland's foggy coast. Straus is a product of Florida, born in Mi-

ami Beach in 1956, and educated in Gainesville and Tallahassee – he has a bachelor's degree in mathematics from the University of Florida and a master's of fine arts from Florida State University.

But judging by the works in the current show, Straus is temperamentally more suited to a colder climate, one in which cloud and mist and frozen precipitation prevail. It may have been partly for that reason that he moved to New York City in 1990, settling at last in Riverhead, N.Y., in 2003.

Museum Executive Director Lucinda Gedeon first encountered Straus's paintings at the Nohra Haime Gallery during a visit to New York. She was impressed by his work and eventually brought it to the attention of the museum's exhibition committee. Curator Jay Williams says that the strength of the artist's ideas as well as his imagery is what ultimately brought his work to Vero.

"Being from Florida was an added bonus," Williams says.

Several paintings in the exhibition take their names from Long Island and environs, such as "Winter Sunset from Indian Island Woods" and "Plum Island."

"Shelter Island in Fog" shows a low hump of land surrounded by water. Dusk is falling, and through the gloom two spots of light are visible on the island's near edge. They might be beacons to guide a ferry to the place, but their insistent redundancy rivets the eye. It is as though homing in on them is a mariner's only hope of reaching dry land before nightfall.

Like most of the paintings in the show, "Shelter Island in Fog" is framed

in wood overlaid with lead sheeting. Some of the lead frames are smooth and relatively featureless; others have an additional raised strip of lead-encased wood that is punctuated at intervals by dark-colored screw heads. In those, the effect is like looking out of an armored car or through the porthole of a steel-hulled ship. With its connotation of sealed protection, the lead surrounding the pictures suggests that a potential environmental hazard lurks in these serene landscapes.

Danger seems imminent in one of the largest works in the show, "S.O.S." At first glance, only a rocky mountain peak can be seen, framed against a background of luminous fog. Half of the peak gleams with sunlit snow, but in its rocky shadows, a tiny figure shines a weak signal light in our direction. The human presence in this picture is so small and insignificant compared to its vast surroundings that the viewer feels no emotional involvement with the figure's plight – if plight it is indeed.

In the six-panel brochure that accompanies the exhibition, curator Williams mentions the German Romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich in the context of Straus's work.

Like Friedrich's paintings, Straus's works are suffused with loneliness. Unlike Friedrich, who wished to convey the possibility of becoming spiritually subsumed in nature, Straus's paintings suggest that modern people are at odds with nature.

Sometimes Straus holds the viewer at more than a safe remove from what's happening in the picture. "Man Filming Something Outside of the Picture" is again set in mountainous terrain, but this time the figure is not signaling us. Instead, the direction in which he points his camera pulls our eyes away from the center of the action to some spot past the edge of the canvas.

Straus is like the tiny cameraman in his painting, recording something that he can see directly, but that his canvas's viewers must be led around to realize gradually. Perhaps it is the fact that the real subject of his paintings is invisible. The artist leads us with his considerable painting skill to think that we are seeing a landscape. But we are made to stand outside it and receive flashes of light, a signal from some tiny, barely recognizable other. What we do with those silent communications is ultimately up to us.

Members of the museum can attend a reception for Straus on Friday at 5 p.m., coinciding with the debut of a Norman Rockwell exhibit, which opens to the public Saturday. ■