



A brush with spring at Les Yeux du Monde

Landscaping

by : Sarah Sargent



"America Loves Freedom" is one of Susan Murphy's watercolor urban perspectives on display in the "New Vistas" show. (Courtesy gallery)

As spring rears its lovely head in Central Virginia, "New Vistas" at Les Yeux du Monde features five artists' approach to landscape. Looking around the main gallery space, it's clear the three artists here, Isabelle Abbot, Karen Blair and Janet Bruce, share a love of paint and use brush stroke and gesture with confidence and dash to build up their complex surfaces.

Abbot works in a contemporary impressionist fashion, capturing the effects of light and shadow with forceful slashes of paint. Her color sense is exceptional; she uses inspired choices to portray the quiet grandeur of a woodland vista or snow melting on the edge of a meadow. Abbot has great painterly self-assurance and while I don't think you'd ever mistake "Carolina's Last" for an abstract work, she applies the paint like an abstract painter with brush strokes and juxtapositions of color that have a stand-alone authority.

It's hard to classify Blair's work, which has a stylized, Folk Art quality, but is also very sophisticated with ornate abstract surfaces built up using chunk-like daubs of paint. The highly-keyed palette, gaudy flowers and over-the-top greens, add a light-hearted note and enhance the general feeling of joie de vivre in Blair's work. "Sunrise, Fancy Gap" is almost a visionary painting with the sun's rays streaking the sky acid yellow and gilding the hay bales below. I also loved the bug's eye view of Queen Anne's lace against an azure sky in "Poppies," a painting in which you can almost feel the heat of the sun and the snap of the breeze.

Bruce has a fluid approach to landscape painting. Though her work is based on observation, she also incorporates memory, as in the case of "Burst" (a reference to the 2010 micro burst). A portrait of nature in extreme animation as opposed to static landscape, "Burst" is an expression of pure energy and the chaos unleashed by the storm. Bruce's contemplative series, "Year of Spring," is more subdued; here paint is applied in flat, geometric expanses of mauve, beige and olive. There's softness and strength to Bruce's work. The sweetness of her palette is balanced with the brio of her brushwork, and visual delights—such as the jagged line in orange that courses through both "Babel" and "Burst."

Kris Iden's lyrical work is deeply grounded in nature. I particularly like her graceful one-line intaglios in "Shape Note Geography," featuring the contours of Virginia where Iden lives, and the German state of Saxony where she resided (in the city of Dresden) for some time. Minimalist in the extreme, these works have distinct power thanks to Iden's sure line. In creating what she calls a hybrid geography she presents two "dearly held landscapes" that speak to being caught between two cultures.

A highly acclaimed watercolorist, Susan Murphy's technical ability is showcased in paintings of construction rubble, gritty subject matter not usually associated with watercolor that adds a nice tension to the work. It also affords an opportunity to play with different patterns, textures and tonal effects. Murphy includes bits of trash to add visual interest and social commentary. Her work has an antique look to it achieved by using an under wash of raw umber that drips down the paper to create interesting rivulets and streaks.

With its five artists' disparate viewpoint and styles, "New Vistas" shows us that landscape, whether pastoral, urban or metaphorical, continues to enchant artist and viewer alike.

"New Vistas" at Les Yeux du Monde

Five painters present their points of view on landscape
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