

Seeing Outside

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I. Painting as Exploration

*“Walking is a mode of making the world as well as being in it. Thus the walking body can be traced in the places it has made; paths parks and sidewalks are traces of the acting out of imagination and desire... Walking shares with making and working that crucial element of engagement of the body and mind with the world, of knowing the world through the body and the body through the world.” –
Rebecca Solnit¹*

Throughout history, wandering was not a way to waste time, but something people did for the purpose of discovery. When I go outside to look for new things to paint, or familiar things to see in new ways, I am aware I am not embarking on a journey as consequential as the Mayflower. However, the main reason I do go outside is to discover. The things I find are familiar and small, seemingly insignificant when compared to discovering a new nation or an unknown land. A deformed tree, falling leaves, markings of the people who have been there before, are the things that peak my interest when I am exploring. Paul Nabhan notices, “how much time adults spend scanning the landscape for picturesque panoramas and scenic overlooks. While the kids were on their hands and knees, engaged with what was immediately before them, we adults traveled by abstraction.”² With this in mind, I want to go back to looking at my immediate surroundings with that sense of wonderment I have lost over time. I want my paintings to capture the excitement and energy a child would have when confronting the immediate world.

Part of my responsibility as a painter is to communicate my visual experiences with others. My paintings are rooted in reality, presenting the viewer with places and

¹ Solnit, Wanderlust 29.

² Solnit, Field Guide 39.

objects they may have otherwise taken for granted during a walk outside. There are innumerable distractions keeping people inside now. With my paintings I am bringing people back outside, even if they are looking at them inside on a gallery wall.



Fig 1

II. Landscape Painting Over Time

Until the Renaissance, landscape painting was seen as a background. Albrecht Durer was the first artist to depict the landscape as the main subject during his first trip to Italy in 1495, perhaps to get a better understanding of his new surroundings, or as a form of escape from what he had experienced in Germany. In 17th century Holland, after a religious war came the Age of Observation: "...the Dutch felt the need of recognizable, unidealistic views of their own country, the character of which

they had fought so hard to defend.”³ For John Constable, “The paintings of a landscape conceived in the spirit of humble truth, could be a way of conveying moral ideas.”⁴ Prior to 1860 in France, landscape painting was academically disrespected, and to have the landscape as your subject was the greatest declaration of a desire for freedom an artist could make.⁵ In 19th century America, plein air work took on a special significance where the native landscape was infused with moral, spiritual, and nationalistic values. Such reverent interpretations of American scenery placed a premium on truth in representation.⁶ Influenced by Hudson River School Painters, the contemporary painter Lisa Sanditz deals with globalization, focusing on China’s single industry cities. In her paintings, [Fig 1], the natural landscape collides with the industrial, calling attention to the new and garish through color.⁷ Approaching her subject in a personal, rather than documentary manner, she expresses what she is seeing, thinking and feeling without making any grandiose claims.⁸

³ Clarke, 59.

⁴ Ibid, 151.

⁵ Champa, 25.

⁶ Sherry, 1.

⁷ Pulimood, 1.

⁸ Franzen, 7.



Fig 2

III. Experiencing Space Directly

“There are advantages to painting outside... There’s a kind of urgency about what you’re doing that your mind can’t wander. Or if it wanders you’re still painting with your mind wandering, and you realize later what you’re doing. It’s good to be outside.” - Lois Dodd⁹

I begin by going outside and making *plein air* paintings. I take these small works, photographs of these areas, and sketches back to the studio. Here, larger paintings are composed based on memories, the palette, and compositions of my references. This first step is not very different from the process of 19th Century American painters, but the latter is more connected with Jean Baptiste-Camille Corot’s.

Thomas Cole’s early style “reflected his genuine appreciation for the beauty of the American wilderness, unspoilt by commercial development or tourism, whereas his later, more grandiose interpretations, reflected his fear of the clash

⁹ Maynes.

between this pure nature and the aggressive American materialism which he was afraid would gobble it up. His allegorical works, *The Course of Empire* (1836) and *The Voyage of Life* (1839-40) predicted the rise and fall of American culture.”¹⁰

Like Cole and other 19th century painters, my *plein air* paintings are formal investigations, a way of understanding the space I am depicting. Working quickly to get these noticed moments down before the light changes, before a storm comes, or before a dramatic shift in temperature forces me inside, the on-site paintings have a speed of necessity. However, in contrast to Cole, I do not feel that I have to insert an overarching theme of spirituality or warning of the apocalypse. The studio is a way of remembering the scene, accentuating the formal absurdities of a certain tree that peaked my interest. In the studio I push these natural oddities to the point where they become the subject of the large works.

Corot would work outside on his sketches, and bring them inside to create more ambitious studio compositions. Diderot said, “Through the sketch the painter’s very soul is poured through the canvas.”¹¹ Many Neo-classical landscapists drew and painted from nature extensively in Italy. Nevertheless, their outdoor work played no role in their studio routine, as though an impenetrable barrier existed between them. Though he was never content with a sketch made in haste,¹² Corot’s sketches were essential to the development of his studio practice. The two paintings Corot contributed to the Salon of 1827 were conceptually conventional, but they display the immediacy of natural observation that none of his masters had achieved in the

¹⁰ Thomas Cole.

¹¹ Galassi, 46.

¹² Ibid, 67.

finished work.¹³ For me, bringing in the same sense of urgency that exists when painting outdoors inside for the viewer is crucial to the studio paintings. In Corot's paintings, touch is very important. The landscape is a domain for poetry and music, feeling is organized via landscape imagining in such a way as to permit free sensation.¹⁴ There was no grand scheme with Corot, it was the music of Mozart and Beethoven that made him paint pictures the way he did. It is that same desire to translate emotion through the landscape, which drives my paintings.

IV. Painting and Me

*"Painters are lucky that they see things. Not everybody seems to see the world that they live in. I feel like I can see things, so that's where it starts."*¹⁵ - Lois Dodd

I first started painting on a study abroad program in Sorrento, Italy. I became fascinated with laundry hanging out the window as a representation of a cultural difference within the European landscape. Formally, I was drawn to the geometries the windows, clothing, and shadows created. Making quick, *plein air* paintings in this landscape became a way for me to learn more about this new place while getting a better handle on the medium.

When I came to Rutgers, I was trying to make paintings that were a challenge to me. I thought a visible struggle on the canvas combined with strange invented

¹³ Ibid, 46.

¹⁴ Kermit, 30.

¹⁵ Maynes.

landscapes would describe the current status of the environment. Wanting to show a vast expanse of land, I chose to paint aerial views, some imaginary, some from a model, some from Google Earth, all of which I had no real attachment to.

The move from the model was one of necessity. I felt I did not know enough about the environments I was trying to represent. The way sunlight falls on a vast open landscape is very different from the way a spotlight hits a table-top model. Everything about these paintings seemed artificial. Because the space depicted was fabricated, the message felt like a parody, and not a genuine reaction to the political problems I was trying so hard to make paintings about. The paintings made from the model generated a few common responses; this was a comment on the state of the environment, on urbanization and/or on waste. Often though, when I was in the studio I let the message fade and the painting take over, and so these immediate conclusions were too limiting. The viewer was getting the message, but not talking about the paintings.

With the tree paintings, I have been focusing on form, shape, color and movement. By making scenes more connected with reality and nature, the paintings are more open ended. Their subject becomes language, history, relationships, emotions, spaces of meditation; they can be any number of things.

Two things made me realize I needed to spend more time looking and experiencing spaces directly to make my paintings more honest. The first was during a visit to Lois Dodd's studio. She said she would hear of a planned fire, or know a frozen river is starting to break up and rush to the scene in order to capture the event on her canvas. Though she may view herself as a sort of journalist with a paintbrush,

Dodd's most successful works transcend the documentary. For example, in [Fig 3] heat radiates from the surface of the linen it is painted on. While the fire feels so real, there is an abstract quality about the smoke that both forms and destroys the roofs at the same time. Lois Dodd stands at purposeful distance from the scene. Details like shutters, windowsills, doorknobs, everything that makes a house a home, are intentionally omitted, implying this house has been abandoned. Although I feel the fire and the smoke forcing the house to the point of non-existence, I have no sense of remorse or nostalgia. Knowing this about Dodd's work, I approach my own in a less pragmatic way, focusing more on the poetry within the space, and my personal response to it.



Fig. 3

A few weeks after meeting Lois Dodd, I saw a trailer for Disney's True Life Adventure Series (which is essentially a Planet Earth like documentary series), called "Oceans". Walt Disney describes his inspiration for the series, "Nature writes the

screenplays and the real animals are often more surprising than the antics we dream up for our cartoon characters.” I was spending all my time fabricating made up landscapes in order to make a grand statement that I ignored the naturally occurring absurdities in nature, just waiting to be painted.

Returning to my roots, making *plein air* studies, informed my studio practice in a new and fresh way. Bringing in air and excitement made the studio paintings more experiential. The scale of the work is more or less life size, which provides a physical space for the viewer to enter. It is essential that the paintings in the studio capture the energy and pleasure of being within the spaces depicted. Constable had a deep understanding of the tradition of European landscape painting and that is why he was able to present the quality of normal observation without the painful banality of later realists.¹⁶ In no way do I want a stale image, which is the reason why I apply paint in a loose, fluid manner. I believe the energy should come from the medium as much as the image.

I want the viewer to feel that they have stumbled upon this particular spot in the woods and they are a part of this space. I begin responding formally, moving my brush around the surface to describe the wildness of twisted, fallen branches. [Fig. 4] Navigating these paintings should be a similar experience to walking through the woods; discovering the abstractions found in nature, the flicker of the light, the contrast between the warmth of the ground with the cool grey tree trunks. It should not just be a visual experience, but a sense of actually being there within this space.¹⁷

¹⁶ Clarke, 148.

¹⁷ Kreimer, 152.



Fig. 4

V. Landscape Politics

“To be in the woods was not to be out of politics.” – Rebecca Solnit¹⁸

My first thought when I started going outside was to seek out areas where man’s disregard for nature was apparent. I began at a construction site and then a littered park, looking for areas where the human footprint was obvious. Distracted by the hustle and bustle of some of these spaces, in search of the same solitude I would find locked in my studio, I started going off the trails in Rutgers Gardens. Alone in the woods, I realized how strange and unpredictable nature can be. Isolating the image of one broken tree limb had the power to convey a sense of seclusion and loneliness, feelings I was unable to capture in previous paintings.

¹⁸ Booksmith.

Dona Nelson spoke at Rutgers in 2009, and quoted DeKooning in her talk, saying, “A painting is never going to change the world.” This relieved me from the pressure I was putting on myself to make politically charged landscapes. Now the work became about my interactions with these moments in specific spaces. “How shall I describe it? - A door opens, a door shuts. In between you have had a glimpse: a garden, a person, a rainstorm, a dragonfly, a heart, a city...”¹⁹ That is what *Puddle*, [Fig 5], is for me. In this painting of nothingness, the floating twigs and the unidentifiable white form in the near center of the frame create a moment of contemplation and meditation within this space.



Fig. 5

¹⁹ Plath, 62.

VI. Missing Persons

David Hockney describes his latest series of paintings of the East Yorkshire countryside, as figure paintings, the viewer being the figure in the paintings. With the incorporation of the tree markings in my newest body of work, the figure becomes present without actually being there. The viewer entering this space immediately gets a sense of who has been here before her. The vertical orientation of the canvases along with the scale and shape of the trees allow for them to act as a surrogate for the figure, and I hope my play with color and space present them as individual characters within a forest of many others. “Landscape can be humanized in all kinds of funny ways. It can be weirdly personified, as in that blurred blob. Or, again, where human designers – gardeners, developers – have materially put their stamp...”²⁰ Sylvia Plimack Mangold compares her paintings of trees to self-portraits saying, “The maple tree is like a self portrait, a mirror of time.”²¹

The lack of a physical figure in my painting goes back to being alone in the woods and seeing things for the first time. Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote about walking saying, “Never did I think so much, exist so vividly, and experience so much, never have I been so much myself – if I may use that expression – as in the journeys I have taken alone and on foot...”²² Incorporating a figure within these compositions

²⁰ Lubbock, 11.

²¹ Finholt, 5.

²² Solnit, *Wanderlust* 19.

would completely alter the sense of scale and remove the sense of solitude that can inspire the kind of thought and feelings Rousseau wrote about.



Fig 6

VII. Particular Places

These paintings all represent liminal space, a familiar kind of wilderness, the place where people have stopped to make their mark before turning back. It is a space of both escape and comfort. Looking at these paintings you can imagine if you were to turn around, you would still be able to see the outline of your house in the distance. Because of this middle ground between being home and being lost, it seems only natural that there be territorial marks at these locations. There is a sense of ownership; they are putting their flag in the ground, saying “I was here first.” Also, there is a desire for immortality, as if these people knew this tree would last longer than they

would, and they have to leave something so their memory is not lost. The carvings are important not only because they describe this threshold, but also the specific people who come and spend time here. They mark feelings that have long since changed or been lost. The landscape now acting as a metaphor for relationships; a relationship between a person and the space she is occupying, a relationship between two people, a current relationship, a relationship long since dissolved, a relationship between man and the natural environment. I want my paintings to become more than just comments on the current state of the landscape, which is how my work differs from artists such as Neil Welliver and Alex Katz. They are investigations of space and self, moments of discovery, loneliness and joy.



Fig. 7

VIII. Looking Ahead

Describing Lois Dodd's work, Julian Kreimer says her "keen awareness of physical surfaces and light borne impressions can tell us more about what's out in the world." I want my work to have that same sense of discovery for viewers, for them to notice new things each time they look at the paintings, and for myself to learn something more about the world when I am making them.

I would like to continue my investigation and exploration with the landscape. Specifically, I would like to go to places less traveled. I am interested in seeing places where the human footprint is not yet as evident. I am thinking specifically about rainforests, jungles and deserts. Where the palette and the conditions are so foreign that they will yield very different results not only in the final pieces, but also in the making of the plein air studies.

List of Illustrations

Fig 1. *LEN Loves*, oil on canvas, 54 x 72 inches, 2010

Fig 2. Lisa Sanditz, *The Road to Decoration City*, acrylic on linen, 2008

Fig 3. Lois Dodd, *Burning House, Yellow Smoke*, oil on linen, 2007

Fig 4. *Untitled*, oil on linen, 59 x 72 inches, 2009

Fig 5. *Puddle*, oil on linen, 48 x 48 inches, 2009

Fig 6. Illustration found on page 39 of Shel Silverstein's The Giving Tree.

Illustration by Shel Silverstein, Harper and Row, 1964.

Fig 7. *Marriage Tree*, oil on canvas, 48 x 72 inches, 2010

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