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Re-Framing the Landscape

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RE-FRAMING THE LANDSCAPE

Landscape painting is not the first concern that comes to mind when artists consider nature in the post-industrial age of modern technology. Rather, attention is more likely to focus on environmental concerns generated by industrial and technological abuses of nature. Furthermore, landscape has seemingly remained outside the main stream of developments in contemporary art of recent generations. These considerations alone might suggest that landscape is an unlikely area for new explorations in today’s art world. And yet, this is far from the case. Some of the major artists of recent times including Richard Diebenkorn, Robert Irving Smithson, James Turrell, and the video artist Garry Hill, among others, have devoted substantial efforts to addressing landscape in their works. Their efforts include painting, as well as earth art and video. Swedish artist Peter Frie, who is being presented in the present exhibition, demonstrates forcefully that landscape painting remains a viable topic for exploring important concerns relating to contemporary art. Among these concerns are the relation of the art and the artist with respect to identity and the on-going struggle between neo-romantic (subjective) and classical (formalist) elements in painting. It is refreshing that Frie is able to approach these topics more or less unsself-consciously, and without becoming entangled in the passing debates of postmodern thought. He accomplishes this by focusing on painting itself and by relating the act of painting to his emerging self. The passion of the artist for his medium and the landscape are clearly evident in his paintings.

Frie’s paintings fall within the Northern Romantic tradition of landscape painting as defined by Robert Rosenblum, somewhere between the works of Caspar David Friedrich (1744–1840) and Mark Rothko (1903–1970). The pervasive interest in landscape among Northern European and American artists has led Rosenblum to posit that this pursuit offers a viable alternative to the tradition of “art for art’s sake” championed by the French. Frie shares with Friedrich a feeling for the evocative power of nature as an inspiration for painting. Frie’s paintings, unlike those of Friedrich, are devoid of human subjects or man-made environments, and they contain no intimations of literary, philosophical, or theological intent. Nor do they
entertain the romantic theatrical Gothic motifs of cross and cathedral found in Friedrich’s paintings. In this respect they differ also from the overtly symbolic paintings of Otto Runge whose images of nature often invoke explicit references to religious themes. ³

On the other hand, Frie’s paintings share with those of Friedrich and other Northern Romantic artists, such as the Norwegian painter Johan Christian Claussen Dahl (1788–1857), the tendency to intermingle emotion with landscape images. Frie’s marriage of human feeling and landscape in his works is nearly imperceptible. The viewer becomes aware of the expressiveness of the works, initially on a subconscious level, and with the help of intuitive powers of observation, rather than through any overtly obvious or deliberate clues. There is no attempt by Frie to anthropomorphize elements of nature, and his paintings do not depend upon metaphors or myths for their significance. Frie’s approach to landscape painting is rather more like the experience of Paul Cezanne who described his experience of painting as a state of rapport with nature based on immediate mediations between the self and nature. ⁴

As Savanarola has remarked, “every painter, one might say, really paints himself. In so far as he is a painter he paints according to his own ideas.” Indeed, Frie finds in the very process of painting a means of self-realization. His landscape paintings provide links both to the external environment and to inner consciousness. The act of painting enables the artist to access the unconscious by creating images inspired by the surrounding landscape. They are idealized landscapes. More precisely, they are “dreamscapes” emerging from the artist’s imagination, with references to actual landscapes based on an assumed parallel between his constructed landscape images and those accessed through the senses. His aim is to reclaim and integrate through painting certain rare moments invoked by a particular place by rediscovering the feelings and the sense of place that made the experiences memorable. Thus, in a literal sense, the paintings are truly a manifestation of the artist’s inner being.

Clearly, Frie’s paintings are romantic in character in the sense that they represent an idealized view of the process of creating paintings and also a subjective and idealized understanding of their landscape subjects. They are, in the artist’s words, a
view of the world “the way I want it to be.” He says, “When I see Cezanne’s paintings, I can feel that he did it for me, work done in a way that I recognize that I have been there, or want to be there.” Frie hopes that the viewers can share a similar experience when viewing his own paintings. This idealized type of experience, admittedly, may not allow the viewer to participate if he/she does not feel the same. The personal nature of the paintings thus raises the question of their relevance for public viewers, most of whom will not have shared the artist’s accrued experiences. Such experiences might include happy feelings associated with childhood, for example, those associated with walking through the woods and talking with parents, or the painful loss of one’s mother to cancer. Even more cogent, is his intense identification with the act of painting where his yearning for the ideal that remains unfulfilled offers a threshold and a barrier. Only a few viewers will be able to identify with the artist’s passionate engagement with painting itself, which is at the very core of an otherwise fragile human existence. Yet Frie points out the dual aspects of his role as a painter: to paint for himself and to convince others that he is also painting for them. Nevertheless, the artist acknowledges his fear of showing his works to strangers who might not be able to appreciate his idealized world. Still, he hopes that the viewers will be moved to share and be comfortable in the psychological sense of place that is created in the paintings.

There are other aspects of Frie’s work of interest to modern and contemporary painting theory and practice beyond the artist’s affinity with the tradition of Northern Romantic painting and his autobiographic concerns with landscape painting. Hence, it is necessary to move beyond Frie’s personal vision or story in producing the works and to recognize in his achievements as a painter, a contribution to the ongoing development and understanding of art itself. Frie’s major paintings join together on the same or proximate surfaces large areas of white and a smaller section of landscape. The image is painted on canvas mounted on wood block, of varying dimensions and shapes—a typical size is a rectangle 175 by 122 cm, 68.75 by 48 inches. Within this plane, Frie paints both the white surfaces and the landscapes, which are also of varying sizes. When the landscape portions of the paintings are completely
enclosed by white, they are painted separately and inserted into the painted white canvas-wood structure. Otherwise they are painted on the same surface as the white and extend horizontally across the surface forming a band of color. The placement, shape, and size of the landscape vary according to the compositional demands of the different series. In some, the landscape occupies the top portion of the canvas; in others it consists of a narrow band, centered, or placed in the lower half of the canvas. The latter horizontal landscapes embody motion and also a sense of passage through the landscape. There are also smaller versions painted on brick-sized blocks of wood, and also miniature paintings on sketchbook sheets which are placed in antique frames collected by the artist especially for this purpose.

Frie’s color palette consists of relatively few colors white, two reds, two yellows, green, blue, and brown, with gold having been added recently. Elements of sky and land masses, with occasional bodies of water, dominate the landscapes. It is not difficult to imagine these indistinct colored masses dissolving into abstractions, thus bringing Frie’s works closer to those of Mark Rothko.

Frie’s paintings are more complicated than a first glance would suggest. With their broader implications in mind, it is useful to consider what is going on within the picture plane itself. What is to be made, for instance, of the fact the landscape image occupies only a segment of his larger paintings, since, as explained earlier, the landscape portion of the painting is inserted into the greater white surface? The white painted spaces are an essential part of each painting and are not merely frame or border, although they do serve these functions. Despite the absence of decorative or figurative embellishments, the white areas carry significant weight in the overall composition and in the interpretation of the works. Curiosity about the interplay of white sections of the paintings relative to the landscape elements gives rise to multiple speculations. At the most fundamental level, the white simply functions as a tranquil preparation for the rest of the composition. It might also suggest undeveloped landscape.

On another level, Frie’s juxtaposition of landscape image against white suggests a number of interesting polarities. There is the tension of the interior/exterior implicit in the artist’s efforts to reconcile his own constructed images with percep-
tions of external nature itself. Perhaps this dichotomy is expressed in part by the ini-
tial division of the painted surface into landscape and white space. Here, the finished
landscape symbolizes the inner struggle of feeling and imagination and the results of
such efforts, while the white space expresses the impossibility of recreating in paint
a landscape the way it might actually appear in nature.

Simultaneously, Frie’s collocation of the two elements of landscape and white
space on the canvas exemplifies the art historical polarities found in romantic and
classical or formalist approaches to art. For instance, the open, relatively uncon-
trolled form of the romantic landscape contrasts sharply with the closed, controlled
features of the formalist white surfaces in Frie’s paintings. Similarly, the warm,
expressive landscapes puissant with expressive feelings are held in check by the cool
white surfaces.

It is informative to compare Frie’s paintings with the paintings of another
Swedish artist, August Strindberg. In his painting *Inferno* 1901, Strindberg divided
the picture plane into a white inner space surrounded by an outer ring of darker col-
ors. The outer ring becomes a frame, not unlike the edges of a cave, through which
it is possible to gaze into the interior of the painting. In Strindberg’s painting, the
position of the viewer is ambiguous. Like the situation in Plato’s myth of the cave,
it is uncertain whether the viewer is looking at “shadows thrown by the fire on the wall
of the cave” or seeing light images projected directly from the world outside the
cave.

The situation with Frie’s paintings appears to be more complex. On one level the
white shapes can be considered loosely analogous to the edges of a “cave,” where
they provide a frame, sometimes only a boundary, for the landscape which acts as an
icon allowing a glimpse into the artist’s inner self. Only, with Frie, the perspective
constantly oscillates between the two viewpoints offered respectively by the white
surface and the landscape. It is possible to see Frie’s landscape in relation to the
frame or boundary provided by the white surface, as if looking from outside into a
cave. Alternatively, if the viewer begins his exploration of the picture by focusing on
the landscape, the perspective is more like that of the prisoners in Plato’s cave whose
eyes are fixed upon the shadows projected on the wall of the cave. Finally, the full
import of Frie’s paintings relies on the tension created by the interplay between the two surfaces, white space and landscape, as the eye alternates between the perspectives offered by each.

Both Strindberg and Frie struggle through their paintings to eradicate the duality separating the outer world of nature and the inner world of the self. In the end, it just may be that the painter and his art are only allowed to access the shadows of a reality that always remains just beyond their grasp. In turn, for viewers paintings like these can only be shadows of the artist’s inner self and whatever glimpses of nature he might have garnered.6

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1 Rhonda Lane Howard, Shifting Ground: Transformed Views of the American Landscape (Seattle: Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, 2000).
3 Rosenblum, 50.
6 My research for this essay benefited substantially from conversations with the artist Ian McKeever and Gerlinde Gabriel McKeever, whose research focused on landscapes in early art.