

American Arts

QUARTERLY

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Tom Uttech, *Enigokodeeian*, 2009, Oil on linen, 68 5/8 x 76 1/8 inches

Landscapes of Tom Uttech

This fall, Alexandre Gallery in New York City presented a selection of Tom Uttech's north woods landscapes. Uttech, a veteran artist who was honored with a retrospective at the Milwaukee Art Museum in 2004, finds a pantheistic paradise in the wild places of upper Wisconsin and Quetico Provincial Park in Canada. While he has the keen eye and painting skills to depict the forests and wetlands convincingly, the sheer number of birds and animals he may include in a scene adds an element of fantasy to his compositions. Rejecting the "sterile, vacant" landscape, he told an interviewer in 2001: "The sky is full of moving things. My paintings allude to the life that *can* be there." In a painting from a few years ago, *Nind Awatchige* (2003), a parliament of fowls wings across a pale sky, while wolves and a black bear prowl the tumbledown wood in the foreground. He observed each species with a birder's eye. The level of detail suggests Audubon's illustrations, although Audubon's models were actually taxidermy specimens in staged natural habitats. The conceptual contradictions of Audubon's enterprise have been thoroughly explored in the beautiful large-scale watercolors of the contemporary artist Walton Ford. Uttech's creatures, while improbably numerous, are inseparable from their natural environment. In nature, of course, moving birds would sweep past the eye too quickly for us to note the patterns on their feathers with Uttech's hallucinatory clarity. Yet his compositions remain realistically spacious, in part because of their sheer size—*Nind Awatchige* is 112-by-122 inches—but also because of persuasive spatial recession and a subtle use of light. Slender tree trunks may be as carefully placed as musical measures, but the pink-gold light gives them volume and sets off the shadowy forest floor from the sunlit treetops.

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Uttech documents his forays into the wilderness in black-and-white photographs that are aesthetically compelling in their own right. With their attention to textural detail, these photographs bring to mind Hudson River School artist Asher B. Durand's sketches of rocks and tangled roots. Uttech's oil paintings are more stylized than his photographs, balancing universal themes against his specific terroir. One way he emphasizes the particular locality is through his titles, such as *Enigokodeeian* (2009), taken from the Ojibwe Indian lexicon and often referring to Native American names for lakes. Acknowledging that these names will be "unpronounceable" to most of his audience, he relishes the mysterious, cryptic quality of words used before the encroachments of modern civilization. Uttech alludes to local craft tradition in his handmade pine frames, wide and often decorated with animal silhouettes and pawprints. The frames give the paintings, with their animal-world *dramatis personae*, a folk art feel, although Uttech is anything but a naïve artist.

In fact, he can be placed in the context of long thematic and art historical traditions. One of his themes is "northernness," which C.S. Lewis described eloquently in his memoir *Surprised by Joy* as "a vision of huge, clear spaces hanging above the Atlantic in the endless twilight of Northern summer, remoteness, severity." The American graphic artist and explorer Rockwell Kent (1882-1971) was also enamored of northernness and spent time in Alaska and Greenland. Some of Uttech's paintings have the whiplash graphic energy of Kent's images, especially when Uttech depicts snowy landscapes against aurora borealis sky displays. Occasionally, he moves in the direction of illustration, but Uttech's dense, nuanced painterly detail demands closer scrutiny than Kent's bold Art Deco-inflected designs.

Then German Romantics are perhaps the best known proponents of "northernness," especially when they focus on the quiet of the forest, rather than the sublimity of snow-capped mountains. Many German Romantic paintings include observer figures, often with their backs to us, who become our surrogates in the contemplation of nature. Uttech, too, introduces such a sentinel figure, although it is always an animal. In *Getemakewa* (2009), the sentinel is a bear, rearing upright and looking out at us from his central position in the middle distance. This is a favorite motif of the artist's. Standing like a man but unmistakably and mysteriously Other, the bear seems to have some oracular message to convey. His reflection in a foreground pond doubles his impact. These foreground ponds are crucial to Uttech's compositions: they bring the light and colors of the sky—often eerily beautiful passages of lilac, turquoise and pale gold—into the more shadowy forest areas and create a sense of magical mirrors on the threshold of an alternate reality. Uttech's landscapes are allegories of nature, like the eccentric paintings of Philipp Otto Runge (1777-1810), where infant angels spring from trees and flowers, and mythic created decorative borders with enigmatic symbols to frame his pictures. That natural places have attended spirits is one of the oldest ideas in religious thought. Instead of dryads or angels, Uttech expresses this numinous power through animal figures. In *Enigokodeeian*, the sentinel spirit is a wolf, perched on a crag overlooking the wetlands and a stretch of woodland. The spindly trees with feathery foliage reach toward the luminous sky, but the bowed brown and red-gold branches in the foreground seem locked in the cycle of decay and renewal. Uttech's reverence for nature is obvious, but he does not reduce it to the tame and the pretty. In some cases, his images may become overly schematic, but usually visual complexity wins out. Without being didactic, he reminds us how much we have to lose if we continue to overbuild and pollute. The notion of America as a paradisaical wilderness has long inspired explorers, settlers, writers, painters and conservationists. Uttech makes an interesting contribution to that tradition. The exhibition ran from September 24 to November 19, 2009, at the Alexandre Gallery, 41 East 57th Street. Telephone (212) 755-2828. On the web at www.alexandregallery.com