EXPANDING THE BOUNDARIES OF LANDSCAPE

The definition of landscape painting changed on a single day in October 1888, at a specific site near the town of Pont-Aven in Brittany, France. We feel the impact to this day. It was there that Paul Gauguin gave a young disciple, Paul Sérusier, instructions on how to depict a small lake hidden deep in the woods. The French call this kind of painting a *sous-bois* or under-the-trees landscape. The point is to capture the effects of sunlight filtering down through the leaves overhead, dappling the forest floor and throwing reflections on the water. The artist's goal is to achieve a convincing sense of ambient atmosphere in a coherent space. The so-called Barbizon painters of the 1840s and '50s perfected sous-bois painting and Pierre Renoir later made something of a specialty of it among the Impressionists. Whatever the style, according to the tradition of naturalism to which landscape painters of the 1880s subscribed, a landscape painting was deemed more successful the more realistic a depiction of a corner of nature it seemed to be.

Gauguin saw things differently. Seeking to explain the direction in which his own work had been developing in recent months, he told Sérusier to look beyond the colors, tonal relationships and play of light surrounding him at the edge of the lake. Where he saw red, Gauguin advised, Sérusier should paint with the brightest, purest red possible, the same for green and yellow and blue. He should repeat those colors with equal intensity when it came to depicting the reflections of the autumn leaves in the water. Don't worry too much about resemblance to nature, he implied. Don't be afraid of artificial effects. Let color play a symbolic rather than merely descriptive role. The first responsibility of the painter is to make the picture vivid, strong, decorative, alive like nature but in its own way.

For Gauguin, landscape painting was still a representational art - he would not have conceived of abstraction - but under the impulse of his art the parameters of representation were shifting, opening decisively outwards, while truth to visual experience was in retreat as a universally acknowledged goal. The jewel-bright painting on a small wooden panel that resulted from Gauguin's famous al fresco training session came to be known as *Le Talisman* - it is today in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris - because Sérusier, bowled over by the audacity of Gauguin's approach, showed it to artist friends over and again to illustrate his mentor's startling new take on landscape. A generation of French artists in the 1890s looked to it as a guide. Here was a way to move beyond naturalism towards a new kind of painting; landscape re-born.

Paul Sérusier, (1864-1927)
Le Talisman, l'Aven au Bois d'Amour, 1888
Oil on wood, 10 1/2 x 8 1/4 inches
Musée d'Orsay, Paris
© RMN-Hervé Lewandowski

Almost immediately after working with Sérusier at Pont-Aven, Gauguin traveled south to Arles in Provence to paint side-by-side with Vincent van Gogh, to whom he reiterated his ideas about brilliant color and decorative simplification of form. Vincent responded with lessons of his own. Painting could be made to vibrate with the individual intensity of the artist's psyche. When pushed to the limits, form and color could be the instruments of a deeply personal expressivity. Landscape painting in particular could register the artist's profound and individual engagement with nature. Vincent's own *Starry Night* in the Museum of Modern Art, executed that same year, was an object lesson in the new range of possibilities then opening up, achieving an almost hallucinatory concentration of vision.

The several weeks van Gogh and Gauguin worked together in Arles that autumn - their extraordinary two-man master class ended with Vincent's mental breakdown and Gauguin's flight to Paris just before Christmas - constituted one of the decisive dialogues of modern art. Between them, they redefined what landscape painting could be, formally and expressively, and prepared it for the expanded role they somehow intuited it would play in 20th century art. They demonstrated two new ways of painting that would lead to countless more.

It happened quickly. By the first decade of the 20th century the implications of their work were coming to be recognised by artists across Europe and America. Among the first were painters who now saw in landscape painting a uniquely flexible and open-ended practice through which they might be able to achieve three distinct goals. In countries such as Norway, Finland, the US and Canada, they wanted their work to participate in the definition of national self-identity, in ways that history painting or portraits of leaders once had done, but now in more abstracted, evocative and allusive terms. The land itself would help to define character. At the same time, they wanted their art to be highly personal in expression and also to be resolutely contemporary, as up-to-date as the most advanced work coming out of Paris.

Another, no less unexpected, consequence arose as well. A work like *Le Talisman* might look a lot like an abstract painting but, as I have said, it is not. Nonetheless, the line between landscape and abstract painting would be blurred - it now seems inevitably so - from the moment abstraction was invented in about 1910. The Russian Wassily Kandinsky's first 'pure' abstractions evolved organically from his earlier jewel-like landscape paintings redolent of ancient myth and folk legend. Piet Mondrian's crisp, clear grid paintings in white and primary colors developed with a cool and consistent logic, and no less organically, from his own depictions of church towers and spreading trees dotting the Dutch countryside. It is almost a platitude of our times that Jackson Pollock's vast drip paintings, which he began to execute in the 1940s, are themselves in some way landscapes, as expansive as the hills and valleys and endless grain-rich fields of the American West he hailed from. In the modern world, many more kinds of images would be read as landscape than earlier generations might have allowed. Modern artists had found in it a space of freedom.

This exhibition takes up the great Modernist question of what landscape can be. Its sub-title, uniting form with thought, implies that the answer is open-ended, creative, conjoining physicality and cerebration in unexpected ways. It confronts masters of mid-20th-century American art with a new, young generation of painters no less ready to push at boundaries than their pioneering elders had been. Indeed, the sense of continuity, of renewed attention in the 21st century to issues that were no less vital in the previous one, is at the core of the show. It is not surprising that landscape should remain so alive in America. Blessed with prodigalities of space, although increasingly aware that it is everywhere endangered, American artists see that the canvas or sheet of paper or wall can be a forum for invention, at once elliptical and evocative, ambiguous where it needs to be. Coming to grips with the landscape they inhabit - that shapes them - remains a struggle that artists are still learning how to wage.

Already by the late 1920s Milton Avery had achieved his distinctively (and deceptively) simple landscape style consisting of broad blocks of intersecting color, animated by squiggles and dashes of paint. (One is surprised to be reminded here that he was actually born in the nineteenth century, so current do his works feel.) And he could turn his distinctive style to broodingly expressive ends as well; his remarkable *New England Industry* of 1930 powerfully suggests something of the grim and relentless rhythms of factory life under lowering grey skies. This is Modernist landscape as social statement.

David Smith's *Voltri 7* , an animated sheet in black ink with spare touches of color, relates to the great suite of sculptures the artist made in a fever of creativity in Italy in 1962; at the same time the calligraphic forms and meandering lines inevitably recall the tree-covered hills, receding one beyond another, in upstate New York where the artist made his home. In canvasses of the 1970s Herbert Ferber paints moody veils of color that inevitably suggest mists rising over mountain lakes, soon to reveal the landscape beyond. In his *Seal Point* series of small-scale works, John Walker revels in the play of paint, thickly and lusciously applied. These are like the tiny landscape oil sketches that Seurat made, only here the dots of color have taken on a life of their own, muscled up, and decided to take control. Donald Sultan's spare forms and inventive use of natural materials like tar deftly evoke the man-made forms such as streetlights that in the modern world populate the American landscape like so many sentinels, imparting to it a subtle sense of menace. And yet, in Sultan's razor-sharp 'take' on landscape, a towering street lamp and tiny yellow iris, incommensurate forms, nonetheless can be seen to rhyme. Richard Pousette-Dart's densely-worked circular and ovoid paintings on handmade paper open out landscape to sugg□

If some artists seek broad landscape effects, others attend to the minute specificities of nature at its most humble. Sidney Goodman explores rock piles in delicate washes of transparent watercolor; solid forms are rendered here as diaphanous veils. Neil Jenney paints leaves and branches floating in water with an intensity that causes us to see them as if for the first time; the over-scale black constructions that frame theme enforce the necessity that we pay attention to the phenomena of nature. Sean Cavanaugh turns his attention to pieces of rock face covered in lichen and mosses, pitted with cavities and indentations. Detached from their context in nature, these fragments become ever more mysterious, alien. Alexis Rockman contrasts electrical wires and smoking factory chimneys with vast, moving skies above, the former details carefully observed, the latter roiling improvisations in oil paint that call our attention back to the medium and the artist's control over it.

Among the youngest artists in the exhibition, Nusra Latif Qureshi and Ryan McGinness expand the parameters of landscape most radically of all, seeing in it a field for the play of rich, organic pattern, subtle historical illusion, appropriated imagery, searing color and fantastical invention. They evoke the dazzling traditions of linear patterning and decorative super-abundance that have played leading roles in world cultures both ancient and still thrillingly alive whose richness we are only slowly coming to appreciate at something approaching its worth.

In the run up to the 20th century the boundaries of landscape painting began an exponential expansion that continued throughout the following century. This exhibition, confronting the works of generations of American artists, shows some of the ways it happened, and how it continues to do so. It is heartening to be reminded how capacious an envelope landscape painting is.

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