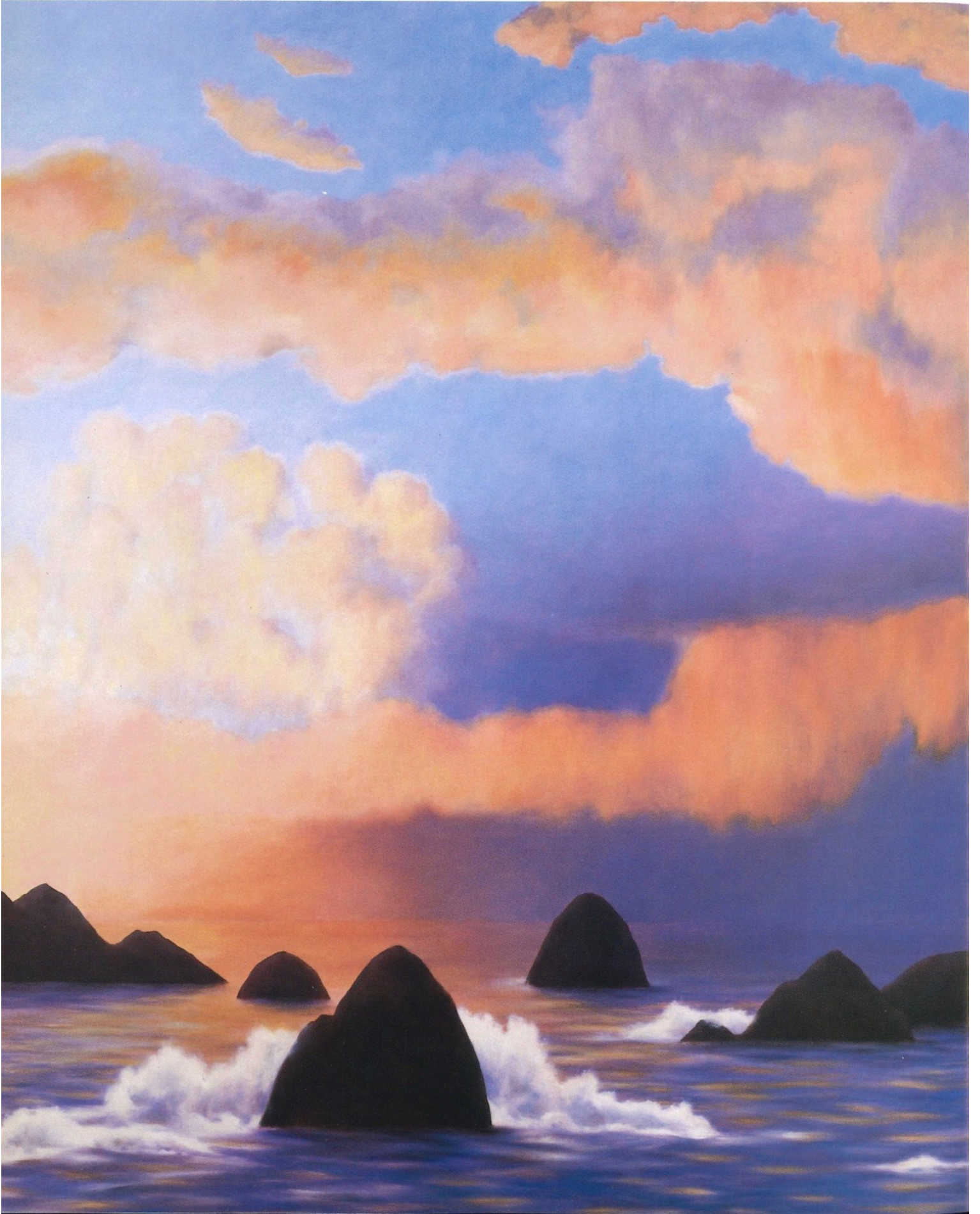


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ABOVE: *Untitled*, Joan Nelson, 1992. Oil and gouache on wood; 24" x 24". By focusing on isolated details she borrows from 17th- and 18th-century masterpieces, Nelson creates in her paintings a powerful new context in which to contemplate images from the past. Robert Miller Gallery, New York.

Art: Contemporary Romantic Landscapes

TEXT BY ROBERT ROSENBLUM

LEFT: *Ekstasis*, April Gornik, 1992. Oil on linen; 80" x 91". Stimulated as much by her imagination and dreams as by her past experiences, Gornik sees her landscapes as representing "the underbelly of the beauty of nature." Edward Thorp Gallery, New York.

IN 1949 Kenneth Clark published *Landscape Into Art*, a survey of the way that Western painters, from the late Middle Ages on, transformed the facts of nature into pictorial fictions. Writing soon after the lethal shadow of Hiroshima cast its pall upon our planet, Lord Clark, with his customary Olympian wisdom, diagnosed the decline and fall of landscape painting in our century, a melancholy pro-



Time, Katherine Bowling, 1992. Oil and spackle on wood; 48" x 80". Bowling's paintings are frequently inspired by snapshots of scenes she has encountered on her sojourns to upstate New York each summer. Composing these fragmentary images on wood panels, Bowling creates abstract compositions that underlie her apparent subject matter. BlumHelman Gallery, New York.

nouncement that at the time rang especially true.

The nineteenth century, of course, had an awesome roster of masters who could still turn the infinite variety of nature into great art—Friedrich, Constable, Turner, Corot, Monet, Cézanne—but in the new century, the age of Picasso and Mondrian, landscape painting in its traditional modes had already become a fragile, endangered species that seemed to wilt every time a new highway, airport, industrial plant or high rise replaced the green that had been there for eons. In fact, by the 1960s, in a world where AstroTurf was as likely to turn up as real grass,

Pop artists began to translate traditional American landscapes into images of mechanized artifice, with Andy Warhol offering paint-by-numbers country idylls and Roy Lichtenstein re-creating Romantic cornball sunsets in the comic-strip language of Benday dots.

For a while, landscape painting appeared to be not so much endangered as extinct. Yet surprisingly, the most old-fashioned traditions of nineteenth-century landscape painting have been revived in recent decades, though in unexpected new guises. Our growing alarm over what we refer to as ecology, a word that triggers visions of past heavens and future

hells, may well have prompted a new mythology of landscape as something that belongs to another era, a magical world to be preserved and cherished, like Venice or a national park.

It is understandable, then, that younger painters who now attempt to confront the once timeless and familiar spectacles of earth and sky, water and trees, do so in a curiously retrospective way, as if they were experiencing these phenomena from vantage points distant in both time and space. Knowing that at every moment landscape is not only being rapidly destroyed but slowly poisoned gives the organic environment we inherited from prehistory a particularly frail, deathbed poignancy. This lends new dimensions of nostalgia to the poetic fictions of nineteenth-century landscape painting, which

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Traditions of nineteenth-century landscape painting have been revived in recent decades.



ABOVE: *The Sap is Mounting Back*, Ephraim Rubenstein, 1991. Oil on linen; 48" x 78". An atmospheric landscape that also conveys the reflective state of the solitary figure takes its title from a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke. Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.

BELOW: *Flooded River at Dawn; Rose Horizon*, Stephen Hanoock; 1990. Oil on canvas; 12" x 22". Describing his work, Hanoock has said, "I like flooded rivers because of the enormous cleansing process going on." Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.



In almost all these works, a twilight aura of stillness and desolation prevails.

recorded, particularly in the United States, an immense Garden of Eden. Artists today who venture far from our roads, railway tracks and cities for their themes are like explorers of a lost world that can be excavated mostly in memory and in paintings of the last century.

This may be why so many recent landscape paintings, even when they include the most sharp-eyed observations of rock, bark and leaf, may seem more imaginary than real, as if nature were seen through a reducing glass. At times this compressed intensity is even literally the case, for artists such as Joan Nelson and Mark Innerst tend to portray nature on canvases and wood panels so small they can be held in one hand, precious relics of an otherworldly beauty.

An uncommon remoteness is also evident in many contemporary landscapes, as if one were a refugee from the blight of manmade cities and suburbs, from the space-time coordinates of modern history. April Gornik, for example, can transport us to what feels like the ends of the earth (are we in Newfoundland or Tierra del Fuego?), places where the final extremities of barren rock produce mysterious confrontations with a vast, immaterial world of cloud-filled skies. Again and again in these younger painters' visions of landscape, we are put on the brink of nothingness: the top of a mountain, the edge of a swamp, the obscurity of fog. It is characteristic too that many landscape painters today seem to be peering through veils, theatrical scrimms that enhance the illusion of something more imagined than perceived.

In almost all these works, a twilight aura of stillness and desolation pre-

vails, a suggestion that the artists are looking back at the history of American landscape and its painters. In fact, in some cases, we might almost be deceived into thinking we have found a lost painting by a nineteenth-century master like John Kensett or Martin Johnson Heade. Yet far from being a survival of the world of those earlier American painters who depicted the forest primeval or the almost supernatural radiance of sunlight on un-

populated stretches of unpolluted land, painters of the 1980s and 1990s belong to a postmodern world in which the historical past is revived in the form of visual quotations, as often as not witty and erudite. That the historical quotations of landscape painters today turn out to be charged with more melancholy than irony speaks volumes about our anxieties in the face of nature viewed in the present and future tense. □



Standard of Rest, Mark Innerst, 1992. Alkyd and acrylic on canvas; 26½" x 16½". Robert Rosenblum has compared the frames of Innerst's paintings to "venerable treasure chests in which the unique records of a vanishing experience were buried." Curt Marcus Gallery, New York.