

Art in America

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Early One Morning, 2006. Oil on canvas, 60 x 70 inches. All photos in this article courtesy DC Moore Gallery, New York.

Jane Wilson's Book of Days

For over 20 years, Wilson has been depicting the changing skies of Long Island, bringing to landscape painting the kind of transcendent luminosity often seen as abstraction's province.

BY STEPHEN WESTFALL

The past 50 years or so have been enriched by the advent and evolution of several art movements that opened up whole areas of practice by means of new materials and ways of seeing. It is thus understandable that during the same time hardly anyone has noticed that we have, in American art at least, been living through a golden age of painterly realism, especially landscape painting, one not likely to be repeated any time soon. From Fairfield Porter and Nell Blaine to Jane Wilson, Alex Katz, Philip Pearlstein, Neil Welliver, Lois Dodd, Jane Frielicher, Yvonne Jaquette, Rudy Burkhardt and Janet Fish, it has long been possible to speak of a school of realists whose approach to painting has been significantly affected by abstraction, even as their work maintains a faithful correspondence to the natural world. That most of these painters have known each other and generally keep to the northeast part of the country (Wayne Thiebaud and the Bay Area Figurative School are California cousins, Adele Alsop is in Utah) shouldn't be an obstacle to broader recognition, but it probably is; the particulars of a specific landscape generally do not travel well across regions and oceans. The Hudson River School painters journeyed fur-



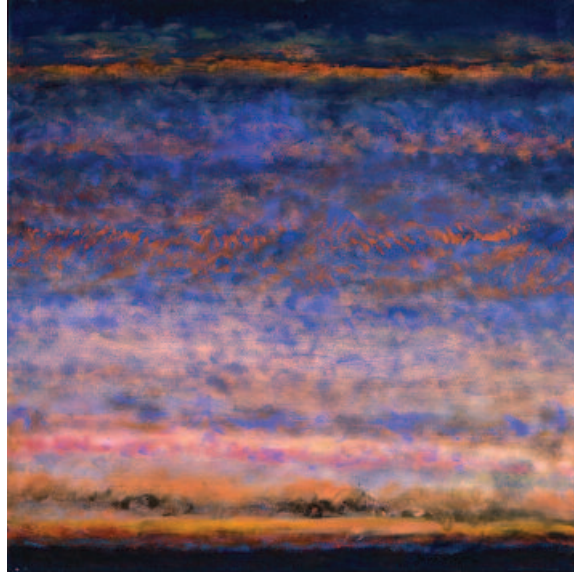
First Light, 2006. Oil on canvas, 60 x 60 inches.

ther in an era when travel was more difficult, but the best of our contemporary landscape painters have been comparative stay-at-homes, mostly dividing time between town and country, and not reporting at all from abroad. Three painters associated with New York—Wilson, Dodd and Welliver (who died in 2005)—have spent almost all of their productive painting time out of the city: Dodd and Welliver up north on their rural Maine properties, and Wilson out in Water Mill, Long Island, where the sky drops down to the potato fields and shoreline like a vast, infinitely variable stage curtain.

Wilson moved from Iowa to New York in 1949. She had been exposed to Abstract Expressionism as a student at the University of Iowa and was swept by admiration for Pollock, de Kooning and, above all, Rothko. Yet she found the observable exterior world too compelling to shut out and proceeded through figuration and still life before settling on the skies of Long Island as her central theme, more than 20 years ago. Her recent exhibition of new work at New York's DC Moore Gallery bore out the many felicities of her choice of subject matter. For one thing, it has allowed her to have it both ways: to respond to observable conditions in the world

and to construct an abstract "field" that is no less all-over than Pollock's or Rothko's. The latter's soft geometry is invoked by the compression of sky and land along the low horizon line that characterizes Wilson's paintings. The translucency of her washes also brings Rothko to mind and, through him, Bonnard. Wilson may have just missed the 1948 Bonnard retrospective at MOMA, but its lingering aftereffects were all around her, in the work of Rothko and Porter, in that of her own generation and in the canvases of those slightly younger painters who seized on Bonnard's translucent color and compositional compaction as a way into modernist representation, freeing themselves from the indeterminate space of Abstract Expressionism.

Wilson's fluid wash, which at times can turn into an opaque churn or a rinsing scrub, offers the distinct advantage of being especially responsive to rapid changes in the cloud formations and the light she is working from. In paintings such as *Still Dawn*, *Early One Morning* and *Sunday into Monday* (all 2006), as well as *Surf and Fog* (2005), it is possible
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Willa Cather Sky, 2006. Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 inches.

sible to calibrate Wilson's movements across the painting surface through the complex cloud patterns she paints. With patient viewing, her lighting effects prove as subtle as one of James Turrell's illuminated rectangular cavities. It takes a while for the eye to find traction in the overwhelming pink haze of *Early One Morning*, for instance. There's little sense in referring to "foreground" when talking about these grounded sky views. The clouds may be closer than the horizon, but they are not overhead, nor are they close at hand. As the threads of gray-green and reddish-brown begin to read as closer to us, then, and the pink takes up position behind them, we see the pink less as cloud than as a brushy volume of light. And the brown-and-green cloud trails darken as they lift towards the top of the canvas like the receding night. The field is composed of at least two pinks, a slightly darker color painted over a yellow/white pink. The darker pink seems to be burning off as the lighter color behind holds the certainty of the day and weather to come. We thus find ourselves looking both backward and forward in time, through veils of paint behaving remarkably like the veils of cloud they are describing.

The sky is arguably the biggest visual subject there is, and painters other than Wilson have made it central to their work, but none have stayed so steadfastly with or have wrung such a variety of experience from a straight-on view of a low horizon. Within her paintings the changes in cloud pattern and light are symbiotic. Light is not just a function of the hour, but is also conditioned by the dispersing effect of the clouds themselves and, in ways perhaps more felt than directly described, by the humidity. Cloud pattern and density describe weather, but they also implicate feeling. The light changes according to whether the view is over the darker land or reflecting sea. And concretely, of course, the light is also a function of pigment suspended in a binding solution.

More pragmatically descriptive than Turner, more amorphous than Constable, more naturalistic than Burchfield, more abstract than Bonnard (but less so than Rothko) and less afflicted by the supernatural than Ryder, Wilson's work finds its contextualizing differences within this broad community of painters. Her paintings are visual essays in natural philosophy, their conclusions consistently beautiful. □

Jane Wilson's paintings were on view at DC Moore Gallery, New York [Jan. 5-Feb. 10].

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