

BRINGING TO LIFE: TOM UTTECH'S PAINTINGS

Tom Uttech's North is a magical place. For a stranger to the border of Wisconsin and Ontario it could pass for an imagined landscape, but it is actually realism revved up to the nth degree in an extreme case of self-identification with place. "I sit down, stare at the blank canvas, and start to draw a place where I'd like to be," he says. That place is always the north woods, "because that is what I am. It's in my body, that image, what's up there." Despite his passion for the restoration of native plants of the prairie, it is the lakes and swamps, ancient rocks and teeming wildlife of the forest that has been the subject of his art for so many years.

Uttech's commitment to the scrubby natural grandeur and spiritual power of this place is transmitted with extraordinary detail that transcends ordinary experience. The sights come not just one by one, but in multitudes. The deer, bears, wolves, and above all the birds, animate his canvases until they reach a visionary intensity. While the birds are usually in flight and we can almost hear their voices, the mammals are emblematic, still and silent. The looming bears are particularly vibrant presences. They face each other, crowd onto a single boulder, perch on a high rock staring into the distance, or emerge from swirling mists, evoking other worlds. Because of their strength, bears are thought by many indigenous peoples to have special powers. Because of their resemblance to humans, they are often stand-ins for us. In Uttech's work they evoke the strength of nature, and perhaps stand in for the artist himself, as part of the place, as mediators, messengers from the deeper parts of the woods.

Metaphor has always been a way to confront the depths. Uttech does not paint "scenery" so much as he offers metaphors for his exalted encounters with what we call Nature, suggesting that a true landscape is a composite of all the life within it rather than a frozen image of what is seen out the window. Nature confronted on her own turf is always potentially dangerous, and no amount of beauty can erase that undercurrent of anxiety and exhilaration we feel when we sleep alone outdoors or take risks in the wilds in the name of adventure or love of nature. We are at once part of "nature" and separate from it.

Take, for instance, the recent painting *Enassamishhinijweian*. (Uttech concocts his titles from the Anishanabe, or Ojibwe, language, hoping that this is seen as a sign of respect.) It seems literally to depict a sublime, concentric light at the end of the tunnel, shared by the creatures of the land. It could be translated as "hope." Uttech's paintings evoke the infinite diversity of an amazing place like this planet. For nature lovers, naturalists, scientists, and ecological activists – in fact for all of us – they stand for what we have to lose and what we have to fight for.

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