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Introduction to *Figure and Landscapes : Paintings and Drawings by Cornelia Foss*

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Figure and Landscape: Paintings and Drawings by Cornelia Foss



Sagaponack Fields III

1985

The Haggerty Museum exhibition, *Figure and Landscape*, brings together two aspects of Cornelia Foss's art — representations of the female figure and of landscape. Both represent Foss's long-standing preference for an art historical approach to formal composition and design over subject matter. Despite her interest in formalism, Foss's work remains figurative, in the manner of certain contemporary English artists, such as Lucien Freud and Rodriugos Moynihan, whom she especially admires, and the Americans, Childe Hassam and Fairfield Porter, who are also favorites.

There is more than a hint of neoclassicism, a return to ideas found in the art of classical Greece which recur throughout art history, in Foss's treatment of the female figure. Like the figures of classical times, Foss's nudes are "representations of representations." That is, the pictures are representations of the artist's idea of a human figure, an idea which is already a representation of an actual model or models. Looking at art traditions from the Greeks and Romans to Delacroix and Picasso, Foss purports to treat the human figure as an art historical subject. The model is chosen very carefully and instructed in the poses essential to carrying out the artist's idea for a painting. Foss is not interested in showing the model as a live human being, or as a particularly sensuous object. Rather, she treats the model as a shape or a "cut out" to be put into the painting. The question might be asked, why use a model in the painting process at all? To this query, the artist would reply that the presence of a beautiful human figure is a vital force in the creating of the painting. "It is more productive to abstract from a real model than from an imaginative idea or a photograph." In such manner, the presence of the model allows for instant translation onto the canvas of an idea, already partially exemplified in the model's body through its natural properties and through its being shaped, by the artist's directing the model to pose.

If there are traces of neoclassical art theories in Foss's paintings, these elements co-exist with certain Neo-Cubist and Abstract Expressionist influences. Neo-Cubist ideas, especially those deriving from the influences of Juan Gris, permeate these paintings — for instance, a shallow treatment of space and flat shapes that lay close to the canvas. On the other hand, the works display enormous sensitivity to the texture of painted surfaces, which is also characteristic of Abstract Expressionist paintings of the mid-twentieth century.

Foss enjoys a certain playful fascination with mirrors — she uses them in her works to explore the interplay of reality and illusions in space. Her use of mirror images brings to mind another important link with art history — the use of mirrors by artists such as Velázquez, Ingres, and Manet. Her pictures incorporating mirror images depict “unreality” twice removed, thus reinforcing Plato's idea of a painting's illusory character. (Plato argued that paintings fail to give truth about objects because they imitate physical appearances rather than the essences or forms of things.) Foss exceeds Plato's wildest suspicions about the deceptiveness of paintings when she creates “Mirrors, 1986,” a painting that includes a mirror image of itself. Such a painting depicts an image of an image and is, therefore, even further removed from reality than a representational painting normally is. The picture shapes are not, however, merely pale shadows of distant realities; rather they are richly textured, often luminous surfaces which can be read on a formal or narrative level.

At least in theory, Foss's landscape paintings are not as far from the paintings of the human figure as it might appear. She treats landscapes as if they were figure paintings, and figure paintings as if they were landscapes. Subject matter performs a similar function in each, and the intent is not to render the subject in a naively realistic fashion, as one might initially surmise.

Elements of the landscape are formalized, that is, abstracted and used as elements in the compositions. Foreground and background are then treated with equal intensity. There are no mirror images in

the landscape paintings, but the “arbitrary” shapes that light creates, in the form of shadows, are intermingled with actual shapes of objects to form a flattened pictorial space. The picture plane in the *Sagaponack Field* and *Cloud* series shown here is proportionally divided by a line of intense coloration falling roughly on what would be called the horizon line of a picture constructed on the principles of linear perspective. If we can ignore the motifs from nature inspired by these Long Island landscape scenes, the composition appears as a textured abstract painterly surface. The ambiguity between the formal and the figurative character of these works derives from their multiple groundings in the theories of classical *and* modern art.

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