

West With the Night

For several years Nathan Abels has made western geography an aspect of his work; old mining debris, miners, the wildlife, or elements of folk legend. The eleven paintings displayed in *West With the Night* are a continuation of that practice, a display of thoughtful immersion into a landscape and environment, yet these current works appear to offer personal, contemplative, and even deeply experiential perspectives. We are given a sort of wandering pilgrimage through the grand cosmic, the symbolic, and the minute biology of the natural world, a layering of views and images that evoke the quiet adventures of a wilderness flâneur, who takes in and combines impressions, not of the boulevard and glittering shop windows of his urban counterpart, but the desolation and stunning vastness of America's west; he moves over sand and rock and enjoys full exposure to the stars and their intricacies, he notices small features of vegetation and ceremonial history; these impressions are the documentation of a fine network of coordinates, a painted philosophy of thinking and living in the West.

The group announces itself counter-intuitively, with a humble painting of a man-built space, a floating window viewed during perhaps dusk, washed away in failing gray-blue light, not delineated as a window should be – for those objects are a perfectly lined, secure item which informs us that we are either indoors or outdoors, (its being open only blends the two in a sensory aspect, and creates its own perception imbalances) – and serves to play with our geographic orientation; are we looking through a window, relaxed in a chair, watching from a slight distance the light recede through sheer curtains or, are we staring back from a small hill, or mountain and taking stock of those confines and our relation to them (this picture seems an undermining of the Romantic image of the window, the lonely figure, and her melancholic *gaze* out to nature.) As the next painting shows, we are outdoors, and the small humbleness of windows gives way, unapologetically, to the epic, cosmic, long watched for comet in the sky.

The holy comet, space matter on fire through the atmosphere, is and perhaps always will be a unique event of awe and inspiration, its bright-blue torch through the night sky catches the eye, stops one, and instantly produces thoughts of scale, universe, maybe heaven and scientific frontiers, but it is to be remembered that humans have watched and recorded these cosmic communications forever. This image has the viewer again consider their perspective (have you ever seen a comet blasting through the sky?) and if either yes or no, have you ever seen such a tremendous streak of blue, jarring and literally alien in our human version of nature. These two initial pictures, in conjunction with one another set the tone for the group; we have become oriented geographically, but maybe more importantly, our mind is directed towards silence and wonder in the sandy openness of the west.

The execution of the pictures themselves, finished in areas with a soft, creamy surface, other portions nearly dissipating, lend themselves to slow method, layer upon layer of thin material, portraying and obscuring, a looped cycle of application and reduction, painting's typical and traditional approach as taken from the example set by the passing of light. The painter's job is to portray thought/emotion, whether representational or not,

upon a surface, making countless decisions all along in regards to application; which lines to blur and cause others to streak out at the viewer; where the paint should become more plastic and another section perhaps merely stained; how much to give the audience as compared to the artist's own expectation of work demanded from them. Though always an exceptional captor of information, line, color, mood, in these newest works Abels has allowed these polarizations of paint application to be more present, there is more artistic exploration happening within the pictures themselves, great technique is still on display, but the varied and looser treatment is more evocative of the mysterious realm he seems to be following; minute details are eschewed for color, tone, and overall texture. The ground of *Still Point* illustrates Abels's recent attempts at this blend, utilizing his typical tendency to create methodical layers of paint into near milky, rich surface, contrasted with the pictorial ground upon which two deer stand, that is comprised of washes, flecks, lines of grass and patches of greens and browns that nearly seem as if they will wash away beneath the subjects. The brilliant lining of sun on the animals' spines and ears act as the ballast between the two fields This loosening is perhaps most displayed in *Carry The Fire*, another nighttime scene, in which a series of campfires, the first large in the lower left corner, gradually recede over the desert and sandstone, beyond a lake, and into the distance, (a manmade mimesis of the stars and comets? An ancient and intuitive communication with the sky? Is it ever just simply camping?) Unlike previous approaches to ground and sky relations, both elements in this picture are executed in a looser, less detailed technique. The combination of blues and rich grays appear washed on, the large central highlight wiped out, across the stony ground; the same approach extends into the sky and clouds. The brilliance of the fire too appears to be layers of wash, and brushed onto the surrounding surfaces. The details are there for sure, but Abels is less concerned about their specific geometry, and is more inclined to their simple existence. This picture brings to mind an underlying precariousness and violence specific to the west; that of the far-off fire. In Cormac McCarthy's novel *Blood Meridian*, in one of the brilliantly executed scenes that is so mythically western, the character known as the Kid is wandering the desert alone – an image in itself loaded with extremity, religious connotations, hallucination; think too on the enigmatic figure moving through and out of the desert in the opening sequence of Wim Wenders's *Paris, Texas* – when he spots a distant fire on the desert floor:

In the distance before him a fire burned on the prairie, a solitary flame frayed by the wind that freshened and faded and shed scattered sparks down the storm like hot scurf blown from some unreckonable forge howling in the waste. He sat and watched it. He could not judge how far it was. He lay on his stomach to skylight the terrain to see what men were there but there was no sky and no light. He lay for a long time watching but he saw nothing move. When he went on again the fire seemed to recede before him. A troop of figures passed between him and the light. Then again. Wolves perhaps. He went on. It was a lone tree burning on the desert.

Carry The Fire is admittedly not so bleak and foreboding as this novel, but the language and symbols of the west have a degree of universality about them, fire meaning both warmth and community on cold desolate nights, but also potential hostility, violence, a fire left improperly extinguished by one of the many campers dotting the western openness goes untreated and meanders through a kindling-stuffed ravine. Abels brings up again this duality in *Low Commotion*, a mid-sized darker painting, taken as a very close,

potentially fatal encounter with an original inhabitant, or less ominously, two creatures in passing. The miniature drama of separate species interacting on and in the land, the view is first person, looking down onto a curved and patterned moving serpent. To read further in the mentioned passage above, we learn that upon reaching the light, the Kid becomes surrounded by the many natural creatures of that wasteland, all sharing his primal need and curiosity for the light. The snake of Abels's painting may be just such a creature; not particularly violent but also not benevolent, simply there in the ancient way nature has always been there and if we choose to share that realm, those creatures owe us nothing and we owe them nearly everything.

We have moved through the nocturnal motions of an owl-cloaked tree and midnight desert, to come to one of the more sizeable paintings that seems to define the coming of day; in *Emergence*, a traditional pole ladder leads up and off the picture plane to the light fused and presumed opening of sky (these clean lines will be the only true geometry in the exhibit.) This piece acts as a visual balance to the other obfuscated and atmospheric work; there is less to decipher visually, nor does it at first reverberate with so much mystery as many of the others do. But it is more anthropological. There is simple and understated, although respectful acknowledgment of the early people who cultivated the region and created a civilization from its resources, who discovered their own gods and spirituality in the sand, the creatures, the rock and presumably the openness that surrounded them. And yet, why is the artist, and by extension, the viewer, there? In that private and foreign space. We with all of our deep and extended "western" cultural touchstones and myths were latecomers to the show, therefore must experience this place as such; and the artist seems to be reminding us, or more so, experiencing with us, the knowledge that our western cultural history and the land we've expanded upon, a place that seems to be endless, is only a partial story overlain on the wider and personal history that has already been lived with and cultivated for millennia.

The remaining pictures are an exercise in calm reflection; *Still Point* offers a gentle moment shared with two grazing deer, the gold of a new morning brightens the picture while we watch. An indicative plant of the west, sage, is portrayed reverently, the small glowing leaves in stark contrast to the blue dunes and nearly black, ominous tree earlier in the perambulation, and a second painting of a sage plant, this time nearly obliterated in a yellow-orange field, verging into dissipated abstraction, and yet in this image, one of the most crucial elements of the west is portrayed in detail and at that almost invisibly, but upon close viewing, a thin spider's web occupies half of the picture plane, to which cling several small droplets of dew. This may be taken as ecological statement, or simple and natural beauty, the work is only asking that we see it, that we linger long enough to recognize its subtleties, the painting itself. In their contrast to the largeness of the earlier paintings (whether in scale or subject) these two paintings of simple plants, and ground life, each complex in their execution, bade us pay attention to subtlety; we have wandered a long ways through the strata of experiential time, and in the end find ourselves looking again at what seems now the strange object of a window, this time gold and white, similarly dissolved, and as the first picture, offering uncertain terms of personal placement. Our relation to interior space is always defined by the outer world; the window is merely the symbol of our non-committal to either. In this quiet gathering of

paintings Abels has brought an uncommon intimacy, perhaps even sentiment, into the gallery space. Through the work, he has asked the viewers to pause for a moment and look at the quietness, the violence, and the indifference of nature to our place and myths therein. These paintings do not bring forward clever and ironic statements, nor do they tempt to pose in political correctness, they really just say that it is cool to wonder, and the world in fact has many quiet wonders. These are earthy and silent paintings that lead a path of moments, but as if often the case with memories, details disappear from memory, and we wander around to have another pass.

-Alan Kitchen