

# Pastorale

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Early in the Sixteenth Century a new subject was introduced into Western European painting in Venice – the pastorale, now defined as “suggestive of idyllic rural life” but then quite often leaning toward an idyllic eroticized life. One of this new genre’s earliest and surely most beautiful manifestations is Titian’s Pastoral Concert (ca. 1510) in which two full-bodied standing nudes, one pouring water into a fountain, the other playing a flute, are joined with two seated and clothed male courtiers, one playing a lute - in a fertile rural landscape with a shepherd and sheep in the background. The architectural framework that had most often embraced Virgin and Child in Florentine painting now gave way, in Venice, to landscape. In one of Titian’s renderings of this subject, the Virgin is seen in a verdant landscape, as she gently holds down a white rabbit with her left hand, while reaching out to the Christ Child with her right. A shepherd rests nearby with his sheep, and golden dusk gently subdues the sky. Two centuries later, the pastorale reached its apogee in the hands of Watteau (1684 - 1721) with his many paintings of figures in glistening garb, now in amorous pursuits now embarking on idyllic voyages - always enveloped in an evanescent froth of landscape - nowhere more fabulously than in *The Embarkation for Cythera* (1718 or 1719). Watteau’s misty intimacies began to dissolve into coy rococo cosmetics under the

brush of first Boucher (1703 - 1770) then Fragonard (1780 - 1850). Concurrently with the subject of the pastorale, from the early Sixteenth century onward, landscape frequently began to overwhelm the tiny figures of the narrative and pure landscape often spread across the entire painted plane.

The painting so often cited as the harbinger of modernism, Manet’s *dejeuner sur l’herbe* (1862 - 63) seems to look back to Titian’s Pastoral Concert, now with just one nude seated in the foreground together with two fully clothed men. However, unlike Titian’s nudes, this nude looks directly out at the viewer with a kind of brazen nonchalance that shocked many a passerby. Perhaps as shocking was the nonchalance of Manet’s brushstrokes and his brazen disdain of finish, especially apparent in the visible tracks of process left bare in the background. Manet had undressed painting. A decade later, so too would Cezanne’s shifting blocks of strokes and Monet’s ever more abstract liquification of the landscape. And on into the Twentieth century with Matisse’s playfully amorous and lush *Joie de Vivre* (1905) harboring, in the background, the circle of dancers that would evolve so astoundingly into the first version of *Dance* in 1909, and Picasso’s ferocious nudes extracted from El Greco, the angular expressiveness of many an African mask, and a local bordello in Barcelona, brutally crowded into *Les Demoiselles D’Avignon* (1907) to de Kooning’s urban bitch goddesses rising out of storms of paint in his *Paintings on the Theme of the Woman* (1950-53) to be

followed a decade later by the squishy nymphs frolicking in luminous eruptions of landscape allusions before dissolving completely into abstraction in the 1970s.

As modernism's options dwindled and artists began to re-explore previously banned alternatives, in the 1980's, the Pandora's box filled with illusion, metaphor, narrative, historic styles, a panoply of nudes and more was pried open. Post modernism the accumulation of these new freedoms was labeled, as so many of the referents that had influenced modernism's abstractions took on more mimetic form - flowerbeds might now arise out of Joan Mitchell's radiant abstract bursts of color titled Sunflowers; the rhythms of the ocean addressed with such lyric anxiety by Jackson Pollock might be more consciously regimented into recognizable sequences of waves, etc. Modernism would become but one of many possibilities for an artist. Landscape found fertile ground and pastorage could flourish. The ever-changing look of landscape-oriented art with or without participating figures becoming a pastorage gave rise to this exhibition. Not a grand survey but a small selection of works by seven artists who have impacted my mental landscape. Seven artists, each one's work occupying one of the seven available rooms of the exhibition space.

In the late 1980s, Peter Cain (1959 - 1997) painted cars variously truncated and most often stood on end and painted in searing fetish finish to become mysterious icons of mechanization. In the last year of his life, he turned to the landscape configuration best known to him - the gas station. His gas stations, with their emphasis on primary colors, severely geometrized composition almost totally limited to vertical and horizontal elements, and absence

of all human and automobile presence might have been designed by a team of Mondrian and DeChirico. Meticulously painted under cool clear light, Mobil (1996), like the other gas station works, is sparingly studded with misty shadows, puddles on the ground, and lovingly painted occasional blurred rectangles on the windows that give witness to more human and natural idiosyncrasies. When I asked what artists he most admired, "Robert Ryman and Richard Estes," he responded without a moment's hesitation. The gas station as landscape invader and surrogate becomes a shrine awaiting its altarpiece.

Before he painted the gas stations, Cain briefly moved away from the automotive to create huge paintings of the outsized portrait head of his beloved partner Sean against a sandy ocean beach - as though making a billboard out of his love. A number of drawings reprised these portraits on a more intimate scale. At once public and intimate these overscaled portraits are pastorage for our time.

When Carroll Dunham (1949 - ) came to New York, in 1972 he grew familiar with the work of Mel Bochner and Barry Le Va, and was particularly drawn to the paintings of Brice Marden and Robert Mangold. At the same time he was also drawn to still discredited Surrealism, especially the slippery high-resolution landscape phantasms of Yves Tanguy and Roberto Matta and the psychedelia of the 1960s. In the mid 1980s, he suddenly began to paint on wood grain, now heightening its patterning, now exploding its organics in Technicolor delirium, to release him into the wilder shores of his imagination. Sexual galaxies he called these works. By the late 1980s, he had moved onto canvas, starting with Shape paintings of

single color inflated-looking intestinal shapes then moving on to more articulated Mound paintings that would gradually become blocky demons with vaginal lips and then a constantly warring army of penis-nosed, eyeless glyphs of Mayan heritage and Japanese anime inclinations. By the turn of the century, a single much larger figure would menace the plane with pistol and penis nose - now in a more elaborate landscape. Always, whether mound or humanoid figure they are attached to and seem to grow out of the plane of their making.

Like his humanoid figures, Dunham's trees grow out of the ground of the canvas plane, their shape becoming rectangulated, their articulation pulsing with myriad modes of markmaking, now brushed, now spattered, now drawn into wet paint with the point of the opposite end of the brush, always becoming a landscape of process that might readily morph into abstraction. And more recently Dunham has given us a behemoth transvestite, something like a human volcano that hijacked the planes of his making. And after a stint at the American Academy in Rome, with all the access to Italian painters of the nude, he has most recently created a group of paintings, each portraying a blimp-like female nude bather in a landscape - at once comic and overwhelming in her monumentality and taking her place in a varied sisterhood of pulchritude envisioned by male artists from Botticelli to Titian to Ingres to Manet to Picasso to de Kooning and now to Dunham - his nude and landscape perfectly attuned to each other and the rectangle in which they emerge - infusing *Pastorale* with new meaning.

Alex Ross (1960 -) has more literally than Dunham revived Surrealism's science-fictional landscapes. Employing a highly idiosyncratic process, he sculpts small forms out of green

Plasticene that then become models for his painting. While his ambivalently horticultural forms often call to the Surrealism of such as Tanguy, he does not engage in the precisely delineated pictorialism Tanguy employed. Ross' paintings are prone to a lush creamy physicality, visceral and visually sexy. When he paints a large body of rippling water, the paint physically ripples across the surface. Most often his paintings bask in a deep stillness. The willing viewer might well move from questioning the origins of Ross' primal forms to find her eyes bobbing endlessly over the surface into and out of meditative coves of paint. He is a painter of a most giving beauty.

An autographic style has never interested Dona Nelson (b. 1947 -). She has moved freely from the figurative to the abstract, from delicate stain to coruscating physicality bolstered by paint-soaked patches of muslin and/or cheesecloth. She might riff on paintings her mother once made or *The Stations of the Subway*. At times it seems as though she has as many hands conspiring at once to create a painting as the octopuses she has so wonderfully painted have tentacles. Whether double-sided or single the dynamics of her paint at once challenge and respect the rectangularity of the canvas. Free pours of green paint take heed of the edges painted to reflect the stretcher on the other side, while wonderfully colored purple, green, and red chords embrace the tree-like green - a landscape of wonder.

Robert Harms (b. 1962 -) has lived and painted by the water on Long Island's East end for most of his career. He now lives in a small house directly overlooking (almost in) a pond. He paints the pond, its myriad of reflections on its rippling surface, from season to season to season with a myriad of strokes delicately reveling in their liquidity. Varied in their size and shape and

color they gather in an open aqueous rectangle surrounded by bare white canvas – something like a vertical pond – limpid, lyric, clear. Earlier work was more gesturally aggressive, often more bound to wooded trails. Harms eyes were nourished by Willem de Kooning's bucolics created after he moved to the Springs in East Hampton and by the painting of his friend the late Joan Mitchell, as well as by the works of the many artists whose exhibitions he regularly seeks out - Monet and Ensor to name but two. And the pond is always changing, always revealing unexpected reflections.

Susan Hartnett (b. 1940 -) moves back and forth between lower Manhattan and rural Maine. Wherever she is located she absorbs nature. In New York, she can sit in a park and watch the dance of grasses for I don't know how long, and then return to her loft and choreograph graphite to dance on paper like the grass - with concentrated directness. Or she can sit in Central Park and visually and emotionally gather up the plants and atmospherics and bring this fragile freight back home and lay it out on a large sheet of colored paper in a vibrant flurry of pastels (she is also most articulate in her verbal descriptions). For years she has been doing this - invoking the weather and the plant life she has communed with. She knows how to communicate her sense of wonder. Hartnett has gathered a large visual inventory over the years that inform her work including a knowledge and love of Chinese and Japanese calligraphy - a writing that often visually referenced its verbal meaning. In this sense, Hartnett's work is writerly as often has been Cy Twombly's. She knows so well how to encapsulate a deep moment of landscape.

Richard Van Buren (b. 1937 -) now lives and works in Maine not far from Hartnett. He was in the 1966 landmark exhibition Primary Structures in the Jewish Museum in New York. This was the earliest gathering of what was known as Minimalism. Van Buren worked with cut and planed timber architected into clear geometric configurations and coated with fiberglass. In more recent years he dispensed with the wood structure and encouraged the fiberglass' flow into organic, distended pours emblazoned with countless colored pins. The organics of his making seemed to call to the underwater realms of coral. With his move to Maine and proximity to the ocean he expanded his vocabulary and now creates extravagant multi-part sculptures of thermoplastic, acrylic paint, and shells; and the underwater referentiality has become more explicit. They have devolved into a kind of marine hybrid of baroque splendor, now risking vulgarity, now achingly beautiful at once completely artificial and organic. They have captured some of the wonder of the landscape of the deep sea.