

Some Place

Benjamin Dunn

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Committee:

Helen O'Toole

David Brody

Ann Gale

Zhi Lin

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Ben Dunn

University of Washington

Abstract

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Benjamin Dunn

Chair of the Supervisory Committee: Associate Professor Helen J. O'Toole

School of Art, Art History and Design

This thesis examines the role of specificity, observation, and organic forms employed in the development of a painting style which is rooted in the landscape tradition. The traditional formats from the history of landscape painting are investigated and replaced with an abstract vocabulary which is sympathetic to the observed formal situations in experienced environments. This paper traces my development from the tradition of landscape to an investigation of place open to poetic and spiritual interpretation. In this paper I demonstrate the development of this style through its historical predecessors in the painting tradition as well as influences from contemporary painting and poetry.

I made an egg-like form using three strips of poplar that I ripped down on a table saw from dimensional lumber. The strips are laminated together with glue to maintain this form. This form is elemental, seemingly universal in nature. It is like an arc or a curve in this way. It is unlike a right angle at the corner of an imaginary picture plane. This egg shape is slightly asymmetrical and flattens out at the bottom. Its plies separate a little near the apex and a lot near the bottom right curve. They don't quite overlap where they are closest to the floor.

This object shows the history of its assembly both where the wood separates and where it aligns perfectly because the layers are different tones of green. It is simultaneously three separate lines and an amalgamate egg-like form. I hope it speaks to the worn naturalness of *wabi* aesthetics and the philosophical implications therein. I also hope it is always both an egg shape and three strips of wood made meaningful by their being joined together. This is also philosophical.

My work is about joinery, natural forms and the almost-meeting of things. It evolved in the tradition of Romantic landscape painting but it is much calmer now. It carries more meaning when I don't pretend to capture anything grand in it. As I become more considerate of, and devoted to, the small and elusive qualities of places my work is becoming simpler and more universal. This essentially embodies my current work and my relationship with the painting tradition that I come from.



My practice consists of drawings, paintings, wooden objects and photographs which emphasize the light, color and forms of places. These expressions are informed by the historical traditions of landscape painting and my experiences. My work describes specific qualities of these environments and the sensation of being somewhere particular through non-representative images and objects. These discrete qualities are considered and recombined in to works that visually address universal situations. I am focused on the smaller phenomena and moments in places and the elusive meanings at which these things point. I hope to depict the ethereal rendered as a distillation of the



quotidian. My work is attenuated to subtle shifts and surprises of a colloquial scale. The images and forms are driven by particulate observations which, in aggregate, begin to suggest vast space and elemental forms.

Through researching various landscape painting traditions I have developed a set of forms and devices which refer to the subject of place using a progressively simple language of form and color. Prior to this development my representative landscape paintings were largely informed by the European Romantic tradition and concerned with atmosphere. By studying the palettes of Romantic painters such as J.M.W. Turner, John Martin and John Constable I emulated their atmospheric space by overlapping colors and varying color temperature. I also became increasingly concerned with the various qualities of light in painting. Eventually I began to de-emphasize most optical-





illusionistic devices in favor of the materiality of paint and interactivity of colors as in the later works of Turner. The Romantic painting tradition produced artwork suited to the narrative of the Sublime and epic scale of nature in relation to man. The paintings of John Constable with a figure as a flash of red against the massive complementary green ground demonstrate this attitude of man set against nature. These depictions are of the power of nature as a terrifying force that people are somehow pitted against.

This division is reiterated in viewing landscape painting as an image of the natural world cut away in a rectilinear frame, unlike any occurrence in nature. The format of the picture plane occurs almost nowhere in nature. The object qualities of the paintings reiterate the distance of the human and natural. The right angles that constitute it are engineered. The space that is depicted on this plane is cut away. This framing activity further deepens the categorical divide of the environment and images of it. My studio research at the University of Washington has largely been to initiate a reconciliation of form, content and material by bringing some devices from landscape painting forward in to formal situations which are sympathetic to the organic forms of the experienced environment. These forms refer to elemental structures and tendencies found in the environment; an arc replaces a right angle, a crushed oval instead of a circle. These are forms which reveal a naturalness in their asymmetry, irregularity and imperfection.



In creating less romantic and less idealized images with less rigidly rectilinear structures in my work I hope to create a more sensitive realism that is similar to my actual surroundings.



The idea of the sublime has been replaced by gentler attention to minutiae in my work. Illusionistic painting is supplanted by a sensitivity to materiality. Pictorial space is engaged with an investigation of the painting as an object occupying real space in dialog with the image. My research has largely consisted of looking carefully at the conventions and underlying ideals of geometry, beauty, measurement, illustration in landscape painting in comparison with an authentic expression of the experience of place. It is my belief that a dented circle or a small gap is more apt in alluding to experiences in places than idealized optical-illusionistic, photographic and mechanistic drawing traditions which render vast images of idealized scenes.



My development from formal concerns with landscape paintings towards an interpretation of place has involved moving away from a preoccupation with rendering an illusionistic likeness of a scene. The impressions that have replaced this activity in my work favor contemplation and attention above tradition and technique. These illusionistic

devices remain important tools in the assessment and translation of the visual experience. I combine them with impulses driven by the activity of painting and the interactivity of color and material. This situation creates an opportunity to tether my work in accessibility while attempting to show a resonance with the subjective psychic experience of places. This bringing-together of observation and invention creates an opportunity to penetrate the typical appearance of an environment by simply looking closely at



it. This work is more faithful to the act of observing the irregularity of the environment and creating a response to the particulate and strange phenomena found there. The poet Forrest Gander refers to this experience in his poem *The Hugeness of That Which Is Missing*:

Call the direction the eye is looking
the line of sight. There
where it grazes the surface
of the visibly surging
without reference to to a field of human presence,
don't look away.

I haven't looked away.

The neurons spike quickly. And the catastrophe
will be consummated even to the end, to the absence of ambiguity,
a new range of feeling. Torn awake. (Gander)



Elsewhere Gander describes the motivation for his almost religious attention and “*listening*” to reality: “Faith for me, derives from the most common revelations. What *is* stands suddenly more revealed. (Gander, *A Faithful Existence: Reading, Memory, and Transcendence*) ” In both instances Gander is describing attention to what is present, even though it is unexceptional, as a point of access for revelation. By not looking away he is “torn awake” to an awareness of the place that he is. The eco-poetics of Gander’s alertness to place resonate with my intention in this body of work. It is through the imperfection and

incompleteness of what *is* that I assemble my take on the profundity of place.

In attending to specific instances and translating these experiences I have landed on an organic abstraction that is indicative of place, space and atmosphere as well as impulses driven by the history of painting and its contemporary context. I utilize asymmetrical, irregular, bent, curved and dented forms to indicate wornness and naturalness. Much of my work displays characteristics of the *wabi* aesthetic of Zen philosophy. These cobbled images and objects are not representational collage, but the conjoining of imagistic elements such as time of day, temperature of light with the immediate concern of the object-qualities of the work itself. This work does not imitate nature or portray tropes of natural subjects, but is formally sympathetic to



instances in the environment whether “natural”, interfered or engineered. My work is about experience above recreation.

By taking, refining and recombining these experiences in my work I metabolize the experience of place, imbuing some additional meaning through this distillation. This is eloquently described in a passage from Rilke’s famous letter to Withold von Hulewicz in which he claims that “it is our task to imprint this provisional, perishable earth so deeply, so patiently and passionately in ourselves that its reality shall arise in us again “invisibly”. We are the bees of the invisible. *Nous butinons éperdument le miel du visible, pour l’accumuler dans la grande ruche d’or de l’Invisible.*” (Rilke)¹

Rilke describes taking instances of the tangible and collecting them in to an amalgamation which speaks to the intangible. Similarly, I attempt to use the provisional elements of places to indicate the ethereal qualities beyond their surfaces. My work has developed an elemental and also celestial tone in the expansive imagery while insisting on the work’s own materiality and the ordinariness of its inspiration. I attempt to address the universal, even cosmic, through the experience of everyday encounters in the very normal world.



¹ “We madly gather the honey of the visible, to store in the great golden hive of the Invisible”



In referring to the gaps, joints, dents and splits of things my work speaks to impermanence, naturalness and imperfection. My work often synecdochically employs a single form as a representation for the material history of each unit and a range of experience. I maintain evidence of the fabrication of my work and the multiplicity of the material in the final form. The constituent pieces and aggregate form are one and several, discrete and whole. This refers to the transitory and strange particularity of observing a certain place. Through a poetic interpretation of subjective observation, I seek to heighten the experience of attentively being some place.

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