

Overview



Sylvia Plimack Mangold, *Pin Oak Detail*, 1999. Color drypoint with spit bite aquatint. Paper size: 20 x 16"; image size: 11 x 9". Edition 50. Printed by Case Hudson.

Why Draw a Landscape?

A New Book and a Portfolio of Prints

Why draw a landscape now, in the 1990s, soon to be the 2000s? Is this subject too old-fashioned for advanced artists of today, for artists who are participating in the philosophical dialogue of our time? "My work doesn't look radical, but I am looking for something new, something to satisfy my curiosity," says Sylvia Plimack Mangold.

Sixty or seventy years ago, before the Great Depression and World War II, people in our grandparents' generation were pretty confident that truth existed. They believed it was possible to understand the world as it is, always and forever.

They thought tapping into the grand scheme was worth trying, even though only a few souls, whom they called geniuses, could finally make observations, discoveries or inventions that would move forward the body of human knowledge. Now, I think we have a different idea about the world and about the nature of creative work.

"I think it's a case of painting what I'm at home with, what's at hand," says Jane Freilicher. And poet John Ashbery

explains that Freilicher's paintings "are really revolutionary, given that lasting revolution comes about only as the by-product of small events that may go unremarked at the time they happen."

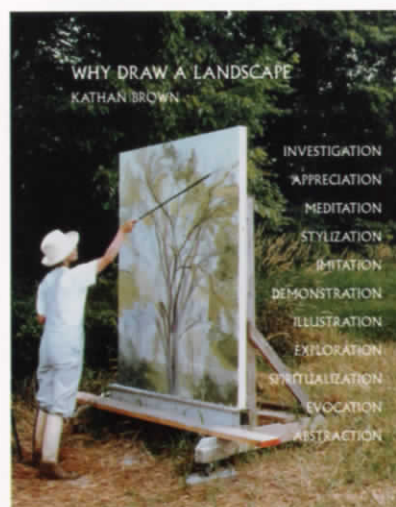
As the recent past has unfolded, more and more people have begun to think of life as being in bite-sized pieces and consequently have been accomplishing things without pretensions of understanding everything about those things. We know how to get the information we need in order to do something. We do it and wait to see what happens next. We expect things to change.

Freilicher's work began to be recognized in the 1950s, just after the heroic period of Abstract Expressionism. She moved away from Abstract Expressionism without rejecting it, keeping its sense of paint but adding figuration, especially landscape, which she describes as a "kernal" to split open.

Ed Ruscha, who came to attention in the 1960s in the early period of Pop Art, also began with Abstract Expressionism, but he rejected it, especially the belief in complete spontaneity as a guiding force. "I think an artist has to negate one thing in order to move on to something else," Ruscha says. "So, it became a question of either loading the brush with color and attacking a canvas—or something else, something preconceived. I took the second way."

In the 1970s, art went in wildly different directions, from Realism to Conceptual Art, but most of the artists of the time thought about what art is and how it works. Realism came in two varieties. Artists like Sylvia Plimack Mangold worked directly from nature. And artists like Robert Bechtle worked from photographs.

Bechtle paints cars and suburban California houses, he says, "because I know about them and I like the way they look." But he is also thinking about the camera and its effect on the way we see things. In Bechtle's work, we sense that the light will be different in a few moments, the shadows



Why Draw a Landscape? 107 pages, 90 illustrations, 83 full color. Published by Crown Point Press, 1999.

Sylvia Plimack Mangold

Jane Freilicher

Pat Steir

Ed Ruscha

Robert Bechtle

Tom Marioni

David Nash

Bryan Hunt

April Gornik

Joan Nelson

Anne Appleby



Jane Freilicher, *Late Afternoon, Southampton*, 1999. Color spit bite aquatint with hard ground etching and drypoint. Paper size: 16 x 20"; image size: 12 1/4 x 14 7/8". Edition 50. Printed by Daria Sywulak.

stronger and longer. A car will move. A person will appear. Bechtle reflects a world in flux, even if movement is not actually shown.

Pat Steir in the 1970s was a painter influenced by Conceptual Art, working with words and symbols and marks. As time went on, she changed. "The self is like a bug," she says. "Every time you smack it, it moves to another place."

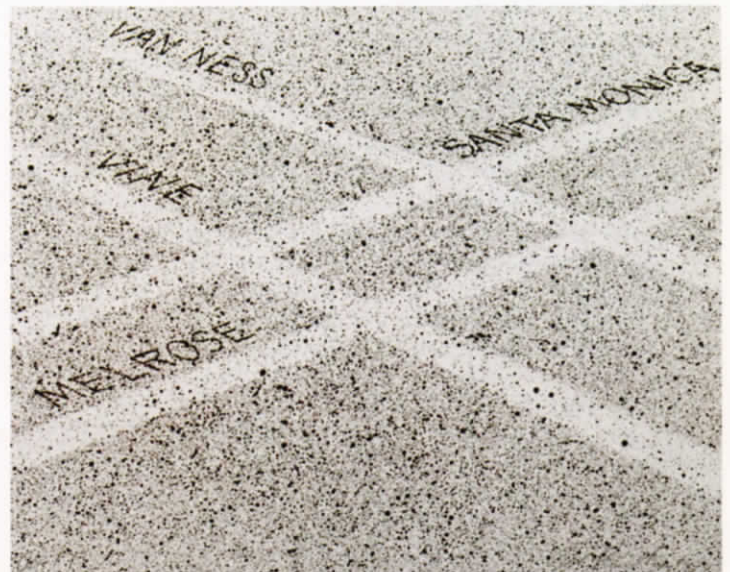


Pat Steir, *Tiny Green*, 1999. Color soap ground aquatint with drypoint. Paper size: 20 x 16"; image size: 15 1/4 x 11 1/4". Edition 50. Printed by Dena Schuckit.



Tom Marioni, *Process Landscape*, 1998. Color spit bite aquatint. Paper size: 20 x 16"; image size: 15 1/4 x 10". Edition 50. Printed by Paul Mullooney.

Since 1980 her work has been mainly landscapes made by throwing paint at the canvas, showing movement and change physically in the work.



Ed Ruscha, *Van Ness, Santa Monica, Vine, Melrose*, 1999. Direct gravure. Paper size: 16 x 20"; image size: 16 x 20". Edition 50. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

Tom Marioni, a Conceptual artist of the 1970s, integrates life and art in his work. He believes that "art is anything done well. And by 'well' I mean 'great,' like corn-on-the-cob cooked to the moment of perfection."

Marioni's landscape works demonstrate the processes used to make them. One is titled, for example, *Landscape Made in a Bottle*. He says that Conceptual artists don't define themselves by their materials as painters do, but are free to use any material. They are mainly sculptors who think about forms in space rather than illusions of space, and they are making "a poetic record of the culture."

Sculptor Bryan Hunt, who came to prominence in the 1980s, works poetically, and also uses an exploratory, somewhat scientific approach. In this he is influenced by Conceptual Art, although at the same time by working in bronze he deliberately rejects it. His bronze works, often of waterfalls and lakes, explore subjects not usually associated with that material. "Standing next to a river's rapids, you can see the form in an eddy," he says. "It exists as a shape, you can almost sense the movement. But at the same time it is constantly moving and changing."

Painter April Gornik attended the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in the 1970s. Illusion was frowned upon. Students were advised to think about materials and process as the key to art, to explore structure and language. Painting was considered dead.

But, a year after graduating, Gornik was painting. Not only was she painting, she recalled later, but she was doing "the most black-sheep kind of painting you could possibly be doing—landscape."

David Nash, also an artist of the 1980s, accepted Conceptual Art. The etching he contributed to this book is an illustration of a landscape he is creating. It shows a ring of ash trees after twenty-two years of growth during which he has been mulching, pruning, and grafting them. By the year 2007, thirty years after he planted them in 1977, the trees will have formed a living dome.

"The Ash Dome is about a human being engaging with the elements, engaging with the reality of change," Nash explains. It is a long-term commitment, and the work itself illustrates a faith in the future. "People's art represents their



Bryan Hunt, *Small Cairn*, 1998. Color sugar lift and soap ground aquatint with soft ground etching and drypoint. Paper size: 20 x 16"; image size: 11 x 9". Printed by Dena Schuckit.

moral stance in the world. It's an attitude," Nash says.

Joan Nelson is the youngest artist in the book. She doesn't paint actual landscapes but rather works from landscape fragments in paintings of the past. Michael Sugrue, a professor at Princeton University, says "the post-Modern project is interesting, creative, pleasurable world-making," and Nelson is a natural candidate for the post-Modern discussion.

She may agree that her art-making is a kind of world-making, but she is not cool or detached in her approach.



Robert Bechtle, *House Near Stinson Beach*, 1998. Color soft ground etching with spit bite aquatint. Paper size: 16 x 20"; image size: 8 x 12 1/4". Edition 50. Printed by Case Hudson.



April Gornik, *Stepped Waterfall*, 1998. Color direct gravure with spit bite aquatint. Paper size: 20 x 16"; image size: 7 1/4 x 6 1/4". Edition 50. Printed by Daria Sywulak.

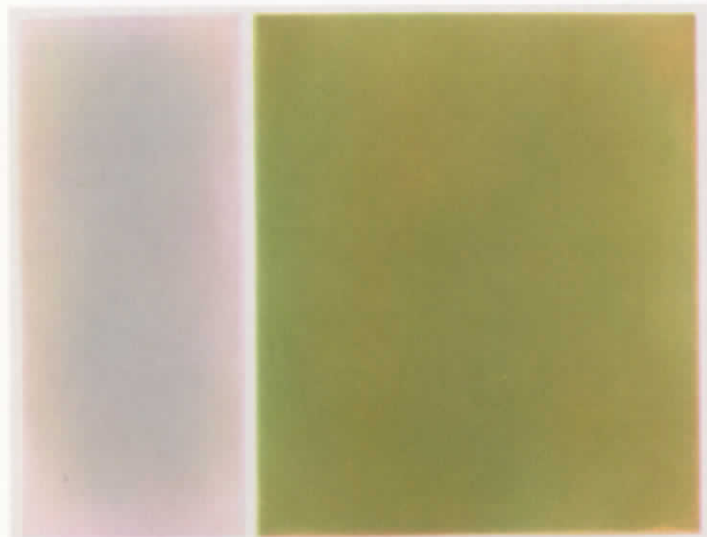


Joan Nelson, *Untitled (#2)*, 1999. Color direct gravure with dry-point and aquatint. Paper size: 20 x 16"; image size: 5 1/4 x 6 1/4". Edition 50. Printed by Daria Sywulak.

She has a passionate regard for the landscape art she uses as her subject. "Sometimes I'm in love with it," she says. "I think it's so great and so perfect."

She says she paints landscape "because it's mild, soft, gentle. And it's equated with beauty. It's a break from everything else. There's so much stimulation in everything." When people combine useful material from the past with what they are doing in the present, they create new continuities, and these fight against the fragmentation that supposedly characterizes our lives.

Joan Nelson and Anne Appleby represent the artists of the '90s in this book. "My paintings aren't about the other world," Appleby says. "They're about our place in this world. What nourishes the soul is the experience of being in the



Anne Appleby, *Winter*, 1999. Color aquatint with burnishing. Paper size: 16 x 20"; image size: 8 1/2 x 11". Edition 50. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

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body." Appleby spent fifteen years in an apprenticeship with a Native American elder in Montana, and her painting is about observing landscape, "watching the cycles of things."

It's interesting that Nelson's work is from secondary sources but is realistic, and Appleby's, which is from her direct experience of nature, is abstract.

I believe the best artists reflect, and sometimes predict, issues of their times in their work. In the course of writing this book, I've come to realize that engagement is replacing coolness. Irony (double meaning) is one way of being cool and defending against instability so, if I'm right, irony may be on the way out as the darling of the art world avant-garde.

In the studio, artists don't often talk directly about fragmentation, instability, and other post-Modern issues. But they do talk about the specific, which they favor as



David Nash, *Ash Dome*, 1998. Direct gravure. Paper size: 16 x 20"; image size: 16 x 20". Edition 50. Printed by Dena Schuckit.

opposed to the general. And they talk quite a lot about change.

I think we are at the point now where we expect things to change. And perhaps we are beginning to take pleasure in change. If that pleasure replaces a fear of instability, we can start where we are and move on. "I believe in intuition and in approaching things as instant gratification. Just do the things you want to do, make the kind of pictures you want to make," advises Ed Ruscha.

Each of the artists in this book has a different answer to the question, "Why draw a landscape?" But I think all eleven artists are similar in their engagement with life, their interest in change, and their confidence in moving forward in their art without grand theories. Anything can happen now.

—Kathlan Brown

Order your copy of the book *Why Draw a Landscape?* from Crown Point Press by sending a check for \$20 plus \$4 shipping, or use your Visa or Master Card.

The eleven etchings are available together in a portfolio case, and also they can be purchased individually.

For more information, please telephone Valerie Wade in San Francisco (415-974-6273) or Karen McCready in New York (212-243-0439).

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