

ADAM STRAUS: *SOS for the Sublime*

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«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,

EARLIEST WORKS, FLORIDA

I arrived at my passion for art-making while at the University of Florida in Gainesville between 1976 and 1980. I was a math major and mostly took courses in science, but I also took a painting and drawing course for non-art majors and after receiving my degree in mathematics, I studied photography with both Jerry Uelsmann and Evon Streetman. Evon used to say, "Find something that keeps you up at night," and in the making of pictures that's what I felt I had found. I put together a portfolio of my photographs, and was accepted into the graduate program in fine art at Florida State University. The photographs were composed from a number of negatives, often with a suggested narrative. Some had a dark post-apocalyptic look that would be more thoroughly displayed in the later paintings. At FSU, for the next two years, inspired by Robert Fichter, who was quite adept at getting his students out of their comfort zones, I began making sculpture and assemblage. The sculptures were temple and totem-like structures built out of wood and covered with lead, steel and dirt. They were adorned with sharpened railroad spikes and sometimes surrounded by moats of ink-stained water or piles of coal. I saw many of them as mini-installations involving the use of a wall and the floor with objects even hanging from the ceiling. I had always loved how Rauschenberg dealt with space in this fashion.

SEMI-PORTABLE WAR MEMORIAL, 1988, was a comment on the proliferation of war memorials at the time, mostly for Vietnam. It was my feeling that perhaps if we stopped engaging in unnecessary wars then maybe we would not need so many war memorials.

END OF THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD, 1990, was my version of the end of capitalism (inspired, of course, by the movie *The Wizard of Oz*). Bricks covered with fake gold leaf are arranged in a ziggurat design on a platform lying on the floor à la Carl Andre. On the last brick the gold leaf disappears revealing the brick underneath.

NUMBERED OBJECTS, 1990, is a response to everything becoming numbered or bar-coded. While I was working at the art department at FSU someone from building services had actually come around and numbered the door jams.



THE END OF THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD, 1990
mixed media
96 x 48 x 7 in. 243.8 x 122 x 17.8 cm.

PLAYING WITH COLOR, SPACE, AND STEEL

In 1996-97 I moved the studio from the basement in Tribeca into a 1000 square-foot very reasonably priced space (for New York City) in the Dumbo section of Brooklyn. Dumbo has since become a developer's dream of gentrification, but then it was down at the heels and somewhat dangerous despite its amazing architecture under the Manhattan and Brooklyn bridges. Walking home in the evening on deserted streets through this industrial architecture I would feel like I was in a DeChirico painting. Having given up the Manhattan studio in Tribeca, I was no longer the building superintendent, which freed up even more time to concentrate on my work.

This is when I began to use steel instead of lead to frame some of the paintings. The metals have a very different feel. Lead is softer, more like graphite or skin. Steel is darker, harder, colder, and I had wanted to use it for a while. The material and its production had been an important factor in the industrial revolution, and my paintings had a tendency to question some of that progress. In the mid-1800s, Henry Bessemer had invented a process that greatly cut the time and cost of making steel, enabling the industrial revolution to proceed at a much more rapid rate. So again, like the lead, the metal

of the frames had a symbolic weight, so to speak.

My neighbor in the new space fabricated all kinds of things out of steel, and he made the frames for me in the look and dimensions I wanted. It was another of the many opportunities that living in the city brought to someone like me, who was seeking to try different techniques and materials. It seemed that if you lived in New York City and came up with an idea, there was almost always a way to make it happen that usually wouldn't break the bank.

By the late 90's, brighter color had established itself as a common element in the work, perhaps a response to the relative gray of the city. I also began playing with the space in a picture, so that objects seemed to be hurtling out of a background. I was trying to break the picture plane with illusion.

DRAG, 1996, is a vast winter landscape with a red spot and smear that is dragged off the painting. I have loved movies since seeing "Mash" and Gordon Parks's "The Learning Tree" as a young teenager. Often movies have led to ideas for paintings. In this case the inspiration was the Coen brothers' "Fargo." I have always felt a kinship with their movies and the ways they have depicted the dark, violent, and absurdist landscape that is certainly an aspect of America.



DRAG, 1996
oil on panel encased in lead
39 x 66 x 2 in. 99 x 167.7 x 5 cm.



THE NEXT TO THE LAST ICEBERG, 2007
oil on canvas encased in lead
72½ x 79¼ x 2⅞ in. 184.2 x 201.3 x 5.4 cm.



GREEN SPACE, 2014
oil on jute adhered to canvas
32 x 48 x 1¾ in. 81.3 x 121.9 x 4.4 cm.

GREEN SPACE, 2014, takes its cue from the combination of a photograph and a painting. The photograph is of a field behind Riverhead's Target shopping center from which the buildings and their lights can be seen through the trees; the painting is George Inness's Harvest Moon, which I so dearly love. The left side of the picture breaks up into the mosaic pattern and the right side is a more realist rendering. This is my simple metaphor for our disappearing green space. Edward O. Wilson, the famous Harvard socio-biologist, has recently written that the only way to stop a mass extinction of species including our own is to save half of nature completely from our intrusion.