

Nature Sublime: The Paintings of Susan Swartz

BY LOUISE BUYO

THE ENGLISH PHILOSOPHER Thomas Browne once said, "Nature is the art of God." Artist Susan Swartz has taken this tenet to heart in her body of work, which resides in the "intersection between the natural world, spirituality and abstract art." Her expressive abstracted landscapes are influenced as much by her emotional state as by the natural environment she loves.

Swartz has a deep reverence for nature, drawing personal and spiritual inspiration from the scenes she captures in her art. She openly embraces the metaphysical aspect to her work, quite vocally part of a long tradition of artists, writers, musicians and poets who see in the natural world a reflection of the divine. In 2005, Swartz was honored by the Harvard Divinity School for a career that continues to combine art and spirituality.

"I thought, 'How could I try to paint anything other than what God has created?' If I can make people pause and really see what is beautiful and real during this busy age when we all hurry through our lives, looking at so many screens without really seeing at all, if through my painting I could make viewers truly see the unsentimental beauty of nature for one moment, then I have met my goal.

"Because nature is the physical manifestation of Divine Love. Because nature sustains us. And because we seem to have forgotten these truths."

After years of working in a more realistic style painting traditional portraits and still life, personal tragedy led Swartz to make a fundamental creative change in both her creative outlook and her studio practice. Diagnosed first with mercury poisoning and then

with Lyme Disease, she has struggled with chronic illnesses for more than a decade.

"My approach has evolved in large part due to my illnesses and my spiritual experiences. Now, instead of painting from an image, I paint from my soul.

"My paintings changed when I became ill. I was forced out of my comfort zone as an artist, forced to become bolder and riskier in my work. The art I am now creating is more impassioned, more profound, and more achingly full of desire than anything I have created in the past. While I have always enjoyed painting the divine beauty of nature, my two illnesses

have had a profound effect on me, and my work. During my slow recovery, I gained a deeper reverence for all that God created and felt inspired — charged, really — to do all I could to protect the environment in its most pristine form."

Swartz's faith is so close to her experience of each vista that her paintings convey a distinct sense of place. Although she painted panoramas in places as far flung as Africa, in present years she has

concentrated on western landscapes, and her style has developed toward the abstract. Her familiarity with Utah's terrain — its rocks, plains, forests and lakes — is readily apparent. Swartz returns to these subjects again and again, seeing something new in them each time while delighting in the aspects that remain unchanged. Each season, with its distinct colors and quality of light, allows Swartz to see her subject with a different lens.

"It's hard to beat the resplendence of autumn in the mountains, but the starkness of winter has its own austere beauty," she states.

Recently, her career has moved into another stage as her work is now beginning to be shown in museums. Her solo show *Natural Revelations* was exhibited at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts in 2008

and the Springfield Museum of the Arts in 2009. From July to October 2011, her solo exhibition, *Seasons of the Soul*, was displayed at National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, DC.

During the span of her 40-year career, Swartz has used her artwork as a platform to promote her passion for her environmental activism.

"I am committed to celebrating the natural world on my canvases, but I feel it's not enough," she admits. "I approach my paintings right now with an underwritten narrative: an urgent plea to notice, respect and preserve our natural environment.

"My art — like my activism — is a direct reflection of my appreciation for and concerns about the environment. I paint now from a place of spiritual reverence for the natural world and a determination to see it cleaned up and protected." **PA**



Frosty Morning by Susan Swartz. Acrylic on linen, 48" x 48".

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