

Robert Bordo at Alexander and Bonin

by

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Robert Bordo started exhibiting his work in New York during the late 1980s. Since then, his intimate, unabashedly sensual paintings have attracted a small but devoted following. Bordo has worked in series, his conceptually structured, yet decidedly intuitive, paintings exploring a number of recurring and often overlapping themes. It would be accurate, though misleading, to say that landscape has been the most prominent theme; misleading because of the indirectness with which landscape actually figures in his works—which is to say, more as trope than as genre. For example, during the mid-to-late 1980s, Bordo elaborated upon a metaphor in which he compared painting to mapping. Some of these works mimicked the look of weathered maps, their alternately liquid and granular surfaces evoking golden land masses and clear blue seas; or darker lake districts that could resemble scary, cockeyed Rorschach tests. Still other works from that time approximated snowy monochromes, their surfaces revealing, and sometimes concealing, silk-screened fragments of the actual maps that daily pinpoint geopolitical hot spots in the pages of the New York Times.

Such works compared the mapmaker's methods to the meandering process of material and psychological exploration that intuitive painting entails. But it was also pertinent to the meaning of these works that they emerged at a time when American cultural life was dominated by debates about borders and boundaries, race and ethnicity, gender and sexual difference—in a word, multiculturalism—which encouraged some viewers to read Bordo's otherwise intensely personal paintings in political terms as well.

A parallel situation emerged in the early 1990s, when Bordo proposed an even more discrete metaphor in a series of monochrome paintings that were either immaculately white or a dark gunmetal gray. In these works, the process of painting began with the silk-screened imprint of a grid whose every square was bisected by a single "s" curve. Bordo

appropriated this pattern from American quiltmakers who refer to it as a “drunkard’s path.” Comprised, once again, of thin layers of liquid paint, the fragile surfaces of these paintings preserved textured traces of the underlying geometric patchwork. But the surfaces also bore the trace of one other element: the ghostly, handpainted outline of an empty comic-strip speech balloon—a speech balloon devoid of speech. Viewers might interpret these works in aesthetic terms as, say, a comical reference to intuitive painting as a “drunkard’s path”; or to the muteness of monochrome painting as painting’s putatively historical end-of-the-line. Was it also pertinent to the meaning of these works that they emerged at a time when the social, political, and cultural life of (gay) communities in and outside of New York City was dominated by the ravages of AIDS? For viewers whose lives were being unalterably affected by the epidemic, the iconic reference to speechlessness might well combine with the underlying reference to quilts—or rather to the Names Project AIDS quilt—to endow these unassuming works with public meaning as well.

Landscape or, more precisely, the memory of landscape informs the ten paintings comprising Bordo’s most recent exhibition. Landscape underlies the shape of each work in which the ratio of width-to-height is always more than two-to-one—a distinctive format that suggests a panoramic vista. Typical of the series as a whole, Azusa (1999, 66 x 150 cm) and Spare Room (1998, 32.5 x 74.9 cm) are painted from edge to edge with an unmodulated, matte ground color that helps to establish the decorative tone and emotional pitch of each painting: a crisp though hardly cheerful grayish green in the former; a nocturnal blue-gray in the latter. Clustered near the center of Azusa, and somewhat less tightly centralized in Spare Room, are what, especially from a distance, read like small, rectangular landscapes—their boundaries distinctly drawn in Azusa, loose and ambiguous in Spare Room. Unlike the flatly applied ground color that surrounds and sometimes invades their space, these landscapes sketches are rendered in a painterly yet precise manner. In each work Bordo constructs a palette, an arrangement of premixed colors that is

keyed in to the ground color: creamy pale yellows, warm and cool blues, gray greens, browns and mauves in Azusa; muted blues, greens, and warm, rosy grays in Spare Room.

According to the gallery's press release, the idea for these paintings derived from arrangements of picture postcards tacked up to a wall. And although one can grasp this prosaic motif in the final works, what results is a far more baffling combination of abstract and representational painting, of abstract and representational spaces that combine with the carefully calibrated harmonies of color to elicit idiosyncratic responses in the susceptible viewer. Perhaps it was it the combined effect of those muted color harmonies, of the shallow, wholly imaginary space in which the landscape passages coexist that made me think about remote times and places, such as the lake surrounded by rolling hills at the camp in Maine where I spent my summers as a child, or the striking blue tint of the distant Catskill mountains late on a winter afternoon during a visit to upstate New York. Was it specific landscape passages or the overall tonalities in Somewhere Before (1998) that summoned my longstanding affection for the mid 19th-century French landscape paintings of Corot? Whatever the cause, I was then also reminded of the way Corot's nostalgic landscapes had fueled the fantasy life I sustained as a young adolescent, fantasies that enabled me to escape to what I was certain were other, more felicitous times and places. Such chains of association are necessarily indirect; and where they lead can be just as unpredictable. Only now does it dawn on me that the combined comfort and sadness that I felt in apprehending the dim blue-green light of Somewhere Before resulted from something other than purely abstract sensual pleasure—or, rather, that such sensual pleasure may not be so purely abstract after all—since looking at the painting had actually put me in mind of my mother's bedroom in the house where I was raised in postwar Montreal.

I wonder whether Bordo, who like me is an expatriate Montrealer, has ever associated the imaginary spaces of landscape painting (19th-century French or otherwise) with the sometimes comforting and sometimes harrowing spaces of "home"; or with the

still more private register of a youthful fantasy life. There is something about the configurations of landscape in his paintings—about their containment within the larger expanses of color that they float in as if in so much amniotic fluid that conveys interiority, as well as vulnerability and defense. As the viewer moves in to get a closer look, what reads from a distance as “landscape” breaks apart into the play of so much abstract color, shape and painterly texture, as if to remind us that these delicate paintings, like some memories and landscapes, require the protective safety of distance.

Bordo’s recent paintings propose a sense of landscape that is more emblematic of the interior life of the mind than of nature per se. And this helps to explain both the nonspecific nature of the landscape passages—their conceptual landscape effect—and the neutral, abstract nature of the space that contains them. One painting in particular offers helpful clues to comprehending the series as a whole, as well as to explaining the associative effect that individual works have on individual viewers. Unlike the other paintings in the show, the rectangular landscapes in this work meander across the breadth of the painting to form a slow, drooping wave. Combined with the painting’s title—Sleeping In (1999)—this composition describes a familiar state of mind in which one hovers at the edge of wakefulness after a night of sleep, prolonging the luxurious free play of associations, ideas and emotions as consciousness crystallizes and the ego rouses one minute only to dissolve into sleep and more dreams the next.

As in Bordo’s earlier works, landscape continues to function as a trope in his recent paintings. These “landscapes” are neither metaphorical in the Expressionist sense of landscape as the malleable stuff that artists shape in order to express private states of mind; nor quite in the Surrealist sense in which landscape becomes dreamscape—the field in which dream fragments accumulate. In Bordo’s paintings, fragments of landscapes become links in an associative chain of rational and irrational ideas and emotions that inform psychic life. In this sense, these allegorical works attest to the existence of an interior life whose details may be private, but whose structure is universal.