

Ben Whitehouse

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Now that Postmodernism has decentered the self and dematerialized the object, the most innovative and timely work in current art has begun to pick up those deconstructed pieces and explore just what it means for humans to experience and perceive the world in contemporary terms. Much of the discussion comes from artists and thinkers involved in new technologies who are investigating and developing the frontier between the virtual and the actual, or between the cerebral and the visceral. But these issues reverberate widely, and perhaps it is not so astonishing to discover similar concerns embodied in the sensuous landscapes of painter Ben Whitehouse.

Whitehouse, 38, an English citizen who lives in Chicago, can be placed within the venerable British landscape tradition in painting, but his brilliant, lapidary, and monumental (some are ten feet wide) landscapes are not advertisements for old-fashioned ocularism. His ambition—as he has reiterated in statements and lectures—is no less than to reproduce the ontology, or the roots, of

human perception itself. Bolstered by new research that suggests that certain aspects of human perception are universal—that all people tend to “see” the same things because their nervous systems are physically organized in the same way—Whitehouse has set out in his paintings to capture what he thinks might be shared perceptual experience. He wants us to see what he sees, literally. He doesn’t want just the impressionistic play of light on a tree; he wants the reality of the tree, too.

Whitehouse’s landscapes are both crisply specific and purely metaphorical. Most settings such as that seen in *Lagoon (Twilight)* are familiar to Midwesterners: reedy shorelines next to winding waterways or dirt paths. But they are not windows onto outdoor scenes; rather, they are instantaneous yet compressed environments that pull the viewer into the flow of the painting’s movement—one “becomes what one sees,” as the British critic William Feaver puts it. These landscapes represent existential ambitions. Their juxtaposition of beautifully articulated surfaces with deeper symbolic structures sharply evoke sensation—a keen sense of being “there”—and an immanent and persistent sense of recognition.

Polly Ullrich is a writer who lives in Chicago.

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Lagoon (Twilight), 1999. Oil on canvas, 81" x 103".
Courtesy of the artist.

