

Essay by John Yau: 2004

Henri Matisse believed that a painting should be what a person dreams of contemplating at the end of the day, after coming home from work. Ideally, this painting offers more than just a comforting respite from the noise of the world, it is able to transport the viewer to a visual paradise. Tom Uttech's landscapes are also paradisaical, but the impulse behind them is the opposite of Matisse's. Speaking about his paintings, the artist has said that he "wants them to persuade you to get up out of your chair, lock up your doors and go out into the woods and see it afresh and join the adventure."

Such blunt sincerity might suggest that Uttech's paintings are either didactic or naive, but they are not. Nor do they offer the kind of release one might expect to find in a luminous landscape painting. Neither escapist nor idyllic, his paintings do not extend out of the Hudson River School, its edenic vision. They are darker and more ominous, and, to my mind, share something with the work of Albert Pinkham Ryder. Some spirit seems to have passed through. Thus, for all their realism, Uttech's landscapes also seem haunted, though in no obvious way. In addition, Uttech is enormously sympathetic to the animals inhabiting his landscape. This empathy sets him apart from most landscape painters. Among contemporary painters, I would suggest he shares something with Walton Ford and Albert York. All three know that we were banished from Eden long ago. And, in different ways, all three are concerned with civilization's relationship to nature. For them, style is not the issue. Rather, how does one articulate a vision that is ethical without becoming didactic. How does one reveal the world one has found?

Using a wide array of painterly effects, none of which become an end in itself, Uttech addresses his passionate fascination with Quetico Provincial Park, a vast, government protected pre-Cambrian wilderness in Ottawa, Canada. Marked by the passage of both deep time and the seasons, and full of all kinds of wildlife, the park is one of the few places where one can discover what this continent looked like before the Europeans arrived. While Uttech is motivated by both his ethical concerns and metaphysical beliefs, what holds our attention is the thoroughness with which he conveys his fascination with this unique ecosystem. Because of his deep-seated desire to submerge himself completely in what he perceives, the artist is compelled to render into paint his capacious recognition of the elemental particulars that populate this complex world, its changing light, clouds, atmosphere, moments of the day and night, different animals, flora, fauna, rivers and pools, reflections and shadows, and particular phenomena such as the Northern Lights and the Aurora Borealis. Uttech's paintings are elemental in their embrace of earth, sunlight, water, and atmosphere. From tree bark to feathers, and from striated rockface to wet fur, he is wondrously attentive to the innumerable textures one finds in nature.

Uttech's determination to submerge himself in the particulars of his world sets him apart from other landscape artists, particularly those who connect themselves to

either a painterly or a photographic realism. Instead of using style to subsume the landscape, he finds ways to transform its variousness into paint. Uttech isn't interested in celebrating paint's ability to generalize or the photograph's ability to make everything an image. A visionary realist, he belongs to a more crucial tradition that understands the natural world to be both sacred and life-sustaining.

Like the classical Chinese landscape painter, Uttech has a metaphysical understanding of the natural world. He believes that in order to paint the mountain, one must become one with it. For both the Chinese painter and Uttech, the point is not to transfer one's observation of exterior likenesses to the canvas, but to live in harmony with nature. The desire to live in harmony with nature's unceasing forces, goes a long way in explaining why both the artist's brushwork and sense of color are always in service of his subject. It is his way of showing respect.

One just has to look at how many different kinds of animals, flora, and fauna populate his work to realize how deeply knowledgeable the artist is about his subject matter. Another artist could build a whole career being preoccupied with just a small portion of the many birds moving through these paintings, none of which happen to be the central point of focus. But for Uttech, the world he honors matters more than his paintings. His pragmatic reverence helps impart a quietly insistent urgency to the paintings.

For Uttech, painting is best way for him to establish a meeting between the viewer and a fertile, unspoiled wilderness. There are two recurring ways he underscores this meeting. One is that the horizon line, which the artist uses to divide the painting more or less in half, feels as if it is where two sharply tilting planes (sky and land) intersect. The severity of the tilting planes pulls us deeper into the painting. Second, near the foreground of this deep and immense space, Uttech often depicts a lone animal, a bear or a wolf who stands or sits near the center of the composition, looking both at and through us, as if we are both there and invisible.

That we feel that we are transparent is something we are meant to ponder. For one thing, it's as if we have left our corporeal bodies behind, but we haven't quite entered this unspoiled, elemental world that is simultaneously dense and open, self-contained and inviting. Instead, we are caught between the world we are in, and the one we are seeing. And this disquieting sense of being disconnected from both ourselves and from the world we are seeing infuses the painting with a moral awareness. When, the paintings ask us, will we finally understand and live in accordance with the world?

If there are other animals in the painting, they are usually passing or flying from right to left. This movement, which is so contrary to our reading habits, causes the viewer to become even more aware of looking. If they are not going towards the right, which we are taught represents the future, then where are they going? Are they doing the impossible and going back in time? The sheer density of these migrations—the sky filled with all kinds of birds and the ground populated by all

kinds of animals—conveys an urgency that we can't quite name. We are stuck with the disquieting sense that these animals are determined to get away from what lies up ahead, in their future and no doubt ours?

In *Nind Awatchige* (2003), the movement of flying and walking animals is simultaneously calm and tumultuous, peaceful and cacophonous. And it is this ambiguity that gets under the viewer's skin? What are they afraid of? Where are they going? The longer one looks at this world, the larger the swirl of unanswered questions one comes to inhabit.

Through his depiction of the foreground, the place where presumably we and the landscape intersect, Uttech underscores the delicate and complex nature of our encounter with this wilderness. In *Nandawendagwed* (2003), the foreground is mostly water, broken stumps rising out of it, fallen trees scattered across it. Water also separates us from the lone, standing bear in *Nin Kabikawa* (2002). Placed in the foreground, these clear, reflective bodies of water function like moats, while, in other paintings, scattered, fallen trees become barriers. The reflections also flatten the painting, make it more frontal, even as we realize how far back the space goes, how sharply the sky sweeps down and how far the land extends in space. As with his brushwork, these formal tensions are always at the service of both the painting's subject matter and meaning.

For while the sharply tilting planes pull us toward the painting's highly articulated deep space, the way there is physically blocked. Even as our sight is pulled into the painting, we realize that we will physically encounter all kinds of natural obstacles, that there are many places and things that we would have to make our way across and around. Seeing becomes an act of visceral awareness, rather than a visual escape. And, as the painting makes clear through the artist's attention to details and specifics, to move in nature requires you become hyper-aware of its contents. For you can neither walk across the water nor step blithely over a fallen tree full of spiky and sheared-off limbs.

Uttech never shows off his incredibly astute pictorial intelligence. Rather, he purposefully fills the paintings with disquieting rhythms and visual conundrums, as a way to nudge the viewer to become ever more attentive and focused, and to connect experience and knowledge. In *Nin Kabikaathe* the sky is luminous, but its light seems not to affect the shadowless landscape below. In the middle ground of *Nandawenddagwed*, the orange light coloring the crowns of the spindly firs seems to be coming from behind where the viewer is standing. At the same time, a large white orb is peeking out from behind the row of trees defining the deep space. By implying that there might be two suns in the sky, the artist sharpens our engagement with the landscape, as well as adds a mythic dimension to the painting. This sense of a dual light is heightened in the night painting *Ganawaabandiwag* (2003), where the northern lights seem alive. And the middle ground of the painting is glowing, as if lit by some internal light source.

He Uttech reinforces this mythic dimension by placing pictographic paw-prints on his beautifully plain, handmade frames. And, as if this isn't enough, one begins to notice the rhythmic echoes of the bent and bowing trees, and the pod-like protuberances defining a tree trunk. In addition to being alluring and enchanting, the wilderness becomes strange. We realize we might have never looked carefully at the world we inhabit. Finally, as with all of his paintings, the title is derived from a Chippewa dictionary, which implies that we remain unfamiliar with both the language and history of this place.

While all these conundrums suggest that one might find it difficult to distinguish between that which is real and that which is fanciful, this is not the case. Rather, one senses the paintings are simultaneously real and mythical. One reason Uttech is able to achieve this seemingly impossible synthesis is because, in contrast to both the Hudson River painters and many contemporary landscape painters with whom he has often been associated, he never idealizes anything. Verisimilitude elevates the painting into a dimension where one must be highly attuned to both nuance and particularity. One must look again and again. And all during that prolonged looking, there is an animal, a bear or a wolf, watching us. We may finally be starting to see this world, this complex wilderness, and certainly that is the artist's hope, but it has been watching us for a long time. I don't think of the bear or a wolf as a surrogate for the artist. Rather, he is a lone sentinel and a messenger, an embodiment of vulnerability. We are charged with protecting this world, insuring its survival and ours.

I think it is necessary to stress that while Uttech makes his own frames, which he marks with silhouettes of animals, pawprints, and even a question mark, they are not meant to define the painting as a discrete, self-contained aesthetic or iconic object. He isn't interested in that kind of art. The trees, horizon, and water extend beyond the painting's edges. Quetico Provincial Park may be a clearly demarcated zone on a map, a well-posted, protected area. But, as Uttech's compositions make clear, the wilderness is connected to the world. It is not simply a park or, to put it another way, an outdoor museum one enters and leaves.

Thus, in defining a situation in which the viewer feels caught between one state and another, Uttech offers another view of the future. The animals may be moving away from the future we have in store for them, but nature in all its splendor is the future with which we will finally meld. As made evident by the boulders strewn in the landscape, a particular night sky, bent and broken trees, rushing waters, this world is constantly being marked by different cycles and passages of time. And the passage of time, as we know, is something none of us ever escape.