

ELLIOTT GREEN

PIEROGI

All of the paintings in this book were made after I moved upstate from New York City in 2005. I had thought that my home was in my head, and the ideas and images it produced would be carried independently wherever I went, but the change of place absolutely transformed my work and myself.

The drawings that I made during my last year in Manhattan now feel overcrowded to me: they're filled with figures sharing a small space, so intertwined that it's hard to know whose limbs belong to whom. This period was followed by a two-year stretch when I made no art, and when I returned to it things spread out and the characters morphed into simpler abstract forms I called "personified abstractions." Their behaviors are less territorial, and the airspace around them opens up into an atmosphere that is refreshed by gradually blended tones.

Then in 2011-12, I went to Italy as a Rome Prize Fellow, and landscape entered the scene with the conviction of a protagonist. The paintings expanded with perceivable depth, and a structure was put in place to host several niches of smaller abstract paintings. Each of these are integrated and contribute to enlarge the scope of the picture.

I think merging these two genres adds a new dimension of spliced time and polyvalent meaning. These paintings represent a decade of transformation and have proved to me how noticeable the influence of environment can be on an artist. The landscape metaphor seems the best way for me to express a range of emotions on a single canvas. Emotions are complex because they move very quickly in sequences, and it has been exciting finding a way to convey the passage of time itself through these paintings.

—Elliott Green, 2017

Opposite: *Beach Mountain*, 2015, Oil on Linen, 76 x 54 inches



Opposite: *Human Nature*, 2017, Oil on Linen, 82.5 x 97.5 inches



Opposite: *Human Nature* (Detail), 2017, Oil on Linen, 82.5 x 97.5 inches



Nothing's Ever Standing Still

by Jana Prikryl

Elliott Green's paintings appear to be in continuous motion, the way animals, plants, and ultimately rocks and mountains are in continuous motion, even when our human vision fails to apprehend it. Placing great thick gestures of paint amid minute intricacies and vice versa, his compositions demonstrate the movement of the universe on both the macro and the micro scales. They might appear analogous to the huge, all-but-abstract photographs of Andreas Gursky or Edward Burtynsky (whose high-resolution digital work similarly presents the eye with experiences beyond its capabilities), but Green's paintings are first and last human documents, their rhythms legible to the pulse and not above trying to accelerate it.

That being so, the paintings can't help invoking intellectual movement as well: they set the viewer's mind tumbling toward successive interpretations. The idioms of landscape painting have been set loose on Green's canvases, and we're invited to see top-shelf vistas everywhere — with all that we expect of them: peaks, shores, skies, and the great luxury of distance itself, which signifies time. But when a swath of blue-to-silver or green-to-gray makes contact with another swath of color, the suggestion of mountain or lake is revoked and we're made to see the flatness of the canvas again, the pigment as pigment alone.

Green has said that he works by accretion, layering each canvas with shapes and colors, the result being that substantial histories of composition are hidden under each completed work. Improvisation is central to this method. His lines travel with such elegance that each one exudes an almost physical coolness — you feel Green's assurance with line and volume leaning on the flux of improvisation — and this tension between restraint and randomness forms something like a habitable climate in almost every painting (in a few the climate feels deliberately hostile to life).

Layering seems the subject of Green's *Fist and Shadow*, where most of the canvas is textured with a translucent wash of grayish brown. Sharp, bright shapes are swimming half-visibly beneath it — a rare sight, since Green usually covers earlier actions with opacity. You can hardly help reading the oval on the right as the eponymous fist — its plump contours maybe referencing Green's earlier work, which was often composed around cartoonish humanoids gestured in exquisitely playful lines.

At once the potential for movement is awoken: Will there be impact between this fist and shadow, and what happens to a shadow when it's punched? Rather than being knocked out, it seems likely to disperse and banish light from the land. As is often the case in Green's work, the darkest questions flow from a comic style. Note the shapes that ask to be read as puffs of chimney smoke near the top of *Bone Dust Beach*: they look storybook-harmless, and then they billow into something like a deadly pale zygote tethered in the sky. But perpetrating such acts of narrative on Green's canvases must fill the viewer with ambivalence: you're teased into seeing things that aren't really present. It's almost as if this systole-diastole between interpretation and unprejudiced seeing were the aim of each painting.

Opposite: *Fire Drip*, 2016, Oil on Linen, 76 x 54 inches



The aptly titled *Polyvalence* is a procession of summits, rocky and/or aqueous, each “ridge” filled with layers of color older than its contours. And these aren’t the Berkshires: they’re sublime horizons, a Hokusai idea of what it is to be at one with nature. Yet a crucial polyvalence here and in Green’s other canvases is that many of these lines or ruptures look distinctly inorganic. The wide pipes of color that often snake through his paintings remind me of the ducts in the dystopian masterpiece *Brazil*. Green’s shapes look nothing like ducts and aren’t intended to look like ducts. But in the context of his abstract compositions they look *nearly* representational. And then one of them — in the kind of instant, unlabored allusion that’s at home in his work — forms a near half-circle near the middle of *The Photon Skirt*, echoing the concentric rings of the known universe in Giovanni di Paolo’s compact Quattrocento epic *The Creation of the World and the Expulsion from Paradise*.

So though I’m tempted to use the word sublime to describe Green’s aesthetic, I see that he takes its old definition — the eighteenth-century experience of nature’s grandeur that leads to feelings of awe and perhaps submission before the divine — and keeps only its structure, its method of operating on the mind. The task of Green’s layerings seems to be the posing of this question: Just how much are we able to see without the aid of metaphor? If his paintings are metaphor generators, they make you wonder if it’s possible to see anything without seeing it as something else, something you’ve seen before. What does it take for us to recognize a new phenomenon?

This question is hardly unique to Green or to visual art, but any artist who asks aesthetics to account for itself has an advantage if he or she happens to produce work that’s irresistible. As you look at it, your appetite for its effects becomes a part of the moral biosphere generated by the artist. Green’s paintings seduce the eye while forcing it to reckon with its expectations of beauty. This contradictory operation, so crucial to painters as well as writers at least since the high modernists, acquires in Green a practitioner who may put just a lick more emphasis on seduction rather than interrogation. These canvases assume we already know how to look at spare, cerebral art. His paintings see no reason to deny us profusions of virtuosity while inviting us to examine our limitations as viewers of same.

Green’s work is often brought into focus by his titles; the images coalesce like iron filings under the magnetic pull of their names. It may be, for example, that the poppy red near the corner of *Shark Mouth* is neither hostile nor benign, just a morally neutral concentration of carmine; but the title invests the painting’s tight rhythm of curves and angles with the jaunty malignity of a killer that can afford to toy with its prey. We tend to think of the natural world as an ascetic, not just indifferent to us but favoring utility over loveliness and efficiency over pleasure. Yet the splendor of Green’s paintings reminds us that nature can be baroque, its organisms organized to the point of rococo. The threadbare opposition of nature and art — often miscast in aesthetic terms as authenticity versus theatricality — is beautifully scrambled on Green’s canvases. And to appreciate nature’s formality of purpose is to arrive at a fresh vision of our fundamentally human hunger for form.

Opposite: *Fire Drip* (Detail), 2016, Oil on Linen, 76 x 54 inches



Hunger is important to mention because we so often imagine formal questions to be antiseptic or apolitical, living as we do in a time when consumers are eager for memoir, personal confession, the who not the how of a thing. Yet a painting like Green's *Expander*— which seems to me a bold series of formal departures, suggesting the unceasing incursions of time's fourth dimension into what we know as the first three and thereby straining an identity's need for coherence, while refusing such readings in just the polyvalent way that, say, Emily Dickinson's "My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun - " resists paraphrase— a painting like *Expander* operates like an expander on the mind, inserting thoughts (see my foregoing m-dashes) while earlier thoughts are still forming.

The result is that *Expander* is a genuinely moving experience. Some durable alloy of gentleness and power emanates from it; the encounter in the top half between the strip of grey-to-silver and the conical form of pale aquamarine generates its own weather, as if a front of low pressure had rolled in and precipitation resulted between viewer and canvas. That a painting so meticulously made should prove so emotional is a paradox that sustains all of Green's work.

Jana Prikryl's first book of poems, The After Party, was published in 2016. Her essays on photography and film appear regularly in The Nation and The New York Review of Books, where she works as a senior editor.



Opposite: *Polyvalence*, 2013, Oil on Linen, 36 x 60 inches



Opposite: *Generator*, 2017, Oil on Linen, 36 x 40 inches



Opposite: *North of the Hippocampus*, 2017, Oil on Linen, 18 x 24 inches



Opposite: *Fatty Mist*, 2016, Oil on Linen, 18 x 24 inches



Opposite: *The Photon Skirt*, 2015, Oil on Linen, 36 x 60 inches



Opposite: *Bone Dust Beach*, 2013, Oil on Linen, 36 x 60 inches

Mineral Ancestors, 2017, Oil on Linen, 77 x 137 inches





Opposite: *Hunger*, 2017, Oil on Linen, 36 x 40 inches



Opposite: *Psychoid Moraine*, 2016, Oil on Linen, 18 x 24 inches



Opposite: *Expander*, 2016, Oil on Linen, 18 x 24 inches



Opposite: *Sorth of Nouth*, 2017, Oil on Linen, 36 x 40 inches



Opposite: *Double Morning*, 2017, Oil on Linen, 36 x 40 inches



Opposite: *Shark Mouth*, 2014, Oil on Linen, 24 x 32 inches



Opposite: *Fist and Shadow*, 2014, Oil on Linen, 20 x 28 inches

Elliott Green was born in Michigan in 1960. He moved to New York City when he was twenty-one and lived there for twenty-four years. In 2005 he moved to Athens, New York, a small town situated between the Catskill Mountains and the Hudson River. Along the way he received a John Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, and the Rome Prize in 2011.

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Edition of 500