

Gregory Amenoff: Renewing Romantic Mystical Nature Painting: 1997

Essay by Donald Kuspit

WHAT A FUNNY WAY TO BEGIN an essay on a fin de siècle post-avant-garde twentieth century painter: with a pile of quotations from nineteenth century poets and thinkers. And yet the seemingly old-fashioned idea they express—their moral romance with nature—remains as fresh and relevant to our lives as it did when it was first enunciated. Indeed, more relevant, for the ways of men seem more offensive than ever. And the ways of art have become offensive: the prevailing conceptual orthodoxy or neo-avant-garde art has left art emotionally bankrupt. Neo-avant-garde art claims to carry the banner of avant-garde art, but it has none of its spirit, if all of its hubris, which is one definition of decadence. This is part of what it means to say that it is avant-garde art petrified—avant-garde art without the fragile balance between heuristic method and archaic emotion that underlay its innovations: neo-avant-garde art reifies innovation into novelty and upsets the balance, leaving a dispirited intellectuality in its wake. In contrast to neo-avant-garde art, the romantic belief in the healing, restorative power of nature, and in art's capacity to distill and convey that power—mediate it in a so-called therapeutic landscape, emotionally resonant with the possibility of self-renewal—seems the only adequate response to such decadence.

Amenoff's paintings pick up on a seemingly marginal aspect of modernism, one that has been regarded as beside the main thrust of its development, supposedly beside its main point of conceptual purification of art—yet that flourished unapologetically in the United States, from the nineteenth century Luminists and Albert Pinkham Ryder to Charles Burchfield, Arthur Dove, and Marsden Hartley in the twentieth century, to name only artists with whom Amenoff feels affinity. This strongly suggests that their nature mysticism—their spontaneous passion for unpolluted nature, and evocation of it as a Divinity, in Wordsworth's sense—has inner necessity. Nature mysticism continues to have appeal because it speaks to a need that has become impossible to satisfy in the modern urban world, that is, in the same claustrophobic cities, full of pseudo-humanity and rank artificiality, in which it originated. Amenoff's paintings attempt to satisfy it, and, like the best romantic nature painting, reach toward mysticism to do so, for only at the orgasmic extreme of mysticism can there be complete satisfaction of a need that has been systematically repressed.

In Amenoff's paintings, modern romantic nature mysticism makes one of its strongest, most defiant statements, coming into its own again, and, perhaps most crucially, offering itself as the healthy fin de siècle alternative to neo-avant-garde decadence. They offer a way out of the impasse of self-styled progressive conceptual modernism by regression to modernism's earliest, most romantic "theory" of the function of art: art is to serve humanity by distilling and mediating a sublime image of nature, presenting it as a beacon of hope in a dehumanizing society. This gave art faith in itself—a brave, new, modern sense of purpose in a brave, new, modern world which threatened to dismiss it as the relic of an old, obsolete, traditional world. In Amenoff, sublimity commemorates—mourns—a nature that has come to seem doomed: no doubt it will continue to exist "technically," in the attenuated, ghettoized form of gardens and parks, where it is preserved but subtly devalued, but it will never again be the force it was for the nineteenth century romantics. That force can now only live in art—in Amenoff's paintings, where his gesturalism communicates and idealizes it. They make it clear that nature's phenomenal appearance no longer matters, only its numinous meaning, which must be preserved. There is no nostalgia—no facile historicism—in this, only emotional necessity.

Thus Amenoff's saturnalian gesturalism mystifies Ruskin's stone and cloud—and pine tree and ocean, sunlight and starlight—completely undermining their conventional appearance, which remains evident, however distorted, in traditional romantic nature painting. In Amenoff's paintings natural phenomena are barely recognizable, not because they have been altogether distorted, but because they have been completely transformed: they exist as aura rather than substance. They have been transcendentalized—spiritualized—to the extent that they can no longer be thought of or even seen as natural phenomena. Amenoff has carried the romantic project of revelation—the project of Blake, Emerson, Ruskin, and Wordsworth, among other romantic thinkers—to a climactic conclusion: natural phenomena are stripped of their materiality to reveal their innate "supernatural" character. For Amenoff, as for all the romantics,

nature is a sacred reality that seems profane to mundane eyes, which is why one needs the eyes of art to see it. The transcendentalist ambition is to display the inner divinity of nature, and to show that it can only be grasped in and through passion, and that once passionately experienced it radically changes human life for the better: it answers one's deepest need for change-the need to change oneself.

Amenoff transcendentalizes nature not only because it is inherently worthy to do so, as well as the subliminally basic task of modern art, but in response to the modern need for nature, as I have suggested. This need has grown stronger than ever, as through to undermine the foundation of modernity, which involves not only a Faustian will to master nature, but ultimately to eliminate it. Replaced by a world totalized by technology, nature becomes a mirage. Thus, while it is hard to know what is special about nature in our increasingly unnatural world, and to recognize that we remain part of it however removed from it we think we are, we continue, however unconsciously, to feel the need for a passionate, unpressured relationship with it as an antidote to the daily pressure of our lives. The need is too strong for nature, however lovingly, and assume that the contemporary viewer will get the spiritual point-to experience natural fact as spiritual fact is "no longer enough to establish an intense, convincing, consummate relationship with it." In our secular world nobody believes such symbolic correspondence: nobody has a direct spiritual relationship with nature, as the first romantics did, and it seems naive to have the faith necessary for such a relationship. In our time, the point must be forced, as Amenoff does, by carrying it to a seemingly extravagant, even absurd artistic extreme, where the passion for nature becomes inalienable, thus ending our alienation from our own nature.

We have then, ironically, come to the emotionally decadent point where only are can acknowledge and satisfy our profound need for a "peak experience," to use Abraham Maslow's term, of nature. Amenoff's art, which affords such experience, is no doubt socially and artistically advanced modern art and technologically advanced modern society: what Erich Fromm calls the psychic need for transcendence, which bespeaks the fact that "man transcends all other life because he is, for the first time, life aware of itself." Thus Amenoff's modern nature painting represents modern life's deepest self-awareness, indeed, its secret self-criticism.

Amenoff is an important painter not only because he is heir to the great tradition of romantic nature painting, but because he renews faith in nature without sentimentalizing it-renews it with a certain rugged, almost harsh, and peculiarly tragic undertone, which seems specifically American, as the paintings of Burchfield, Dove, and Hartley indicate. It is this tragic ruggedness that radicalizes their paintings, and that Amenoff carries to an extreme from which there seems no return to the matter-of-fact representation of nature. Indeed, the tragic vehemence of his image of nature is an aggressive critique of the sterile, matter-of-fact appearance to which it has been reduced in photography, which has become the commonplace, even puerile (as Baudelaire suggested) means of representing-and commodifying-it. Thus Amenoff's mystical nature paintings are not only an important alternative to avant-garde art-a way of underlining the fact that it has become academic, redundant, and commercial, that is, decadent-but to the mechanical standardization of natural appearance. Where photography tends to make nature look inorganic, artificial, mummified-as static as a clothes dummy-Amenoff's painterliness restores living process to its appearance-the same organic process that Pop art mocked and denied. Pop art, by reason of its capitulation to urban industrial imagery and commodity photography-clearly for the sake of capitalist success-was the beginning of the end of avant-garde art, its self-destructive handwriting on the wall, and Amenoff's elated gestural painting can be read as a rebuttal of it and all it stands for.

Thus Amenoff's mysticism is a form of social and artistic subversion and resistance, all the more so because it signals the possibility of "an original relation to the universe," as Emerson called it, in a society in which it seems impossible, a society too disillusioned and faithless-too scientifically enlightened-to believe such a relation is possible, or even meaningful. "Why should we not enjoy" such a relation, Emerson asked, never realizing that it would one day be regarded as a decadent response to social progress, rather than a healthy response to social pathology. But Amenoff's paintings convince us that even in our technological society it is possible to have an original, inspired relation with the universe. Indeed, they suggest that it is something we should consciously strive for-a romantic vision of the universe that may seem absurd from an everyday perspective, but that ultimately makes more emotional sense.

As their titles suggest-they come from Blake's Songs of Experience-Amenoff's series of nature paintings range far and wide, reaching high into the sky and deep into the sea: on the one side The Starry Floor (all 1994) and The Starry Pole (1994-95), on the other The Wat'ry Shore (all 1995). But whatever their ostensible site, the same mystical, visionary point is made again and again: the primordial sky above and the primordial earth and sea below are linked, indeed, all but one, whatever their apparent differences. They sky has roots of light in the earth and sea: one sees them reaching down, no doubt deep below the surface, in "The Wat'ry Shore" and "The Wat'ry Shore II". In "The Wat'ry Shore III" a tree of light is suspended above the earth, as though uprooted from it. In "The Wat'ry Shore IV" dazzling circles of light are set within a sky that seems to be raw terrain, as the earth color mixed with its blue suggests. Light suffuses the earth in "The Wat'ry Shore VI": Blake's holy light dematerializes the earth, turning it into a sacred substance. In "The Wat'ry Shore I" striations of light echo the curvy of the shore, as though they were partners in a dance the movement of one reciprocated in the shape of the other. In "The Wat'ry Shore V" triangular shapes, presumably pines, are tinged with light from the circular stars above-stars that, however remote, seem to exist on the same plane as the trees.

In all these works Amenoff seems to view the earth and sky and sea from an infinite distance above them-sub specie aeternitatis. This universal point of view sets their finitude in bold, dynamic outline: their form is all force, their material is excited energy. The Starry Floor and The Starry Pole series make the perspective of revelation explicit: the stars are larger and more glowing-fiery-than ever, as though we are viewing them up close rather than from a distance, as in The Wat'ry Shore series, and climactic, crucial new element is added-the starry pole, a sturdy vertical, as thick as the trunk of a large tree, that directly links heaven and earth. It is in effect a Jacob's ladder-a visionary pathway along which the stars move, more mysterious than ever, like Blakean angels in abstract disguise. This vertical appears, already outsized and burning bright-glowing with extraordinary presence-in "The Starry Floor IV" and "The Starry Floor VI". Growing out of the earth-indeed, seeming to shoot out of it like a rocket-it spreads to form a heavenly platform, a kind of launching pad for angels. It is the centerpiece of all the works in The Starry Pole series, generally sky blue in appearance, although one is the color of radiant sunlight. In "The Starry Pole I" and "The Starry Pole III" it seems to be accompanied by the tangle of a burning bush-the same volcanic burning bush out of which the pole seems to grow in "The Starry Floor IV" and "The Starry Floor VI", and a huge bush which seems to have burnt itself out, becoming a charred root, in "The Starry Floor I." There are other omens-heavenly and elemental signs, intimidating and full of foreboding in The Starry Pole works, as there are in all of Amenoff's images-but in The Starry Pole they seem more abstract. However derived from geomorphic heaven or biomorphic earth, and gesturally intense and tangled, they belong to neither: they have become universal. An original relation to the universe transforms its appearances so that they become transcendental symbols-enigmatic emblems that bespeak the universe's own mysterious originality. Amenoff's visionary paintings are about the problem of origin, not as a concept or a literal moment, but as a certain kind of experience of being.

All of Amenoff's paintings are a compound of dark earth and illumined sky, which seem to be locked in a Manichean struggle as well as a loving embrace. This paradox-"mystification"-is crucial: the sense of transformation-and transvaluation-in process is crucial to the visionary effect. A certain tendency toward extremes-apparently irreconcilable opposites-is also necessary: broad planar handling, as in the smoldering dark blue lower section of "The Starry Pole IV" and the upper section of "The Starry Floor III", contrasting with violently busy, dense, raw-gritty-gesture, as in "The Starry Pole I" and, in a different tone, "The Starry Pole III." The calm and tranquility of "The Starry Floor V," with its balance of bright blue sea, luminous pines, and dark sky, with red stars is rare. "The Wat'ry Shore V" is another example of a relatively balanced work-a stabilized scene, in which all the natural elements are at peace, however uneasily. In fact, balance is always precarious in Amenoff's pictures, and lack of balance-a sense of the impossibility of balance, in the midst of what seems like a struggle to achieve balance-reigns in most of them, as the stunning disproportion between earth, water, sky, and the light in The Wat'ry Shore indicates. Again and again such disproportion between the elements manifests itself-"The Starry Floor II" is another stunning example-suggesting that Amenoff is more interested in conflict than its resolution, which at best occurs fitfully. For all the apparent coherence of Amenoff's pictures-a scene, however strange to ordinary eyes, is clearly recognizable-they are a sum of wild fragments that do not add up to an integral whole. No doubt this

contributes to their visionary character: the ordinary world of appearances is shattered, and the fragments become luminous with mysterious significance.

Art historically, Amenoff's paintings belong to the American transcendentalist tradition of visionary landscape, as I have argued, and specific influences can be traced. But Amenoff never simply takes them over and touches them up; he is not just another postmodern historicist, adding an ironical twist to what he appropriates. On the contrary, he is anti-ironical, and realizes that the past had a certain vision of reality that must be recovered however irrecoverable and unrealistic it seems today. It must be taken seriously, for our own good, for it has something to give us that we have forgotten how to give ourselves. The credibility of Amenoff's appropriations comes from the fact that he renders them dynamically and abstractly, thus ending their art historical petrification and estrangement. They become dialectical structures rather than sanctimonious reifications. Unresolved dialectic is in fact at the core of Amenoff's paintings, as I have suggested, and it is operational in his relationship to his sources. "The Wat'ry Shore IV" is a case in point. It is derived from Ryder's famous marine landscapes, but luminous sky and dark sea are more fused and confused in Amenoff's marine landscapes: in Ryder they remain clear and distinct-puritanically separate, while in Amenoff they are set in dialectical motion-erotically interpenetrate. The same thing happens in the works derived from Munch: the sky in Munch's *The Scream* reappears in tattered, almost chaotic form, less fixed and more beside itself than anything Munch dared imagine. Similarly, Amenoff's phantom-like forms have a more sinister intensity than those of Munch, and spread like a tumorous growth-the earth brown sky, with its morbid black aura, in "The Starry Floor I" and the amoeba-like form in "The Starry Floor III," are good examples. Amenoff's starry sky is wilder than that of Van Gogh's; so is his light. In general, Amenoff's abstract naturalism is the most intense and dramatic of the entire tradition, which, on its abstract side, culminates with Arthur Dove, whose *Sunrise* series, 1937 seems to be the springboard of Amenoff's work.

Amenoff seems to recapitulate the history of abstraction, but he takes it back to its beginnings, when it was an expression of revelation that walked a fine line between pure expressive form and visionary experience of nature, and the picture was neither all immanent form nor blind emotional response to external nature, but an equivocal compound of both. Where Kandinsky saw through Monet's haystack to the luminous abstract pentagon it was, discarding its naturalness in the process, Amenoff sees its organic truth-luminous vitality-through its abstract form. But he does not so much reverse the process, as struggle to balance precarious truths-the equally endangered truths of radical abstraction and radical abstraction and radical concreteness, truths that are equally impossible to grasp in an ordinary state of mind- all the while knowing that they can never be completely reconciled, for they derive from different, if obliquely related, orders of experience. Each can aid the revelation of the other, but neither by itself is a revelation-this is Amenoff's ultimate point. He suggests that only by renewing the friction between them can each cast serious light on the other.

Thus, where Kandinsky and Mondrian dispensed with and finally destroyed the image of nature for the sake of artistic truth, Amenoff shows that its true image can only be recreated with abstract means. Their fusion makes clear, in an awesome imagistic revelation, that nature is emotionally indispensable. Successfully synthesizing them, Amenoff overcomes the dissociating of sensibility endemic to modernism, as T.S. Eliot observed. Formalist abstraction and photographic representation are its polar opposites. Both secularize art, by undermining its aura and resonance-the aura and resonance of Amenoff's stars-which can catalyze a transvaluative, even sanctifying experience of existence. Amenoff's neo-transcendentalism, as I suppose art historians will call it, convincingly restores aura and resonance to art, suggesting that, however much art's only purpose seems to be to advance and refine style, it can still have a sacred purpose. Artist and viewer may still have to pass through the needle's eye of style, but beyond that the horizon is infinite.