



THE NEW ROMANTIC LANDSCAPE

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Romanticism, the triumph of imagination over reason, was at its height in the first half of the nineteenth century. The Romantic movement in Europe arose in opposition to eighteenth-century rationalism; it challenged the objectivity of scientific or logical modes of thought, placing individual sensibility at the very center of aesthetic judgment. The early Romantics achieved a heightened emotional state in contemplation of the wonders of nature. Mountains, waterfalls, and storms at sea embodied the idea of the unattainable, the dramatic, and the threatening. A concomitant fascination with supernatural phenomena—ghosts, vampires, and werewolves—was also common. This allure of the mysterious and the uncontrollable was accompanied by feelings of fear and horror, charging the work of Romantic artists with highly emotional content. Romanticism also encompassed an interest in esoteric religions, medieval literature and architecture, and the East. It was, in short, an impulse toward the exotic, an escape from the present to a different time, geographic locale, and state of awareness. The quest for the sublime—a complete communion with the universe—as well as a search for divine harmony, were the philosophical and religious motivations of the Romantics. To express such transcendental ideals, European Romantic artists such as Caspar David Friedrich and Claude Lorraine developed a symbolic language of natural phenomena—air, water, earth, fire, and vegetation.

Because America was a new continent full of promise, the early settlers did not experience the feeling of alienation that was the very point of departure for the European Romantics. America's novelty and virginity also precluded the fascination with decay and chaos at the root of much European Romanticism. The attraction of an "elsewhere"—some mysterious place or historical period, such as the East or the Middle Ages—was not justified. For early Americans the appeal of the negative forces of the human psyche, as manifested by ghosts and vampires, receded in the face of the challenge of building a new society.



April Gornik
The Equinox, 1987

April Gornik's work can be seen as directly descended from that of the German Romantic landscape painter, Caspar David Friedrich. However, unlike many of her artistic predecessors, Gornik presents a world that excludes all human presence. Her meticulously rendered paintings, depicting calm oceans, low hills, and quiet wetlands, have an oversized, photographic quality about them. Viewed through an atmospheric or grainy haze as if from a distance, Gornik's pictures make use of only those aspects of the scenery that have a slightly abstract character. *The Equinox* is an idealized representation of two dark, massive rock formations placed amid a motionless, pale blue sea. Small clouds dot the sky. Feelings of anxiety are provoked in the viewer by the seemingly frozen image, ominous in its absence of any human form. This dispassionate view of nature makes one think about how the landscape is perceived and mythicized as the embodiment of the divine.



Mark Innerst
Alpine View, 1986

Each of Mark Innerst's small paintings is in an obtrusively large frame. This consistent use of antique frames is an important component of the artist's work, compelling the viewer to visualize the painting as an object. Innerst elaborates his chosen scenes of exalted turbulent clouds, distant dust storms, and dramatic light with signs of pollution and cultural decay. In *Industry along the Mississippi* (1986), the urban riverscape is transformed into a postnuclear vista by the suggestive inclusion of a brilliant orange horizon. *Brooklyn in Flames* (1986) displays a comparable radioactive glow in the guise of a conflagration consuming most of the picture's surface. *Alpine View* is a more detailed image of tall, pencil-thin trees in a dense forest. Both the image and the frame have an ironic and anachronistic Victorian quality. The yellowish hue of the painting suggests a chemical haze or acidic trace permeating the environment. The imagery of the last century, escapist in its depiction of the natural and the wild rather than the urban and industrial, is imbued by Innerst with contemporary social, political, and environmental issues.

A deep wonder about a universal divine law and the origins of creation, linked to an awareness of the newly chosen environment and the need to master the wilderness, was at the center of the American romantic experience. The idea of the sublime, expressed through uncontrolled nature, was omnipresent and a strong tradition of landscape painting, developed in response to a socio-psychological need. For American artists and their public, landscape became a means of expressing one's identity, a mirror to themselves and their new and different universe. Quiet scenes—images of lakes and dense forests—offered the opportunity for meditation and contemplation. Fear, horror, and threat seemed to have remained in Europe, where the roots of American romanticism are without doubt to be found.

In *Romantic Painting in America*, James Thrall Soby and Dorothy Miller note that romanticism has survived, since the mid-nineteenth century, "as a state of individual mind rather than as a cohesive tendency in art." The decision to paint romantic landscapes today may indicate a return to tradition, a sensitiveness to the stylistic appearances of an art-historical period. For some artists, such as April Gornik and Georgia Marsh, a return to landscape painting is primarily an interior, emotional, and completely subjective response after previous, unsatisfactory experimentations with abstract art. Unlike Conceptualism and Minimalism, romanticism is based primarily on emotion and a rejection of the rational, focusing on nature and refuting the man-made. The work of Joan Nelson recalls the background of seventeenth-century Flemish landscapes, such as those of Jacob von Ruisdael, but that is not their source. They are, according to the artist, a personal way of envisioning the landscape.

A romantic fascination with the spectacle of nature still exists in much contemporary work. The representation of still water is characteristic of work by David Deutsch, April Gornik, Tracy Groyson, and Clegg & Guttmann, while fire is represented in the work of Donald Sultan, Borboro Ess, and Freya Hansell. Air, captured in images of skies and clouds, is the principal feature of paintings by John Beerman and Mark Innerst and a very important part of pictures by Jeff Joyce,

Clegg & Guttman, and Joon Nelson. Earth is predominant in the paintings of Tobi Kahn and in the photographs of Barbara Ess and Oliver Wasow.

Several artists depict vegetation in fine detail and rich color. It constitutes the entire subject of *Alpine View* (1986) by Mark Innerst; is treated as an unfocused green obstruction in Donald Powley's painting *Untitled* (1985); and takes the shape of a three-dimensional artificial plant that literally springs out of Dike Blair's construction "+" (1986). In these contemporary works, a panoramic view has often been avoided; instead, fragmentary images, focusing on one aspect of traditional romantic landscapes, appear better to express a contemporary sensibility.

In the American tradition of landscape painting, a romantic feeling is most successfully conveyed when artists attempt to capture and preserve the memory of a disappearing natural environment. There is a feeling of nostalgia in the works of Jeff Joyce and Mark Innerst; civilization fades away and nature is the primary focus. Anxiety and the threat of unexpected danger permeate Jack Goldstein's work, with its impending lightning storms, as well as some of the convos of April Gornik, where there is the possibility of drowning. The overwhelming magnitude of darkness is a powerful element in the paintings of Georgia Marsh.

The advancement of scientific knowledge has transformed our vision of the world. In contemporary romantic landscapes, conventional modes of representation, questioned extensively in modernist theory, no longer convey the sense of the sublime as it was understood in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, the effects of nature are no longer thought to be divinely inspired. The idea of the artist as a unique and powerful creator has been questioned and rejected. The work of art no longer possesses a self-validating quality or a quasi-sacred, unquestionable status. Consequently, contemporary works explore new directions, exemplifying different preoccupations both in the conceptual approach to and material expression of the landscape. As one might expect, many artists have integrated elements of abstraction into their work. In *Journey* (1987), Ellen Phelan uses the imagery of the



Jack Goldstein
Untitled, 1983

Jack Goldstein's appropriated imagery focuses a man's relationship to a mass consumer society. His depictions of lightning storms, comet showers, or planetary eclipses are taken from photographs printed in scientific publications, and relate to a profusion of other images within a media-saturated culture. Using an airbrush, Goldstein creates a flat, nantextured surface that keeps the viewer at a distance. Much like the images projected on a theater screen, the paintings possess a documentary or cinematic feeling and scale. As contemporary, technological evocations of nineteenth-century landscape paintings, the works present nature as a cultural spectacle.



Joan Nelson
Untitled, 1986

The technically inventive landscapes of Joan Nelson are composed of layers of a translucent encaustic and oil paint. Nelson builds up the painted surface to a palpable thickness, creating a luminous and visually penetrable illusion of depth. The boxlike support projecting noticeably from the wall augments this sense of a deep, panoramic space. Nelson's palette is dominated by one or two tones, such as a dark sepia for the ground or yellow and red for the misty atmosphere. Instilled into these untitled landscapes are dreamlike fantasies of an earth before man—dawn on the fifth day of creation.



Paul Rosin
Temple of Herpes, 1987

Paul Rosin's black-and-white photographs are sensually and psychologically charged. Taken through binoculars, they have an aged Victorian blur, apparent in *Temple of Herpes*. The antique and grainy quality of this photograph harks back to the romanticism of the nineteenth-century photographic tradition. A red circle, pointed in the center of the photographic image, conveys the sense of looking through a camera's lens or through an early telescope with a blind spot. The ancient Roman columns and architectural structures have a melodramatic feeling of decay. Unpopulated, the photograph directs the viewer's gaze into its space, allowing exploration of an unsettling world where nature seems to have outlasted man.



Freya Hansell
Twin Fire, 1985

Freya Hansell's paintings of natural disasters convey a sense of the world in constant change. Her mock-Abstract Expressionist method of painting includes pouring and dripping oil, acrylic, and sand to achieve illusions of chaos. Her images of cavernous tunnels, sinuous rivers, and volcanic eruptions have been interpreted as anthropomorphic allusions to states of erotic ecstasy or sensuous repose. *Twin Fire* depicts a turbulent, fiery explosion on a richly textured black body of water, and a flash of light, sublime in its magnitude.

nineteenth-century French painter Camille Corot. She achieves her own expression of the landscape by retaining abstracted forms and fields of color and by letting the paint drip onto the work's surface to create new textures. By cutting small, geometric shapes out of the canvases and filling the holes with colored organic screens, she introduces an element of distance from the illusion of the landscape, simultaneously drawing the viewer toward a recognition of the painting as object and abstraction. However, the carefully selected tones of color used for the screens ultimately bring one's gaze back to the depicted landscape.

Gerry Morehead uses the compositional device of a diptych in *Hope Bay* (1986) to create a new expression of a landscape. Alongside the scene of a river and aquatic plants is a black panel of unidentified flat shapes. This abstract panel offers, on a representational level, an element of distraction from the mundane image of the landscape. On a conceptual level, it suggests a link with the dark forces at work in the romantic experience.

Both Neil Jenney and Edward Ruscho use language within the image. Concerned with understanding by naming, the words in these paintings direct attention toward a more intellectual interpretation of the landscape. The tension between the image and the literal meaning of the words makes the viewer concentrate on the links between pictorial and linguistic systems of representation and communication. Understanding this connection involves us as subjects, positioned before the work of art, conscious of our own construction of meaning. The use of words also adds a more abstract, formal effect to the representation as a whole. The elongated format used by Ruscho, which evokes the sensation of travel at great speed through a landscape, is at one remove from the romantic tradition, but the visual solidity given to the fugitive sensations of speed and movement nevertheless leaves room for subjective and emotional content.

Another genre of abstraction, exemplified in the works of Dike Blair and Jon Kessler, fragments observed landscape forms. Elements of the landscape are gathered on the painting's surface or even projected into real space.

According to the harmony of shapes, colors, and textures, a new order is determined in the organization and arrangement of the universe. Contrasts between carefully painted surfaces and three-dimensional elements are surprising. The inclusion of abstract geometric shapes also reminds us of representational conventions and prevents us from being totally drawn into the illusion of the landscape. Jon Kessler integrates into his three-dimensional pieces elements belonging to twentieth-century technology, such as electric lights and motors. Kessler's works, extreme in their inclusion of contemporary materials and devices, illustrate an attraction to the East, a decisive source of inspiration for Kessler's art.

"The New Romantic Landscape" supports the idea that certain primal images, including those of natural phenomena, continue to communicate a rich interior vision in a sophisticated postindustrial society. If romantic imagery and the very act of painting the landscape seem to belong to a distant past, many reasons for their continuation exist. Although some of the original impulses of romanticism have been superseded (the need for a divine harmony ordering the world and the experience of the sublime have been definitively altered since the eighteenth century) for contemporary artists this loss allows critical distance from antiquated and obsolete Romantic imagery. Romantic landscape painting is a reflection of today's environment. It confronts the tension between nature and postindustrial civilization, and attempts to define nature itself in a society rooted in technology. To some extent it also offers an escape from the problems of overly populated cities; the majority of artists represented in this exhibition live in the densely urban milieu of New York.

Contemporary landscape painting is also an examination of representation itself and our understanding of the tradition of romantic iconography. Some artists have chosen to keep a strong bond with tradition; others diverge greatly from tradition but still retain its emotional and subjective viewpoint. Consequently, landscape painting addresses its public on the subjective or emotional level as well as in a more rigorously theoretical and analytic manner. Not to be reduced to any of its aspects, it is a field rich in possibilities of content and expression.



John Beerman
Will That Which Must Be, 1986

John Beerman's intimate Luminist landscapes are always surrounded by morblelike frames of his own making, a decorative strategy that emphasizes an ironic attitude toward historical landscape painting. *Will That Which Must Be* depicts a dark green hedge or a field of tall grass silhouetted against a brilliant blue sky in which the source of light is not visible. Vaporous clouds make uniform parallels across the sky, much like airships searching for a landing site. The work retains an idealized light and rich, bright colors that make reference to the landscape painting of the Hudson River School.



Neil Jenney
North America Abstracted,
1978-80

North America Abstracted fuses the painted image and its enclosing frame. Each is dependent upon the other for its identity and importance. Jenney's small bond of illuminated nature juxtaposes and layers abstract forms that can be interpreted as mountains or trees, sky or pavement, water or land. Although images of humanity are emphatically absent from this work, nature is ironically depicted as man-made, artificial, and mass-produced. In its massive, black, coffinlike frame, prominently lobed with its conceptual title, the work embodies the look of a showcase from a natural history museum.



The Storn Twins
Seascape, 1985

The Storn Twins, Douglas and Michael, collaborate in the use of photomontage. Working from scratched negatives, they tear and fold developed prints, then reassemble them with adhesive tape. This manipulation of materials and their matte surfaces creates an antique effect. *Seascape*—purposely blurred, toned, and grainy—reconstructs a view of the surface of a turbulent sea. No horizon line is present and the lower portion of the image appears extremely close to us, as though we were looking over the edge of a boat. This unfamiliar angle of vision, unanchored and dislocated, has a disturbing, unbalanced effect.



Barbara Ess
Untitled, 1986

In *Untitled*, Barbara Ess uses the technology of pinhole photography to transform a simple and barren landscape into a dramatic, voyeuristic theater. Presented from an insect's point of view, the photographic print is suffused with a narcotic, dreamlike mood. The orange and yellow enamel tints applied to the original gelatin silver print convey both a sense of warmth and of hidden danger.



Danold Sultan
Forest Fire, October 28, 1983,
1983

Danold Sultan interprets the constantly changing face of the landscape. His paintings remind us of the uneasy relationship between man and his surroundings. The eerie, industrialized worlds and disaster scenarios in Sultan's work are based on news photographs, and like them always include a precise date. Sultan's images are not literal transcriptions of media imagery, however; they challenge the viewer's understanding of change. In *Forest Fire, October 28, 1983*, large patches of bright orange plaster crossed by a labyrinth of tree branches pointed with black tar are an abstract evocation of the work's title. Linoleum, tar, plywood, Masonite, plaster, and latex paint comprise Sultan's nontraditional painting materials. He constructs his work by covering plywood stretchers with Masonite and vinyl tiles, then drawing, cutting, burning, pouring, plastering, scraping, and pointing onto this surface a complex vocabulary of abstract symbols.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.

John Beerman (b. 1958)

Will That Which Must Be, 1986

Oil on wood and mosonite, 26½ x 22¾

Lorence-Monk Gallery, New York

Dike Blair (b. 1952)

" + ", 1986

Mixed media, 96 x 30 x 16

Baskerville + Watson, New York

Clegg & Guttman (Michael Clegg and

Martin Guttman, b. 1957)

Meadawlands, 1986

Cibochrome print, 47½ x 61

Collection of Senator Frank R. Lautenberg

David Deutsch (b. 1943)

Park with Paal, 1985

Acrylic, gouache, and paper on canvas, 6⅛ x 71¾ x 3⅛

Blum Helmon Gallery, New York

Barbara Ess (b. 1946)

Untitled, 1986

Monochromatic color photograph, 30 x 40

Collection of Ann Philbin

Jack Goldstein (b. 1945)

Untitled, 1983

Synthetic polymer point on canvas, 96 x 168

Simon Cerigo Gallery, New York

April Gornick (b. 1953)

The Equinox, 1987

Oil on linen, 74 x 103

Collection of Emily Fisher Landau

Tracy Grayson (b. 1960)

Untitled, 1986

Enamel on wood, 31½ x 49½

Wolff Gallery, New York

Freya Hansell (b. 1947)

Twin Fire, 1985

Oil and acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48

Prudential Insurance Company of America, Newark, New Jersey

Mark Innerst (b. 1957)

Alpine View, 1986

Acrylic on board, 14½ x 12½

Collection of Robert M. Koye

Brooklyn in Flames, 1986

Oil and acrylic on board, 10¼ x 14⅞

The Brooklyn Museum, New York

Industry along the Mississippi, 1986

Oil and acrylic on board, 17½ x 32

Collection of Martin Sklor

Neil Jenney (b. 1945)

North America Abstracted, 1978–80

Oil on wood, 38 x 85¼ x 5¼

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Purchase Fund, and the Painting and Sculpture Committee 83.19

Jeff Joyce (b. 1956)

Turn of the Century, 1985

Oil on canvas, 60 x 96

Chase Manhattan Bank, N.A., New York

Tabi Kahn (b. 1952)

Fila, 1986

Acrylic on panel, 36 x 27³/₄

Althea Viafora Gallery, New York

Jan Kessler (b. 1957)

Days of Our Lives, 1983

Mixed media with lights and motors, 48 x 36 x 12

Collection of Bette Ziegler

Georgia Marsh (b. 1950)

Reflex, 1985

Vinyl gouache on canvas, 82 x 52

Collection of the artist

Gerry Marehead (b. 1949)

Hape Bay, 1986

Acrylic, gouache, and tempera on wood, 16 x 48

Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

Jaan Nelsan (b. 1958)

Untitled, 1986

Oil and wax on panel, 14 x 16

Collection of Patrick Lawrence and Rick Patrick

Untitled, 1986

Oil and wax on panel, 11 x 12

P.P.O.W., New York

Untitled, 1986

Oil and wax on panel, 11 x 13

P.P.O.W., New York

Ellen Phelan (b. 1943)

Journey (after Carat "View from Valterra"), 1987

Oil on linen with organdy, 56 x 75¹/₂

Barbara Toll Fine Arts, New York

Donald Pawley (b. 1955)

Untitled, 1985

Oil on canvas, 16 x 16

Cash/Newhouse Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1985

Oil on canvas, 20 x 20

Cash/Newhouse Gallery, New York

Paul Rasin (b. 1957)

Temple of Herpes, 1987

Gelatin silver print and enamel paint, 20 x 16

Collection of the artist

Edward Ruscha (b. 1937)

Pretty Girl vs. Evil and Trouble, 1979

Oil on canvas, 22 x 159

Leo Costelli Gallery, New York

The Starn Twins (Douglas and Michael, b. 1961)

Seascape, 1985

Toned silver print with adhesive tape, 50 x 60

Stux Gallery, New York

Donald Sultan (b. 1951)

Forest Fire, October 28, 1983, 1983

Oil, watercolor, plaster, tar, and vinyl tile on Masonite, 96¹/₄ x 97

Blum Helman Gallery, New York

Oliver Wasaw (b. 1959)

Untitled, 1986

Cibachrome, 9¹/₄ x 25

Collection of Eloine Donnheisser

Untitled, 1986

Cibachrome, 15³/₄ x 7³/₄

Collection of Arthur and Carol Goldberg

Photographs by David Allison (Sultan), Geoffrey Clements (Jenney), D. James Dee (Goldstein), Philip Pocock (Hansell), David Sundberg (Nelson), Brion Weil (Beerman), Zindmon/Fremont (Gornik)

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