

Today's Landscapes, Tomorrow's Dystopia

By Benjamin Genocchio

June 1, 2008

Art Review



Michael Hayden's "Clean Up" (2007).

There are a lot of ways to depict the landscape. You can faithfully reproduce what you see; you can improvise, painting in an impromptu manner without prior preparation or thought; or you can imagine a fictional space. All of these options are sampled in "Future Tense: Reshaping the Landscape," the Neuberger Museum of Art's behemoth of a summer painting show.

Even with 10,000 square feet of exhibition space spread across a pair of giant galleries, this exhibition of works by 60 artists still feels packed. But while half the works here probably would have done the trick, few joys in museumgoing can compare with the delights of an intelligently themed show.

Theme shows are about ideas, and "Future Tense" is no exception. It was conceived by its curators, Dede Young and Avis Larson, to demonstrate ways in which the age-old genre of landscape painting is changing and evolving to reflect more contemporary issues. It is a smart, alluring and wide-ranging curatorial thesis.

The landscape tradition originated in the Netherlands in the 17th century, but didn't really begin to flourish as an art form for another century or so. In the 19th century it came to be associated with Romanticism and the picturing of nature as a sublime, godly creation only to fall out of favor in the 20th century.

These days, landscape painting survives as a charming vestige of the past — photography and film have all but replaced it as the dominant means of recording the world around us. They are faster and more accurate and far more accessible. But while painting itself may be arcane, this show suggests that a great deal of contemporary landscape painting is nonetheless timely and relevant.

Most obviously, landscape painters have sought to reflect the increasing awareness of environmental issues. This is apparent from the moment you enter the show, where the opening artwork is Alexis Rockman's "Manifest Destiny" (2003-2004). It is a vision of Brooklyn 3,000 years from now. Buildings lie in ruin, humans are extinct and cockroaches have run amok.

Mr. Rockman's painting, 24 feet long, is one of the largest works in the exhibition, though it is not quite as big as Adam Cvijanovic's 20-by-40-foot painting of a melting glacier, which straddles a corner — floor to ceiling — of the main exhibition room. It is an imposing, monumental work produced in sections; the artist paints on Tyvek sheets, which he then sticks to the wall like wallpaper. When the show ends, he peels them off.

The theme of Mr. Cvijanovic's painting — the vulnerability of the planet to climate change — is echoed throughout the show, though most obviously in paintings by Dana Melamed, Johan Nobell, Jean-Pierre Roy, Michael Schall, Claire Sherman, Nathan Redwood, Alec Spangler, Michael Torlen and Sarah Trigg. Mr. Spangler's painting "It Tastes Like a Village" (2007) presents a scorched landscape, all but uninhabitable. Mr. Redwood's "Like an Iceberg" (2007) appears to show semi-submerged houses adrift.

The effects of global warming also have implications for architecture and technology, along with questions of urbanism and community. Clustered about this category are several very unusual, sometimes disquieting works, including Verne Dawson's "Earthly Paradise" (2003), an oil painting depicting an arid, desertlike landscape dotted with a communal housing complex and a domelike utilities structure.

The exhibition also includes a handful of photographs, sculptures and drawings, all of them related to the landscape tradition. Among this group is a pair of intriguing new photographs by Mary Mattingly. Her work focuses on environmental issues, from rising sea levels to the scarcity of — and global competition for — fresh water. "Building Paradise" (2007) depicts menacing ocean waves encroaching on eroded shoreline.

For me, the show's high points are works that attempt to forecast the future, as opposed to presenting us with a sobering reminder of looming environmental crises and challenges. Some depict an expansive, even hopeful future, like Anke Bauer's "Switch Your Mind Off" (2005), showing people enjoying the scenery from a futuristic viewing platform. But most are pessimistic, with an abundance of images of post-apocalyptic landscapes in which the conditions for life on this planet are imperiled, and humans are all but extinct.

These kinds of artworks reveal — at times in nauseating detail — a moral imperative behind the environmental cause. I mean, who would want to live in a world resembling the abject, repellent

places depicted in the paintings here by Scott Anderson, Erik Benson, Kirsten Deirup, Angelina Gualdoni and others? These artists flirt with visions of dystopia, imagining the human world in ethereal degrees of decay and destruction. In Ms. Deirup's "Mayor of Doubt" (2006), the world is reduced basically to rubble.

If nothing else, the bluntness and desperation suggest a widespread anxiety over the need for solutions to the serious problems we face, reminding us that environmental consciousness begins at home, and sometimes in the studio.