

March 19 - May 24, 1998

# beyond THE MOUNTAINS

The Contemporary American Landscape



Early 20th century view of Asheville, W.H. Jackson, ca. 1900, photochrom, Asheville Art Museum Collection.

Asheville Art Museum

- Gregory Amenoff
- Ken Aptekar
- Richard Artschwager
- Richard Bosman
- Roger Brown
- Rackstraw Downes
- Susan Hartnett
- Alex Katz
- Alfred Leslie
- Sarah McEaney
- Nancy Mitchnik
- Malcolm Morley
- Robert Moskowitz
- Catherine Murphy
- Dona Nelson
- Ellen Phelan
- Katherine Porter
- Paul Resika
- Glen Rubsamen
- Joan Snyder
- Michelle Stuart
- Wayne Thiebaud
- Helen Miranda Wilson
- Robin Winters

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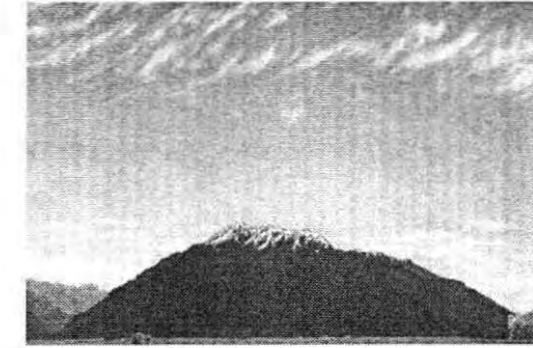
Twentieth century painters have never lost their infatuation with nature and the landscape. Whether we look at the provocative abstractions of Paul Klee's invented worlds early in the century, the enigmatic vistas of Balthus or the very contemporary photographically derived and impressionistically detailed paintings of Gerhard Richter, the fascination with the subtle complexities of nature remains a tempting and inexhaustible subject.

At the end of the century American painters are the inheritors of twin traditions. First, the tradition of 19th century painters such as Thomas Cole, Frederick Church and Albert Bierstadt, whose absorption with the power and vastness of the American landscape was translated through realistic and naturalistic images into paintings of monumental scale and proportion. The second tradition derives from the dynamic forces at work in the styles of Cubism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art and Minimalism. The 20th century explorations of the character and meaning of painting allowed artists to explore the landscape as a metaphor, filling it with the signs and symbols of the American way of life: a way of life that is at once divergent, dramatic, enormous, rich, fragmented and vibrant, a landscape that is as equally diverse and contradictory, and the stage upon which all these characteristics are played out.

The American landscape is no different today. Artists still paint in a multiplicity of styles and from varied and very personal points of view. All the artists in this exhibition are transfixed by the effects of light and weather, by atmosphere and terrain. Though most of these artists are based in New York, in a day or less they can be working in the California desert, trekking the mountains near Santa Fe or walking the Atlantic coast in New England.

Back in the studio their work is a distillation of the landscape, images made from photographs, sketches or memory. Of the twenty four artists in this exhibition, few consider themselves to be landscape painters per se. Yet for each of them the landscape is crucial to their art—whether in terms of material, subject matter or theory. Further, they recognize a common history and collective experience that is shared at the close of the 20th century and acknowledge a regard for the landscape which we all share. How they choose to employ the landscape is the subject of this exhibition.

As a theme the landscape seems almost too gargantuan to address. Whether portrayed by means of a thick painterly brush as is the case in **Wayne Thiebaud's** thrilling pictures of the night skyline, or the mystical evocations of **Gregory Amenoff's** seascapes, or the domestic garden of **Catherine Murphy's** hypnotic realism, the subjective recollection and depiction of place is always the product of great visual creativeness. The eclectic character of this exhibition echoes the endless varieties of paintings styles today.



Helen Miranda Wilson  
BLUE MOUNTAIN, TAOS  
PUEBLO, NM, 1989-90  
Oil on panel, 8" x 11.88"  
Courtesy of private collection  
and Jason McCoy Gallery,  
New York

The natural setting of the prospect is of crucial importance: the shifting sands of **Nancy Mitchnik's** *Yellow Pyramid* the "dusty dangerous mountains of California" as she describes

them, **Paul Resika's** idle sailboats in the quiet of the Provincetown Harbor, **Alex Katz's** springtime *Yellow Field* or **Helen Miranda Wilson's** mountain range in New Mexico.

In a recent letter Wilson described the importance to her of this southwest landmark, "the smoke in the image rising from the field is from fires set by the Taos Pueblo people to renew the soil: it puts potash back into it. The mountain is a sacred place . . . the clouds are Marie's Tails—cirrus clouds. It was April."

In **Alfred Leslie's** *Flooded Parking Lot* one wonders if this is a painting of an event or a depiction of the world after the biblical flood. The richness and texture of the imposing oak tree, the dramatic lighting on the water and the feeling of awe suggest an event of colossal proportions. **Richard Artschwager's** *Volcano* can point to a similar catastrophic event but his representation is more a record of something sitting in the landscape, as straightforward as an illustration in this morning's newspaper. Nonetheless some element in Artschwager's ironic take on the world is probably extinct if not dormant.

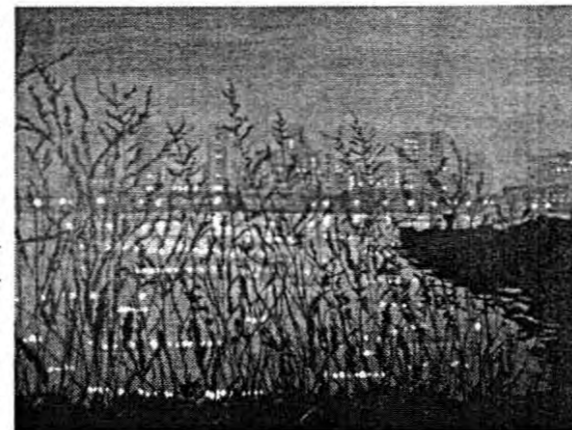
**Rackstraw Downes, Richard Bosman, and Glen Rubsamen** are keen observers too, but their interests are the urban landscape. Downes reports in detail on everything he sees from buildings and cars to roadways and signposts in Texas. Bosman turns his attention to the atmosphere of a foggy New York harbor. Seen from a pier in Brooklyn near his studio, the world is portrayed *en grisaille*, all in grays. "I was struck by the decay of the waterfront," Bosman explained, "rotting piers, weeds, piles of abandoned cars and junk made for a curious juxtaposition to the city which glowed across the river." Rubsamen paints an equally seductive view: dusk, a Chinese inspired Victorian house surrounded by palm trees. This northern California sight was composed in the studio three thousand miles away in New York. Relying on photographs Rubsamen makes on his travels, he sometimes creates his own compositions out of disparate images.

Verisimilitude even for a landscape painter is always a question of technical abilities, and the needs and requirements of individual paintings. For these painters, Emile Zola's dictum about the Impressionists viewing the world "through a sensibility" certainly continues to hold true, as with **Ken Aptekar's** conceptually oriented paintings. Aptekar balances painted image with text; he superimposes the picture with glass that has been etched with sentences describing his world. The side view glance of the Boucher landscape triggers a reminder of a more personal landscape, a time and a place where his family met. For Aptekar, landscape is both a very personal domain and a psychological phenomenon. Through his text and paintings he constructs the process that all viewers partake: the recall of memories of familiar places.

Like Amenoff, **Roger Brown, Dona Nelson, Katherine Porter, Joan Snyder** and **Robin Winters** create landscapes that are highly personal

Continued on reverse side

Richard Bosman  
CITYSCAPE, 1991  
Oil on canvas, 54.5" x 72.25"  
Courtesy of the Artist



# beyond

## THE MOUNTAINS

The Contemporary American Landscape

### CHECKLIST

Gregory Amenoff  
NORTH II, 1996  
Oil on canvas, 80" x 72"  
Courtesy of the Artist

Ken Aptekar  
"WE ONLY MADE  
BACON...", 1998  
Oil on wood with etched glass  
and bolts, 24" x 48"  
Courtesy of the Artist and  
Jack Shainman Gallery

Richard Artschwager  
VOLCANO, 1985  
Acrylic on celotex with acrylic  
on wood frame, 17" x 31 3/8"  
Courtesy private collection  
and Tom MacGregor

Richard Bosman  
CITYSCAPE, 1998  
Oil on canvas, 54.5" x 72.25"  
Courtesy of the Artist

Roger Brown  
MOVING DUNES, 1978  
Oil on canvas, 48" x 60.25"  
Courtesy of Phyllis Kind  
Gallery, New York

Rackstraw Downes  
TRANSFORMER WITH  
NEW HOUSING  
DEVELOPMENT OFF  
LOOP 197, TEXAS  
CITY, 1996  
Oil on canvas, 15" x 38.5"  
Courtesy of the Artist and  
Marlborough Gallery, New  
York

Susan Hartnett  
NOVEMBER 22, 1996,  
MARSHES & THICKETS  
WHERE DEER CAN  
HIDE, 1996  
Pastel on paper  
47.25" x 61.88"  
Courtesy of the Artist

Alex Katz  
YELLOW FIELD, 1997  
Oil on canvas, 66.12" x 90.12"  
Courtesy of the Artist and  
Marlborough Gallery, New York

Alfred Leslie  
FLOODED PARKING  
LOT, 1986  
Oil on linen, 84" x 72"  
Courtesy of the Artist and Oil  
and Steel Gallery, Long Island  
City, New York

Sarah McEaney  
PINK AND BLUE TOO, 1996  
Egg tempera on wood  
24" x 24"  
Courtesy of the Artist

Nancy Mitchnik  
PLAIN, 1996  
Oil on canvas, diptych  
26" x 108"  
Courtesy of the Artist

Malcolm Morley  
BAIT DRUMS, 1992  
Watercolor on paper  
22.25 x 30 inches  
Courtesy of private collection

Robert Moskowitz  
THE RAZOR'S EDGE, 1994  
Oil on canvas, 90" x 40"  
Courtesy of the Artist

Catherine Murphy  
PORCH SCREEN, 1994  
Oil on canvas, 59" x 59.5"  
Courtesy of the Artist and  
Lennon, Weinberg Gallery,  
New York

Dona Nelson  
ISLANDS, 1991-93  
Oil and acrylic and muslin  
collage on canvas, 79" x 41"  
Courtesy of the Artist

Ellen Phelan  
CLOUD STUDY  
(WHITE SKY), 1994-95  
Oil on canvas, 45" x 76.5"  
Courtesy of the Artist and  
Danese Gallery, New York

Katherine Porter  
BALINGER CREEK,  
1995-96  
Oil on canvas, 54" x 96"  
Courtesy of the Artist and  
Salander-O'Reilly  
Galleries, New York

Paul Resika  
ORANGE BOAT,  
BLACK PIER, 1997  
Oil on canvas  
62.25" x 76"  
Courtesy of the Artist and  
Salander O'Reilly  
Galleries, New York

Glen Rubsamen  
SALINAS, 1998  
Oil on panel, 36" x 96"  
Courtesy of the Artist

Joan Snyder  
ORCHARD, 1995  
Oil, acrylic, mud straw  
on canvas  
75" x 114" x 5" shelf  
Courtesy of the Artist and  
Hirschl & Adler Galleries,  
New York

Michelle Stuart  
SABI II, 1989  
Encaustic, pigments, shale  
on canvas, 55" x 55"  
Courtesy of the Artist  
and John Weber Gallery,  
New York

Wayne Thiebaud  
NIGHTSCAPE  
STUDY, 1992  
Multimedia on paper  
25" x 30"  
Courtesy of the Artist  
and Allan Stone Gallery,  
New York

Helen Miranda Wilson  
BLUE MOUNTAIN,  
TAOS PUEBLO, NM,  
1989-90  
Oil on panel, 8" x 11.88"  
Courtesy of private  
collection and Jason  
McCoy Gallery, New York

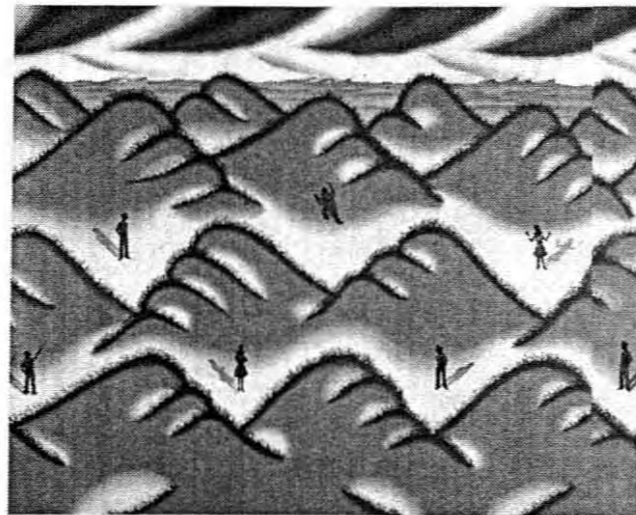
Robin Winters  
ON A SPIRITUAL  
PLAIN, 1994  
Acrylic on canvas, diptych  
40" x 60"  
Courtesy of the Artist

### Asheville Art Museum

Pack Place - 2 South Pack Square  
P.O. Box 1717  
Asheville, North Carolina 28802-1717

### Museum Hours

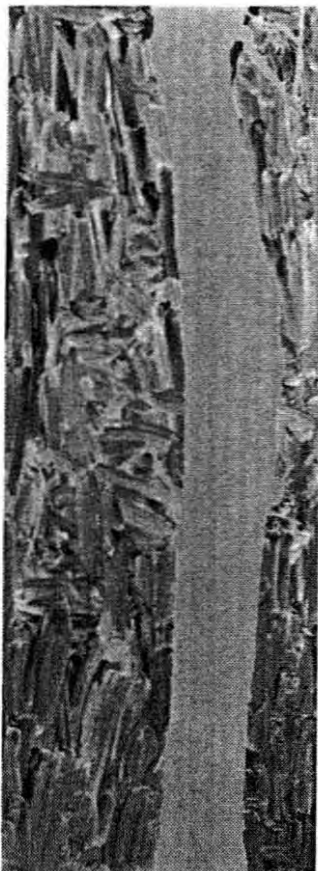
Tuesday through Saturday, 10:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m.  
For information call 828.253.3227



Roger Brown  
MOVING DUNES, 1978  
Oil on canvas, 48" x 0.25"  
Courtesy of Phyllis Kind  
Gallery, New York

Continued from reverse side

and fictive, though based on the experience of the landscape and nature. Snyder's *Orchard* is a place, a map, a chart and a recollection of the trees in the vistas surrounding her studio, hidden in the woods of the Hudson River Valley. Nelson's is a memory-landscape built with paint and muslin, we look down at an island and the surrounding, turbulent ocean captured through the density and texture of muslin and paint. Porter's *Balinger Creek* is the pictorial memory of this creek which ran behind the painter's home in Virginia. The creek regularly flooded the surrounding landscape. Her painting is a symbolic and abstract recognition of nature's power over the land. **Robin Winters** is the mystic of the group. His landscape—a spiritual plain—is a place guarded by the ghost of an ancient world, conjured up to protect the entrance to this secret landscape. The same kind of mystical quality surrounds **Robert Moskowitz's** Fauve red tree. We see only a distinct profile on the edge of a forest, a fragment of the visible world,



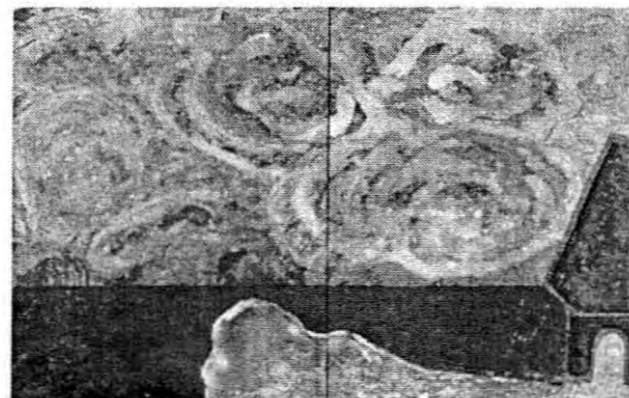
Robert Moskowitz  
THE RAZOR'S EDGE  
1994  
Oil on canvas  
90" x 40"  
Courtesy of the Artist

a minimal and hard edge detail flat against the atmosphere of brushstrokes. The isolated tree becomes symbolic of time, place and spirit. Underscored by its borrowed title from the W. Somerset Maugham classic, *The Razor's Edge* it is about the search for the right path, the image of the tree signifying the place where that path may emerge. Like Moskowitz, **Ellen Phelan** is also foremost a colorist and minimalist, but she sets out to explore the atmosphere of landscapes. In her pale blue cloud study the flat, silent space of her world is punctuated by a single white cloud.

From a day out in the field, **Susan Hartnett**, **Malcolm Morley** and **Michelle Stuart** recreate the adventure inherent in exploration of the landscape. Look at Morley's view from the small harbor into a Maine fishing village focusing on the details of the bait drums, as compared with Susan Hartnett's calligraphic re-creation of a hike along the Maine coast. Her painting is a visual re-telling of the details of what she sees. She writes, "By November's end one is stir-crazy, and risks a Sunday walk when hunting is forbidden (even though one

might hear gunfire)." This drawing was preceded by a 6-7 mile walk along the road traversing Popham Beach State Park. In her description of the terrain she recalls, "... extensive marshes to the north flooded by the powerful Kennebec River, wooded thickets to the south...sun...wind...cold—near freezing—raw unkempt beauty. The drawing started out to be the terror of the deer, but ended by making safe hiding places." In Michelle Stuart's multi-part paintings each segment is made from soil mixed with pigment and other fragments. Her concerns center on the history of sites and with the archeology of the landscape, with what is covered over time and hidden from the naked, untrained eye. Later, in her studio, this is sorted out, revealed and becomes the substance of a newly charged, landscape textured grid, filled with fragments of flowers, shells and earth.

Folk Art and art by self-taught artists has had a strong impact on 20th century painting. This influence is seen especially in the works of the late **Roger Brown** and **Sarah McEaney**. Brown's *Moving Dunes* with its herring bone perspective is a depiction of figures on the dunes somewhere on either coast. The small animated silhouettes are both protected by and thwarted by



Robin Winters  
ON A SPIRITUAL PLAIN, 1994  
Acrylic on canvas, diptych  
40" x 60"  
Courtesy of the Artist

the pattern of dunes and the gray clouds above. Nature is portrayed here as an ominous presence, playing as it were with mankind. McEaney works in a tradition of artists such as Horace Pippin. Hers is a narrative imagery of life in a Philadelphia neighborhood, underscored by powerful abstracted forms and seductive color. The settings

are usually domestic and she paints her life, her house, her garden in a way that makes them familiar and appealing.

The fact that at the end of the 20th Century we can now see our world and its many landscapes from space does not minimize the impact of the craft of painting or these

painters' objectives. Through these pictures our senses are sharpened, our understanding of our surroundings increased and the humanity we share honored.

Michael Klein, Guest Curator

*Many thanks to Michael Klein for his efforts on behalf of this project. Much appreciation to the artists, collectors and galleries who graciously lent works to the exhibition, to the staff of the Asheville Art Museum and to Asheville Savings Bank whose support made this project possible.*

Pamela L. Myers, Executive Director