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Landscape of the Interior

To paint the world outside, Brian Rutenberg first examines the world within.

By Katherine Mesch

Landscape painting, says Brian Rutenberg, isn't really about the landscape.

"The landscape is a conceptual one," he says, "a scene more reflective of who you are on the inside than what you're looking at on the outside." It's this paradoxical concept to which he has devoted the last 20 years of his life, both as a prolific and successful abstractionist and as an avid student of history.

In his Tribeca studio, a modest workspace in Manhattan, just across the park from The Metropolitan Museum of Art and only a few blocks from the Hudson River, Rutenberg works to complete his latest series. The bright and expansive abstract landscapes lean against gallery-white walls, tilted up toward him as if to inquire about their completion.

The paintings, sometimes spanning 13 feet across, with paint applied in layers inches thick, are a reflection of Rutenberg's southern education, he says. Growing up in South Carolina, he was influenced not only by the low country's waters, marshes and mosses, but also by the Southern notion of excess. "It's a land of voluptuousness," he says. "It's about putting it all out there, wearing your heart on your sleeve. I love oil paint, and I hold nothing back when I use it—it's almost excessive. I think that sometimes by going a little too far, you can be really clear." It's when he reaches that clarity that Rutenberg knows to put down his brush. "There's something about the way [a painting] looks when it's done; it becomes transparent, and you can really peer deep into the picture."

Achieving ecstasy

In that moment—when the colors feel harmonious, the composition is both static and in motion and the painting is simultaneously simple and ornamental—the painting fulfills his purposes. It's a moment of ecstasy.

Ecstasy isn't, he says, "some euphoric emotion you feel when you just look at a painting." Rutenberg pauses, carefully conjuring just the right words to describe the concept. "It's to

A new reality

"My paintings undermine our way of looking at the world objectively," Rutenberg says about works such as *Summer Swirl* (at left; oil, 36x25) and *Palmetto Smooth* (above; oil, 36x55). "Instead of trying to replicate external reality like a lot of drawings do, the paintings are about trying to possess something rather than observe it."

approach a painting," he says slowly, "and then to stand squarely in front of it until it's all you see, to project your vitality—your consciousness—right into the painting. At first it may resist, but eventually it starts to give in. And somewhere there's a tiny, deep, one-to-one, nonverbal, meaningful, human communication." He laughs a little, caught off-guard by his own fervor. "You almost can't describe it," he says, "but it's what art's all about, ultimately. That's the ecstasy for me."

Ecstasy is something inspired in Rutenberg by an unusual source: the eccentric Canadian pianist Glenn Gould (1932-1982). "I remember exactly when I was first introduced [to his music]," he says. "It was 1986, during my junior year of college. And it was like having a towel over the speaker for years and years and finally taking it off. It was so clear. I felt I had to know more about this person."

Rutenberg's fascination with Gould goes far beyond the music. "It's the way he sought ecstasy," he says. "It's the way he lived his life. He once said, 'The purpose of art is the gradual, lifelong construction of a state of wonder and serenity.' There's such enormous patience in that statement." (See Unlikely Inspiration, below.)

Out with the old

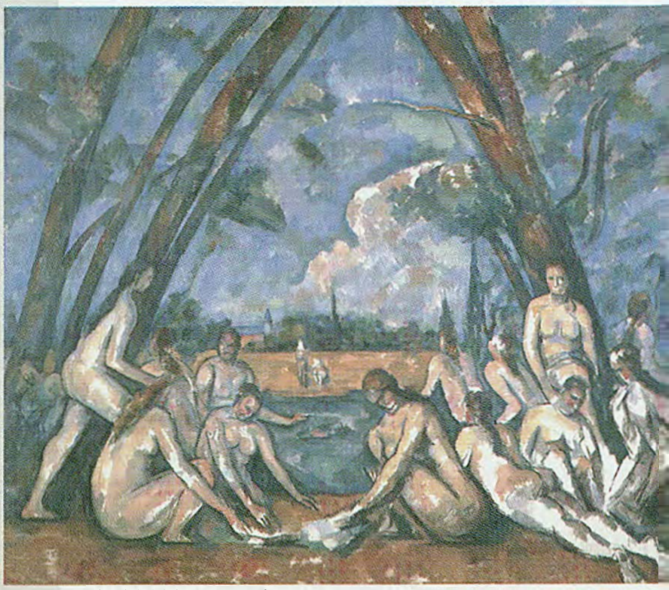
Today, Rutenberg works on oil-primed, double-sanded linen, but 20 years ago, as a master's student in New York City, he painted night after night on cardboard—the cheapest surface he could find—often wandering back to his apartment at a late hour, leaving his paintings anonymously on doorsteps. "Sometimes you'd see them on trash heaps the next morning," he says, "but once in a while I'd see one hanging on a wall through a window. That was cool,

A Deeper Look

Unlikely inspiration

Although of great variety, the masters whom Brian Rutenberg looks to for inspiration are not abstractionists and often not even landscape artists. He cites the sweeping feathery strokes of Thomas Gainsborough's vertical portraits and the figurative works of Eugene Delacroix as instrumental to his understanding of how the figure relates to its scene. His most recent solo exhibition in New York City featured *Carolina* (above; oil, 63x158), a massive painting that he says was influenced primarily by Paul Cézanne's *The Large Bathers* (at right; oil, 82 7/8x98 3/4):

"It fascinates me when there's a bond between the figure and the landscape, as there is in this painting. At the top, there are trees that sort of collapse inward to form a triangle, almost like a stage with a curtain, to unveil the Michelangelesque figures. It's a frame within a frame, one world within another. And I find that I'll do that often in my paintings, where the frame suggests a portal or a doorway, gradually moving from one space to another, transporting the viewer from the physical world to the imaginary world."



The Philadelphia Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY.

but it didn't matter. It wasn't about creating something precious. It was about trying to learn and work quickly through difficulties."

With undergraduate training in classical painting, he built a solid foundation that he says was important to have—and important to deconstruct and recreate on his own, later. "The more I started to experiment," he says, "the more my work started to free itself up—not just the image, but the color representing the form. It was a whittling down to get more concise in my own voice."

A method to the madness

Rutenberg has several methods for attaining correct coloring. With a nod to the color-spot theory of painter Edwin Dickinson (American, 1891-1978), Rutenberg says he often starts with two perfectly mixed colors that relate to one another---creating a "dialogue"—and then he follows those colors with a third, fourth, and so on, until all the colors are in relationship to one another. Other times, he'll start by laying in darks in opposite temperatures to those he wants in his painting---creating a cool, cerulean blue wash for a warm painting, or an burnt sienna or cadmium red wash for a cool one.

"I try to push color as far as I possibly can," he says, "sometimes to levels of intensity that border on wildness." Indeed, although the soft, filtered light in the paintings exude a sense of

To see more of Brian Rutenberg's work, click on **Gallery** at **www.artistsmagazine.com** or visit **www.brianrutenbergart.com**.

Captive and free

Rutenberg quotes the German painter Walter Sickert when he says: "Drawing is about captivity. Painting is about freedom." His small pencil drawings, such as *Shade* (graphite, 10x8) "are about capturing, distilling down to the essence so I can work on things like value and gradation of line." Paintings such as *Reeds Rise From Water* (above; oil, 56x79), large, colorful and abstract, are, by his own description, "much freer, much more subversive, much more about letting something explode."

Found in translation

"I react very strongly to things that inspire me. I don't want to translate that verbatim into the response that the viewer has, but often the responses I receive have been right on target with what I was hoping," Rutenberg says about paintings like *Cherry Grove* (oil, 56x79). "I paint ultimately for me, but it's deeply meaningful when my paintings resonate or strike a chord in the viewer."

calm, there's something just beneath the surface, a tension created by discordant juxtaposition of color, that Rutenberg says was aptly described by a critic as "the promise of violence." Placing bright cadmium orange next to an intense icy green, for instance, is a contrast in both temperature and chroma, he says, that's never totally relaxing.

Perhaps, though, the key to accomplishing a feeling of a completely enveloping landscape is Rutenberg's treatment of a painting's space. Foreground and background, he says, are used in the traditional sense, with the foreground tending to be warmer, thicker and more intense, and the background tending to be thinner, bluer and grayer. "I like the conceptual idea of foreground being related to the physical world, to the actual flesh of the person looking at the painting," he says. "I make the foreground whipped and dripped and scraped and tactile. The background is a metaphor for the immense possibility of the imagination, something that's thin, veiled, more hidden. It's painted thinner as well."

The middle, though, is completely left out. It's partly in homage to the Canadian painters, he says. "The Group of Seven of the 1920s removed the middle ground from their paintings to give the viewer the feeling of direct proximity to the power of nature. With just the foreground and background, you're pulled into something immediate and raw."

This approach, he points out, is the reverse of what Claude Monet would do—a technique called "load and support," where the artist painted heavy, dark areas on the top and lighter areas on the bottom of the piece, as he did in his later paintings of water lilies. Instead, Rutenberg likes to filter soft light in from the top and paint darker and thicker as he gets to the bottom of a work to attain a feeling of gravity.

For both thick and thin areas of composition, Rutenberg suggests using whatever feels right, whatever tool it takes to make the mark that you want. "It doesn't have to be brushes," he says. "It can be the box they come in, a business card from your pocket, keys, fingers, knives." He layers and removes paint, breaking up areas with the swipe of a palette knife or the side of a box, often leaving edges of previous layers exposed.

Of course, all his experiments don't end with a moment of clarity. Rutenberg says he still has pieces that will most likely never leave his studio. "I just work and work and hope that lightning will strike when it's all clear and everything comes together," he says. "You have to work all the time so you can be ready for those moments." ♦

KATHERINE MESCH is an artist and freelance writer. She lives in Chicago.

About the Artist

BRIAN RUTENBERG lives and works in New York City. He's held numerous solo and group exhibitions across the United States and was awarded the New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship in Painting in 2004. He is represented by Forum Gallery (www.forumgallery.com), Toomey Tourell Gallery (www.toomey-tourell.com) and Jerald Melberg Gallery (www.jerald-melberg.com).