

ABSTRACT FIGURATION AND THE LANDSCAPE

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My paintings are surreal and abstracted landscapes inhabited by shapes, piles, objects, and figures, both recognizable and abstracted. The images in my paintings are culled from my memory and often appear as a stream of consciousness. I think of my paintings as autobiographical accumulations of memory.

My first residency at The Fine Arts Work Center was in September 2006. I arrived with my latest paintings to show at the introductory critique. They were abstracted landscapes in subtle grey and aqua tones. The images were often vertical rectangles broken up geometrically. These works were visually balanced, and their compositions made sense from a design standpoint, but they lacked life. I was told that although I handled paint well, the paintings needed to hold up better from a distance—higher contrast and use of darks was advised.

I acclimated to my new studio and surroundings. I absorbed colors and shapes as I walked along the beach, and the fishing wharf. The rich tradition of art in Provincetown interested me. I looked at books, and spoke to gallerists and some local characters. Everything reminded me of my childhood summers spent barefoot on the wharf in the fishing village of Menemsha, Massachusetts. I was born in France. My father was French and my mother was American. Every summer we made a pilgrimage to join my American grandparents in the small cottage by the sea.

My father passed away when I was six, and we moved to America soon after. Nothing was ever the same. I no longer had the strong sense of security that characterized those carefree idyllic summers. Memories of childhood and an intense longing for place are the source of my work.

Over the summers, my sisters and I slept in a cabin next to my grandmother's painting studio. Her paintings and inspirations surrounded us. She was painting throughout the 1930's, '40's and '50's. Her influences were Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, Thomas Hart Benton, Charles Birchfield, Pablo Picasso, Ross Moffett, and Herman Marill, to name a few. Paintings by



Ross Moffett, *Wellfleet Harbor*, 1953, Oil on canvas, 24 x 36"

these artists share common characteristics—the color palette is toned-down, the hues are grayed-out, and large geometric shapes build the compositions. The subject matter is often socialist in nature, depicting semi-abstracted figures working. My grandmother's paintings shared the subdued color palette, and melancholic mood, but her method of abstraction seems more closely allied with cubism. The aesthetics of this period of American and European art is a source of inspiration for my paintings.

In Provincetown I admired the Ross Moffett collection then on view at the Provincetown Art Association. Reconnecting with a seaside fishing village, and the historical paintings that are generated in that environment, affected the paintings I produced in the first residency. I attribute my color palette, use of black, and bold compositions, to those influences.



Hannah Bureau, Perch, Oil on panel, 16 x 20"



Hannah Bureau, Passager, Oil on canvas, 16 x 20"

That September, I was also interested in developing sculptural form in my paintings. I was instructed to look at Fernand Léger and Stuart Davis for examples of solid three-dimensional masses within a flat picture plane. I continually struggled with how to capture in my paintings the humor and whimsy found in my illustrations. One of our visiting critics, Julie Heffernan, suggested I look up Amy Sillman. Through that inquiry I found other contemporary artists with whom I felt a kinship, or whose work interested me: Keegan McHargue, Cecily Brown, Eric Sall, Charline von Heyl, and Erica Svec.

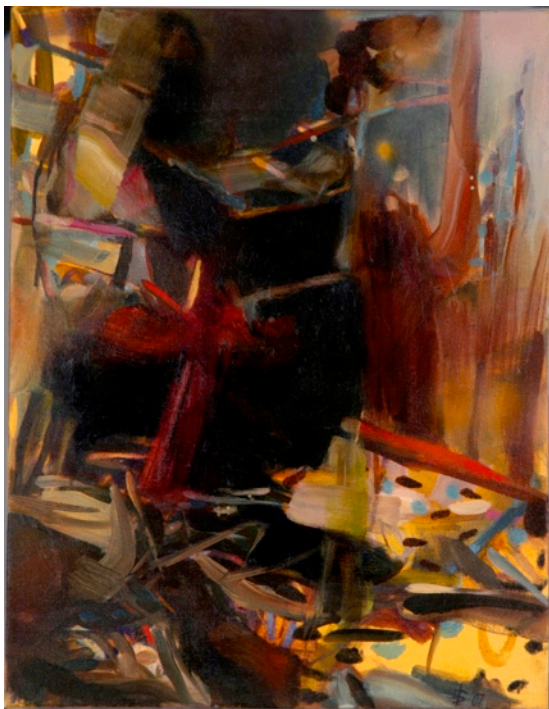
I saw the Cecily Brown Show at the Museum of Fine Arts in November 2006. I was amazed by her facile way of manipulating paint. She embraces every attribute of the expressive and tactile medium. She bravely attacks her large-scale canvases. Brown often alludes to art history in her work. Her pastoral scenes, which depict trees and landscape surrounding fragmented figures, recall compositions by Fragonard, Titian, Tinteretto, Goya, and Reubens. The figures, though deconstructed and blended into the painting as a whole, provide an anchor for the overall sense of scale and place. In his article *Cecily Brown* in *Art Forum*, Barry Schwabsky makes observations about Brown's methods of Abstraction. "Brown's point, I suppose, is that paintings, like people, have multiple points of entry. She seems to be coming around to the abstractionists' insinuation that a painting without fixed imagery, while open to figurative suggestions, might allow for even more ways in."¹ Schwabsky points out that the intimation of observed imagery in Brown's paintings allows the viewer to identify with recognizable subject matter without becoming alienated by its specificity or overt figuration.

I was greatly inspired by Cecile Brown's paint handling, and began experimenting with mark making. I tried to grow my vocabulary of paint application and marks. I used a brush, and a palette knife. I dripped, splattered, and poured. I decided which two colors blended in a harmonious way on my brush, and noted the combination on a chart: "Mixes well with...." I enjoyed developing my language and practicing my "alphabet." Recognizable elements, spaces, or subject matter, often developed in each painting. Sometimes I would pursue them, but mostly I preferred to remain non-objective. I was less concerned with imagery than with the exploration of material and language. Gerhard Richter's quote from 1982 aptly verbalizes my thoughts at the time: "Abstract Pictures are fictitious models because they illustrate a reality that we can neither see nor describe, but whose existence we can infer.... With abstract painting we created for ourselves a better possibility of approaching what is non-visual and incomprehensible, because it portrays nothing directly visually with all the means available to art."² Like Richter I believe that abstraction as a visual language is capable of communicate what we cannot describe.

Although my mark making developed over the winter, my paintings seemed like fragments of larger paintings. I could not base a body of work on gesture alone. I had

been in dialog with formal abstract issues, but was not satisfied with non-objective, lyrical abstraction alone. I became interested in laundry lines as a subject. Laundry lines are compelling as public portraits of otherwise private families. Visually, I am drawn to the bold geometric shapes of the clothing, which breaks up the visual plane into shallow and deep space. The clothing is a flat plain that interrupts the illusion of distance, and frames the landscape behind. I tried to plan a few paintings around photographs of this subject, but the paintings were static and unimaginative. I had become attached to a final image at the expense of the process. Through this experience I observed how essential exploration and discovery are to my process of working.

When I returned from residency I revisited my passion for landscape painting. I set up a traveling plain-air easel and went into the woods. Before heading out each day I prepared a few canvases in the studio using an airbrush. I discovered that I liked the contrast of layering oil paint over the soft airbrushed background. This technique allows for a greater diversity of marks and an illusion of deep space. I employed this method over the summer and produced a few dark and moody paintings of the woods.



Hannah Bureau, *Red Guardian*, Oil on canvas, 20 x 16"



Hannah Bureau, *After The Rain*, Oil on panel, 18 x 18"

Working from observation generated new imagery, but also posed its own challenge. Ideally, when working from observation, I loosely interpret what I see and try to render the subject in a way that gives me the feeling or mood of what I've observed. Often, however, painting from life results in a tight, academic-looking exercise. In close observation I am reminded of my background as an illustrator and I lose the inspiration. My true passion comes from experimenting with how far removed or reduced from the actual subject I can get, while still capturing its expression. My method of abstraction moves the landscape beyond a comfortable pictorial illusion, and puts the viewer in a less controlled environment. My best work comes from painting the landscape while simultaneously pursuing images within my imagination. Philip Guston verbalizes the experience of working from within the mind in this expert: "I think that probably the most potent desire for a painter, an image maker, is to see it. To see what the mind can think and imagine, to realize it for oneself, through oneself, as concretely as possible."³

For the September residency, I was intent on painting larger landscapes. As I mixed up my paints I became focused on the medium of paint. I wanted thick, juicy, complex, and varied marks. I wanted the paint to pile up in thick impasto. Exploring the possibilities inherent in oil paint led to literal forms of accumulation. "Piles" appeared in my work, often taking the form of a heap or mound of objects painted with cluttered marks. I was affected by images of landfills, and inspired by the challenge of transforming the environmental atrocities into beautiful paintings with the use of paint and color. I was intrigued by the fact that the oily, messy, toxic paint could be a literal depiction of an oozing, mess. Brushstrokes, colors, themes, memories, and moods were all layered onto one another physically and metaphorically. The piles ended up being a device; a structure on which I could experiment with marks.



Hannah Bureau, *Aggregate*, Oil on canvas, 36 x 36"

I really noticed the importance of re-working a painting beyond the first sitting. After making initial marks I wait until the painting is dry and then add more layers. In this way I am able to gather and pile up painterly strokes. I do this by way of a call and response. The first mark, leads me to make a corresponding mark somewhere else on the canvas. During this process I decide whether one stroke stays or becomes the base for other strokes. The layering sometimes gets messy and muddy, at which point I sand down the area that has been over painted. Brush strokes on top of one another create new marks that lead the painting in different directions.

I arrive at my color palate in much the same way of accumulating. I blend a color with wet paint that has already been applied, and a new combination is made. Colors join together and create an unintentional "story" or harmony that I pursue by adding analogous and complimentary colors. I think about formal relationships, composition, design, and graphic organization. I work on balancing or unbalancing certain elements. If there is a warm green, I might add a cool green. If there is a big shape, the painting will call for smaller shapes. I am always analyzing the works in this way, and making specific and intentional choices based on my assessment of what feels aesthetically satisfying. I say satisfying rather than aesthetically pleasing, because I am equally engaged when a painting is challenging to look at. I try to see beyond the harmonious, seeking instead to create works that may be uncomfortable. I am in search of the border between dissonance and harmony. Somehow this tenuous line excites me because by treading on it I am discovering the characteristics inherent in both.

The scale of my work tends to be small, 16x20 or 12x12 for example. I gravitate towards this size because it feels accessible, natural, and intimate. I sometimes think this is a domestic scale, in that one might have a similar relationship to a window, or piece of furniture. The paintings are human sized, body sized. This scale captures a bit of the wild and tames it.

After the residency, I was interested in transitioning from the accumulated pile back to the landscape. The piles of trash, though beautiful, have an aspect of irony that undermines my sense of wonderment of the world. I wanted to return to painting places remembered and imagined, and I was interested to see how my developed

mark making might inform the new paintings. A few paintings emerged that bridge a central pile and a pictorial landscape. I learned through these transitional paintings that I tended to depict the piles myopically, that is, from the same vantage point. Like an icon or classic portrait painting, objects in the front were consistently given more importance. George Creamer had often commented that my work had a central protagonist, which occupied most of the canvas while the corners and backgrounds were less considered. I wondered what would happen if I parted the mass and could see through it. I made a few paintings that explored this idea. I used airbrush as a background to increase the sense of space and distance. Dark colors piled up in the middle of my canvas got pushed to the edges of the picture, and light came from the center of the image. The background slowly became the focal point of the painting rather than the afterthought supporting the central image.



*Hannah Bureau, We Two Parted,
Oil on canvas, 16 x 20"*

I became interested in the characteristics of the bare canvas, and wondered if an area of canvas with no accumulation of paint could be as significant to the overall image as an area of heavy impasto? Would a "negative space" carry weight, and how would this economical use of paint affect the sense of pictorial space? I explored other ways of achieving illusionistic space and employed these recognized techniques in my work. For example, I used cool colors to recede, and higher contrasts to pop forward. I varied size relationships, and made use of atmospheric perspective. I also organized my compositions differently. I began to stack and overlap motifs. Pierre Bonnard, Edouard Vuillard, and Paul Cézanne are three artists that I looked at in search of alternative ways of depicting space. Their paintings don't operate in logical single point perspective. Elements are flatly stacked upon one another and organized within the frame of the rectangular canvas. Cezanne interpreted three-dimensionality by breaking his sub-

jects down to their essential shapes, and painting them as if seen from multiple perspectives. These three artists are decisively modernist, in that their treatment of brushstroke and subject matter draws attention to the surface of the canvas and the picture plane. "The paradox which animates Cézanne's painting lies in the gap between two worlds, on the one hand, the three-dimensional world which is the scene for our activities and the limitless object of our vision, on the other the bounded two-dimensional canvas, within the literal edges of which any transcription of that world must be adjusted. The almost unrealizable aim will be that the painting—as a thing in itself—should be both original in the sense of faithfully responsive to the individual experience of the world, and self-sufficient as an achieved and unavoidably flat decorative whole."⁴ I am closely allied to this tradition of modernism, yet I want my paintings to reach beyond the self-critical and address broader concerns.

In the second May residency I began to make triptychs. Viewing my painting as part of a whole helped me imagine the space beyond the edges of my canvas, and got me out of the habitual methods by which I had been arriving at a composition. I learned to trick myself out of my routine. I observed nature, and analyzed the unusual organization of elements. Hans Hofmann wrote: "An artist must look to nature for the essence of space—but appearance must be thoroughly understood. Space was never a static thing, but alive, and its life can be felt in the rhythm in which everything in a visual ensemble exists. Nature is not limited to the objects we see—but everything in nature offers the possibility of creative transformation, depending upon the sensibility of the artist."⁵

I wanted to see more broadly. The realization that I had seen myopically motivated me to seek out the most spacious and expansive of landscapes paintings. I looked at paintings influenced by Romanticism such as The Hudson River School—Albert Bierstadt, Frederic Edwin Church, and Thomas Cole. These paintings are awe-inspiring, and so beautiful as to almost be kitsch. They are idealized beauty, ordered and harmonious. I could never achieve this level of proficiency in landscape painting, nor would I want my paintings to be so over-the-top sublime, but I am interested in utilizing this genre as a means to draw our attention to our present day relationship with nature. I associate these spectacular landscapes with an historical period of exploring, and set-

ting undiscovered territory. The paintings clearly show reverence for the magnificence and mysteries of nature, and man's relationship with it. Such scenes evocative of nature in a pristine uninhabited state become symbolically important to our modern day. I use the idea of this time period as a metaphorical device, a trope to remind us of our present day environmental call to action. I believe that images of the natural awe and beauty of landscape are significant to contemporary art today. We have seen the figure return in painting, and now it is time to bring back the landscape in a bigger way.

There are a number of landscape painters that I am influenced by. I greatly admire Joan Mitchell, Richard Diebenkorn, Gregory Amenoff, Thomas Noskowsky, and Joan Snyder. Gregory Amenoff speaks eloquently about his interest in landscape painting. "Because landscape generally has a fixed point of view, there is clearly a reference to an observer experiencing this space, whether it is the artist or the viewer. In that way, landscape becomes an extension of consciousness of the observer. It becomes a metaphor for the separation between the exterior and the interior."⁶ I agree with Amenoff's suggestion that landscape paintings become an extension of the viewer's consciousness. Unlike Amenoff, however, I believe paintings are a metaphor for the unification between the exterior and the interior.

Titles are very important to the mood of my paintings. My titles often suggest the presence of humans within the world I create. For example, I recently named a piece Picnic in the Park. This is not a figurative painting, but the title suggests it is based on the experience of humans having been in contact with the landscape. A theme has evolved in a few of my paintings along the same lines. I have titled these paintings Guardian 1,2 or 3. In these paintings there is a presence depicted within the landscape, or forest scene. It is the hint of a figurative element without overt figuration. The presence is symbolic and allegorical, and explores a spiritual relationship I have with my understanding of the natural order of things. One of the Hudson River School painters, Asher Brown Durand, wrote about something similar, and put it this way: "The true province of Landscape Art is the representation of the work of God in the visible creation." If I always tried to achieve this lofty a goal of landscape painting, I would never be finished with a painting. I am satisfied with finishing a painting when I know I have hit some emotional truth, about the place or the mood—real or imagined.

My work is a pastiche of contemporary influences as well. I remember the exact color combinations of the pattern on a dress in a store window. Similarly, motifs and shapes emerge in my paintings that I absorb from visual themes and memes in popular culture. Some of this imagery appears in my paintings by way of a stream-of-consciousness expression. I would like to include more repeated imagery in my paintings, like a chorus refrain, echo, or hiccup. I would also like to add more non-sequiturs—de-contextualized fragments of images and random, illogically placed motifs that force the viewer to take a second look. The impulse for adding small interruptions, and illogical elements stems from a desire to control the experience of viewing the painting. I use this as a device to re-direct the focus of the painting, or the attention of the viewer back onto the visual plane of the canvas. It is a means of arriving at an exaggerated interpretation of modernism, but also, my experience has often been that when I disengage from what is recognizable or can be named, I can really feel it. Some examples of these devices in my most recent paintings are a wide swath of green paint that occupies one third of the canvas, or a circle of built up paint in a candy color that interrupts the experience of the landscape illusion.



Hannah Bureau, *Apple Picking*, Oil on canvas, 12 x 12"



Hannah Bureau, *Bee Keeper*, Oil on canvas, 20 x 16"

My paintings are sometimes very busy. The chaotic marks and intuitive paint handling externalize a feeling of positive energy and enthusiasm, while also manifesting the difficulty I feel keeping all my responsibilities in order. Imprinted imagery from daily life become familiar shapes and color combinations. I am creating an imaginary space where objects, figures, the landscape, and memories can interact with each other and become familiar beings or old friends. In my painted world I want things to interact, cluster together, overlap, pile-up, and touch each other.

In the recent animated Pixar movie Wall-e, live-action images of a verdant and fertile earth are broadcast to the human civilization of the future that had been living in space for 700 years. The earth had become uninhabitable due to pollution and garbage, and humans sought refuge in space. The live-action clips are mini, idealized glimpses of our planet. The color and quality of the film in the clips is suggestive of the 1970's. The live action seems so kitschy when paired with the pseudo-reality of the animation. As part of the generation growing up in the late 1970's I experience the clips as retro analogue memories. I had never seen the images, but was at once familiar with them. They simultaneously create longing for the past, interest in the fanciful animation, and awe in the natural world. I would like my paintings to elicit a similar range of feelings.

1. Barry Schwabsky, "Cecily Brown," *ArtForum* (April, 2000),
2. Gerhard Richter, London, Tate Gallery, 1991
3. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, eds., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artist's Writings* (University of California Press, 1996) p.250
4. Francis Frascina, et al., *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting In The Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 213.
5. Hans Hofmann, *The Color Problem in Pure Painting- Its Creative Origin*.
Notes on Abstraction published in *Arts Magazine*, New York, Vol. 61, June 1987
6. Debra Bricker Balken *An Interview with Gregory Amenoff*
The Aesthetics of Excess, or, Anarchy, and Walking the Line Between the Beautiful and the Vulgar, 1999