

The World Outside: “Landscapes” at Marlborough Chelsea

By Peter Malone

Landscapes at Marlborough Chelsea

Organized by Jake Palmert and Nolan Simon

June 23 to July 29, 2016

545 West 25th Street (between 10th and 11th avenues)

New York, 212 463 8634



Installation view, “Landscape,” 2016, at Marlborough Chelsea. Courtesy of the gallery.

Art dealer Jake Palmert and painter Nolan Simon, both from a thriving Midwest art scene, have put together a group show this July that is worth a stroll over to Marlborough Chelsea. Called simply “Landscapes,” its uncomplicated title implies, misleadingly as it turns out, a conventional look at a conventional genre.

The key sentence in a densely formulated curatorial statement doubling as a press release explains how they sought to “...tease out the developments in visual culture that have so fundamentally realigned relations between the artist and the art work, art’s content to its audience, and the art-world to society at large.” Despite the somewhat muddled argument that follows this sweeping outline, Palmert and Simon’s choices for the exhibition were certainly adventurous, offering juxtapositions highlighting the many intriguing dilemmas facing those concerned not just with landscape, but with any basic genre’s

survivability in a whirlpool of media-soaked contemporary art.

The theme I gathered from the selection was how much and how permanent are the changes to the landscape genre that are hinted at in the show. What effect can radical change have on a genre that has been both flexible and consistent for several centuries? For instance, a stark and cold vision of the Himalayas called *View of Nepal* (2010), by photo-realist founding father Richard Estes, hangs next to a pair of untitled and clearly kitschy forest scenes that Ull Hohn created in the 1990s as an overtly ironic take on the Bob Ross painting method. Placing Hohn's jarring cultural critique beside Estes's subtle dissociation from traditional realism reinvigorates an early judgment that Estes was primarily concerned with the media properties of the photographic image. Palmert and Simon characterize this aspect of Estes's work as "National Geographic." But does their media metaphor explain Estes's only motivation? It's worth noting that Estes's recent canvases remain unpopulated, carrying over a feature of his work that dates back to his often depopulated views of upper Broadway in the late 1960s. Could it be that his figureless sensibility, which has deep roots in 19th century American landscape painting, led him to the naturally barren landscapes at the Earth's poles? And if so, is this not a development one might associate with a conventional landscape approach, seeking views to match a sensibility?



Richard Estes, *View in Nepal*, 2010. Oil on canvas, 32 x 43 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Marlborough Chelsea.

How often such questions arise in "Landscapes" is a function of the curators' having admirably avoided the easier path of choosing exclusively from artists dedicated to painting's realignment (their term, not mine) and wisely including less radical examples of the genre. Rackstraw Downes's *Presidio: In the Sand Hills Looking West with ATV Tracks & Cell Tower* (2012) fits the show's thesis to the extent that it is a view of a somewhat industrialized location. However, the expansive and near greedy absorption of a site that has long been Downes's *métier*, is also one of the older and more sustaining tropes of landscape painting. It is no surprise to me that his feeling for landscape as open space is unmatched in this show.



John Marin, *Summer*, 1913. Watercolor on paper, 14 3/4 X 17 3/4 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Marlborough Chelsea.

The conceptual touchstone of the exhibition is Simon's own work, of which there are three examples around the gallery. They range from blatantly illustrative of the idea of a "...discourse on truth as a distorted image of itself," as in *Unisex Medium* (2016), to *New Location* (2016) where Simon is at his best, offering an interior looking out onto a courtyard with the upper windows revealing a partial view of the walls surrounding the space, while the lower windows replace the courtyard with a shepherd and a flock of sheep surrounded by green mountains. Why he chose *May in*

Mount Carmel, Texas (2016) as his third entry is difficult to assess. It is as unpretentious a landscape as one can imagine, though its unadventurous color and brush handling exemplify Simon's stated determination to keep the viewer's focus on idea over execution.

A few notable inclusions seem, with respect to the exhibition's thesis, neutral at best. An aptly seasonal watercolor called *Summer* (1913) lets John Marin hold the line on landscape as a concentrated study of nature; John Miller's *Untitled* (1984) Fauvist inspired waterfall is both lively and benignly distant from its subject; and FLAME's beach scene is vaguely Picasso-like acrobats (or perhaps Dali-like self-immolating hulks). All three strive to complete the landscape context that serves as a counterpoint to the more radical entries. FLAME, possibly a reference to the high-end video editing program of the same name, serves here as a moniker for a collaboration between multi-media artists Taslima Ahmed and Manuel Gnam, whose computer graphic vision, though technically exotic, maintains a conventional sense of space.

I read Sylvia Pilmack Mangold's *Untitled (yellow painting)* (1977) as a provisional work that ended up in a strange place. Cropped with masking tape, perhaps as an adjustment to a reconsideration of its original idea, the outer canvas received several shades of yellow before the artist either gave up on it or found its unfinished look appealing. The latter is more likely, as Mangold actually completed a series of similar canvases in the mid-1970s.

Alex Katz's *North 2* (2015) could be construed as a view from the artist's studio. It has that sense of the rediscovery of an overly familiar sight. With its blank wall punctured by windows, uniform in appearance but for one, it echoes the sunlit cheerlessness of Edward Hopper's city views. Moreover, hinting at the poetry of old age — looking to the cold north (could Estes be doing the same thing?) — it brings a poignant human vulnerability to the show's otherwise cerebral orientation.

Paintings by several artists in the show suffer from not having enough examples available to provide more than a glimpse of each artist's unique conceptual framework. Assuming these frameworks were the essential element for their inclusion in the show, their sparse representation inadvertently pointed to the weakness of their individual pieces. These include Keith Mayerson, Paul Thek and Mary Ann Aitken. In contemplating Aitken's painterly riffs on billboards, Thek's watercolors, and Mayerson's *Grand Canyon* (2016), it became obvious that each needed a fuller representation of their self-defined contexts.

John Kelsey's four watercolors are focused on landscapes surrounding politically charged institutional buildings, including an Apple Data Center in North Carolina, an NSA building in Utah, the VMWare Data Center in Washington State, and an unidentified Google facility. As a side note, Google's undisclosed location infers that Kelsey feels Google to be most ubiquitously threatening of the lot — a consistent position considering the show's focus on media imagery. As watercolors they are nothing special, but the artist's allegiance to disaffection, expressed in his mounting and framing each piece on a cool aluminum sheet, comes through loud and clear.



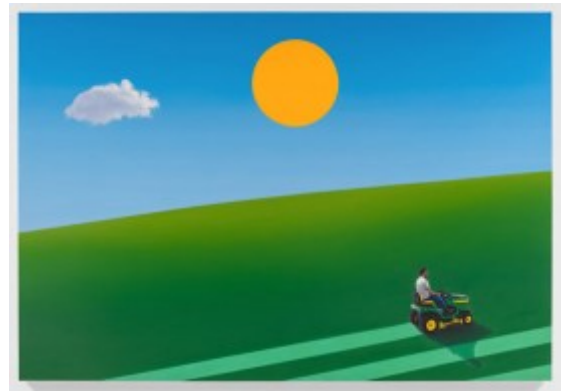
Keith Mayerson, *Grand Canyon*, 2016. Oil on linen, 50 X 70 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Marlborough Chelsea.

Mathew Cerletty's *Almost Done* (2015), a witty rendering of a lawn mower's progress across a carpet-smooth hillside, makes for quite a contrast to Jeanette Mundt's *Heroin: Cape Cod, USA* paintings, made this year. Underscoring a grim subject — the

paintings were inspired by the HBO documentary of the same name — each canvas offers a somber bluish New England landscape, some with narrow strokes of white scattered across the surface in a manner similar to Van Gogh's attempts at painting rain. In an exhibition bent on addressing painting and media imagery, Mundt's landscapes are a perfect fit. How they address the disturbing subject of drug addiction is less clear.

Marring an otherwise thoughtful selection is the seemingly transparent decision to include a work by radical feminist Betty Tompkins. Though an argument can be made for a nude in a landscape context —Titian, Giorgione, Joan Semmel, Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of the World* (1866) — Tompkins's uncompromising *Cunt Painting #9* (2008) is fiercely feminist, and in this exhibition shows just how stubbornly her work resists attempts to transpose its intensity to a disinterested environment.

Considering that the exhibition was limited for the most part to Marlborough's holdings, I thought the show managed to address its subject broadly and with imagination. Painting's current struggles with a welcome rebirth of subject matter is the story of the decade, and how this story unfolds, specifically how the merging of media imagery with fundamental genres like landscape resolves itself, will likely remain the heart of the narrative.



Mathew Cerletty, *Almost Done 2*, 2015. Oil on canvas, 48 X 70 X 1 1/4 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Marlborough Chelsea.