

# NOHRA HAIME GALLERY

## 730 FIFTH AVENUE

# MAX-ART

## ADVISORY SERVICES

*Contemporary art notes from the files of Douglas F Maxwell As a contemporary art advisor, consultant, and professor, I have spent decades navigating the world of galleries, museums, international art fairs, and exhibitions. This blog shares my personal notes, thoughts and insights from my weekly journey through the contemporary scene.*

28TH DEC 2016

### **Adam Straus Retrospective at Nohra Haime and Adelson Galleries**

Over the past 25 years Adam Straus has maintained a vision through landscape that has paid homage to the art historical traditions while being poignantly contemporary in pointing to concerns in a late 20th and 21st century world. Although trained in art, Straus is really a self taught painter. Rather than using a paint by numbers technique to learn, he literally painted over photographs until he felt accomplished enough to dispense with them and let his own style flourish. The essay, by Amei Wallach, in the magnificent catalogue that accompanies the exhibition, is most comprehensive. Therefore I'm going to concentrate my comments around Straus's works that speak to the changing environment.

From the outset, he was fiercely aware of environmental concerns and employed his biting sense of humor to accentuate the issues.

In the 1991 painting "Exodus", he epitomizes the Hudson River School notion of the sublime. Rather than reflecting the 19th century view of a miraculously potent sunset as seen on one of Albert Bierstadt's paintings



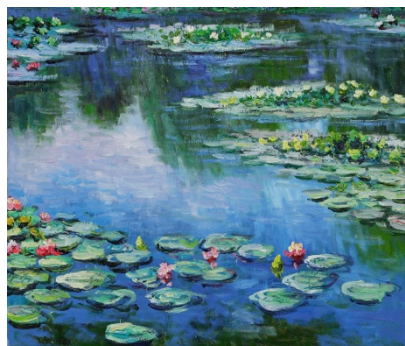
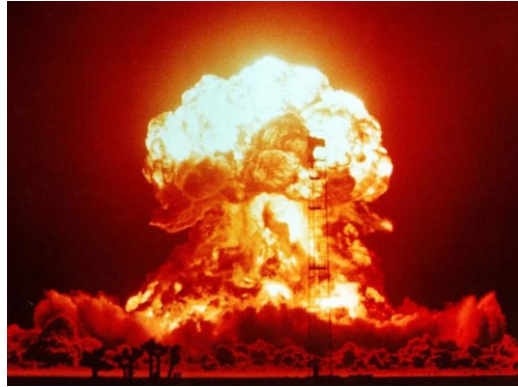
Straus does just the opposite. The nocturnal scene is mysteriously lit up as cars make their way as fast as possible away from the light. The real tipoff is that Straus frames the piece in lead as if to try to protect the viewer from the calamity inside the canvas. The irony is that lead, itself, is so toxic. For many years, almost all of Straus' paintings were encased in lead and thus became a kind of signature element in his work that also reflected his sculptural training.

Nuclear devastation has been a concern since the inception of atomic power. Mark Rothko and the other Abstract Expressionists could not help but let their anxiety seep into their abstract paintings in the mid 1950's when the first H-bomb tests took place.

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I have actually stood in a gallery space surrounded by Rothko's red/orange and yellow paintings and felt the heat become palpable. Straus' Exodus gives a more distant perspective where presumably the devastation hasn't yet arrived but escape appears pretty futile.

Often Straus likes to pay homage to artists who he has admired. Such was the case with the 1999 work, Toxic Runoff: Waterlilies.



Aside for the obvious connections to Monet, Straus uses subtly darker colors indicating the change in the water quality during the last 100 years, giving pause for thought about what has happened and what we are doing to the beautiful Giverny gardens.

During the recent election, Jill Stein ran for President on the Green Party line. She managed to pull votes, most likely

from Hilary Clinton in the crucial swing states including Michigan where several years ago the water supply of Flint became totally toxic. Adam's 1994 painting, Detroit, is like an uncanny premonition.

When Straus was living in Florida, he ran for the US Senate as a write in candidate because he didn't believe either of the major candidates responded sufficiently to the environment. His campaign became a performance piece where he enlisted his friends to do his only campaigning by going around and stenciling "Straus for Senate" on individual sheets of toilet paper in public bathrooms. To his astonishment, he garnered more than 3000 votes which was more than the margin of victory for Straus' least favorable candidate. He learned a lesson that Jill Stein could have benefited from as she received around 1% of the vote in the key battleground states which was more than the margin of victory that determined the next President. Now, like Straus in Florida, we all have to lament Trump's choice for the Environmental Protection Agency, Scott Pruitt, a notorious anti climate changer, who might as well change the department's name to the Environmental Destruction Agency.



As early as 1994, Adam Straus made paintings about oil leaks. By the turn of the 21st century, oil spills and leaks were feared to be among the most devastating disasters to the seas and coastlines. In his 2002 painting Oil Slick,

his pun about oil paint juxtaposed with the slick portends of our surreal reality. Besides the very real hazards of off shore drilling, the vast amount of oil in Iraq and the surrounding area provided at least one motive for the ill fated war culminating in Trump's bizarre campaign statement that "at least we should have kept the oil". And his administration is headed in a direction with Rex Tillerson as potential Secretary of State at the helm that might be renamed US Oil and Gas.





No area involving our changing environment has eluded the wit and painting prowess of Adam Straus. In 2001, he created a series about global warming as he had read that Mt Everest was shrinking because the snow on it was melting. Entitled Summit: Melting, the painting shows the majestic peak leaking snow. Ironically, the title is



one small letter away from being “Summit: Meeting” which is what it has taken to move the countries of the world to respond at all. This kind of exotic look at a far off distant mountain reflects Straus’ keen understanding how artists, in the Romantic tradition, have always sought out remote images to pursue the sublime.

In his most recent work, Straus has incorporated technology, partially based on the influence of his son, while continuing to address increasing environmental concerns. In his very recent Glitch series, he takes an app that causes a “glitch” in his image and then repaints it incorporating the glitch.

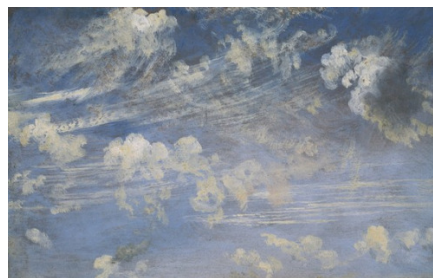
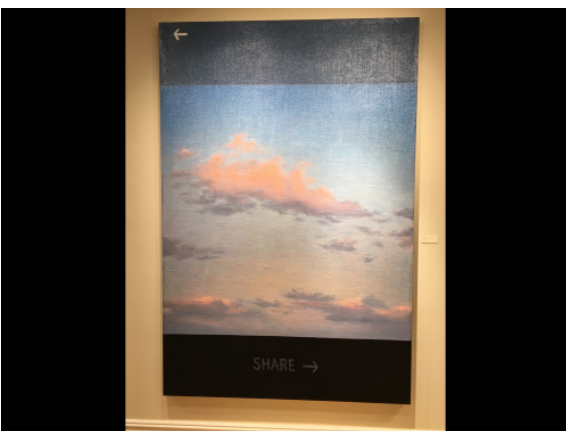


In Glitch: Antarctica, he finds the ultimate remote seascape, which remains remote to direct viewing, but through technology becomes accessible yet we don’t seem to really get the message.

Finally, taking from an app like Instagram, he has created the image Shared Air which recall the 19th century cloud studies by John Constable

But for Straus Shared Air is a way of making the deadly serious pun that sharing, in the Instagram sense, doesn’t tell the story of really sharing polluted air around the planet.

For a quarter century, Adam Straus has been sharing his vision in landscape, and what has saved it from being nihilistic, is his profound painterly style in conjunction with his ever-present wit.



#adamstrauss #nohrahaimегallery #adelsongallery #ameiwallach

<http://max-art.tumblr.com>