



Back to the Land

**IN ERIC AHO'S PAINTINGS, WE ENTER
A MYSTERIOUS AND POWERFUL
REALM OF NATURE.**

BY JOHN DORFMAN

THE SEARCH FOR the sublime in nature, pursued by the Romantics in Northern Europe and the Hudson River School in this country, goes on in the work of Eric Aho. Aho, a 54-year-old New Englander, isn't a landscape painter in the literal sense of the word. He doesn't document specific places, and he doesn't paint *en plein air*. Much, though not all, of his work is abstract. But whether abstract or figurative, Aho's painting is deeply rooted in his experience of nature and conveys nature's power to affect human beings. And paradoxically, while embarked on the centuries-old pursuit of the sublime, he delights in the sheer physicality of paint, just as earthy as the landscape it represents.

What is the sublime, according to Aho? Not quite a religious experience, as it was for his 19th-century artistic forebears, but nonetheless a rare and precious one, and one that can be had in front of a work of art as well as immersed in nature. "I've been thinking about Stendhal Syndrome," Aho says, referring the proverbial overwhelming emotional effect that a work of art can have on a viewer, "and though I've never fainted, I have been shocked by a

Eric Aho, *Canada*, 2013,
oil on linen, 48 x 60 in.



Clockwise from top left: *Portage*, 2019–20, oil on linen, 78 x 70 in.; *Rapids and Fallen Tree*, 2020, oil on linen, 78 x 70 in.; *Figures in a Landscape*, 2015, oil on linen, 50 x 60 in.

space and by beauty.” He points out that it can happen in dramatic places like Niagara Falls or in more ordinary ones. “I’ve felt that speechlessness and shock and body buzz just standing in front of a field of flowers in a hemlock forest. It’s the body connecting to that telluric pulse; it’s both real and imaginary. I’ve also had that feeling in front of paintings—though not the paintings I would have expected.” Standing in front of an Aho painting, one feels as if one has stumbled into a clearing in the woods and been given a glimpse of something powerful and usually hidden.

An inveterate hiker and cross-country skier, Aho has been connecting to the world of nature most of his life. Though he started life in the Boston suburb of Melrose, Mass., his family moved to southern New Hampshire when he was young, and he grew up near Mount Monadnock, a favorite destination of the New England Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. (He now lives in southern Vermont.) His father was Finnish-American, and Finnish culture, which has a deeply Romantic connection to nature, has always been important to Aho. When he was starting out as a painter, in the early 1990s, he got a Fulbright fellowship to study in Finland, and he has often





Clockwise from top left: *Approach*, 2012, oil on linen, 108 x 92 in.; *Halcyon Falls*, 2020, oil on linen, 20 x 16 in.; *Wilderness Studio (Summer)*, 2015, oil on linen, 50 x 60 in.



returned to it in the years since. One of the painters he most admires is the Finnish Romantic and Symbolist Akseli Gallen-Kallela, who infused his landscapes with a mystical, numinous aura. In fact, Aho sees some similarities between the natural sceneries of Finland and rural New England. “There are things that I think are coded in you,” he says. “Growing up in New Hampshire was pretty close to the Old Country. Even city Finns have this deep thread of landscape natural reference in their world. You can’t escape it.” He likes to use the term “topobiography,” which he defines as “how the landscape affects one, how the land formed me.”

While he drew compulsively as a child—partly, he

says, as a means of possessing things that he couldn’t possess literally—Aho didn’t start painting until he was in his early 20s, when he got a job as an art teacher at the Putney School in Vermont. In order to teach painting, he had to first learn it himself. Before that, as a student at Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, he had majored in printmaking, which he pursued on the graduate level at the Central School of Art and Design in London. After that, he studied for a year at the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana, Cuba, followed by Institute of Art and Design in Lahti, Finland. This wanderlust led him as far as the Norwegian and Siberian arctic regions. “Traveling to these far-off exotic northern places where none of my peers were going, I thought I would make the painting more interesting, and frankly *be* more interesting,” he says. “I didn’t have the faith back then that painting a pine tree in my backyard would be worthwhile.”

When he started painting, Aho recalls, his “guiding poles” were Fairfield Porter,

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Tiered Falls, 2019, oil on linen, 60 x 50 in.

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Clockwise from top left: *Succession*, 2019, oil on linen, 78 x 70 in.;
French Forest, 2012, oil on linen, 52 x 48 in.; *River Crossing*
(Meurthe), 2015, oil on linen, 74 x 95.5 in.

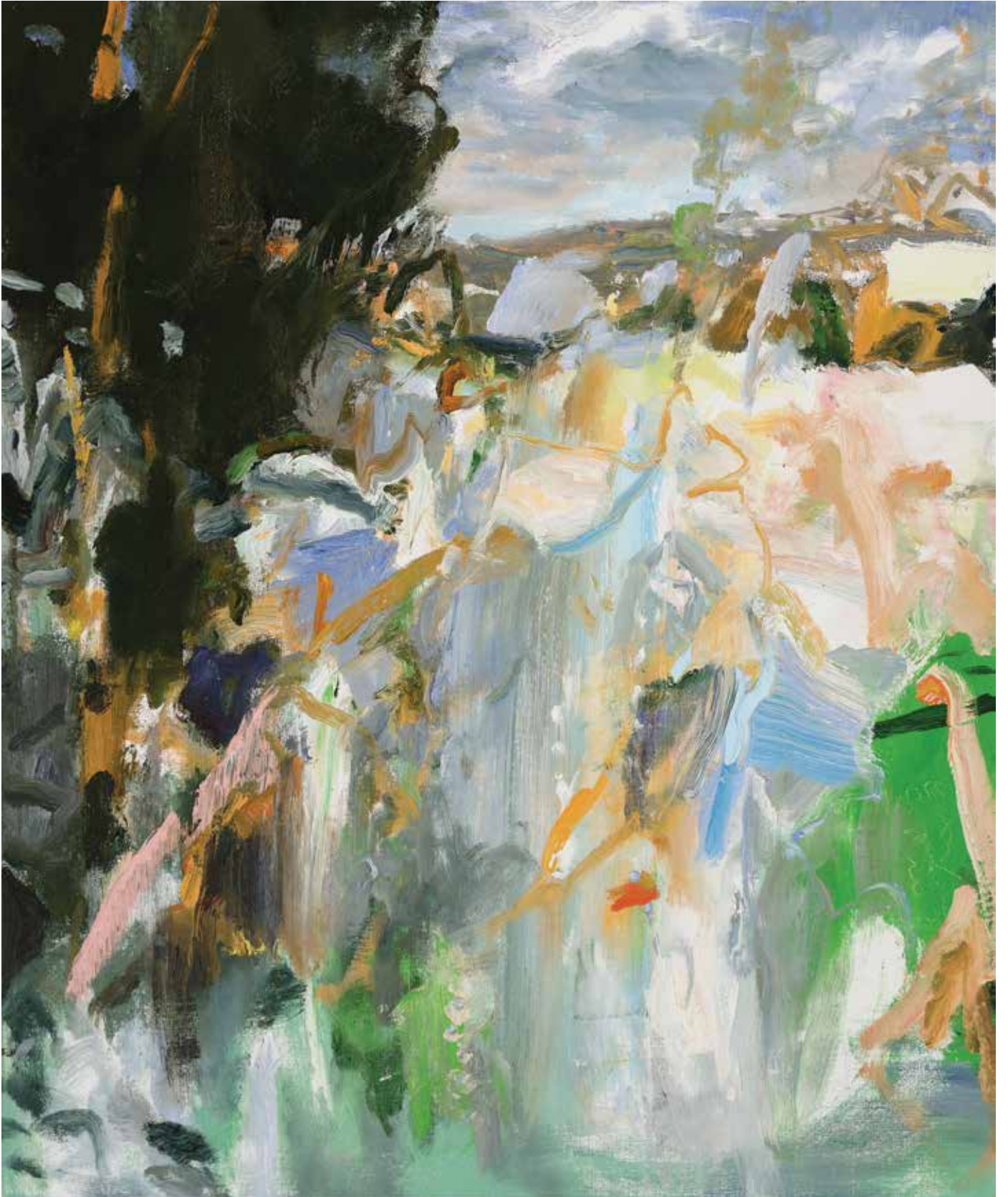


Willem de Kooning, and Frank Auerbach. Later he added other guides—Marsden Hartley, Charles Burchfield, Gallen-Kallala, Goya, Walt Whitman. A talk with

Aho teems with art-historical and just plain historical references. But he wears his knowledge lightly, and his work doesn't read as filled with self-conscious references to artistic predecessors. "My work plods when I weigh it down too heavily," he says. "I'm going to take all that out. I believe that what you edit out, remains. It's the same with painting—you scrape it out and simplify it, and the essence remains. You can't plan for it, but you can push for it."

Aho's abstract works capture the colors and textures of landscape without illusionistic space or literal description. "My paintings follow the seasons," he says, "and while I'm not interested in seasons topically, I am really interested in that wine color, that russet color of the oaks that happens in autumn. However, I'm more interested in mood, tone, and temperature than

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High Grass, 2017, oil on linen, 36 x 30 in.



Wald, 2014, oil on linen,
48 x 52 in.

**Works by Eric Aho
are available from:**

DC Moore Gallery – New York

Tayloe Piggott Gallery –
Jackson Hole, WY

LewAllen Galleries – Santa Fe, NM

color. The darks are what I call chromatic darks; they're made of many colors other than black. I don't use black typically. I really want to live in the world of color, and black is the antithesis of it."

Memory plays a major role in Aho's art. For one series, "Continental Series (War Paintings)," he retraced his father's path through France as a soldier in World War II, making plein air paintings as references along the way and then creating semi-abstract works in his studio back home that

embody both his and his father's memories of place. Many of his more figurative landscapes are composites based on memories rather than documents of one particular place and time, directly observed. "I look at something and think about it, but I don't want to look so closely as to overwhelm it," he says. "I want it to circle through me."

Recently he has been producing a series of more or less figurative "River Paintings" in which the rivers are deep inside a forest, emerging from rocks and underbrush,



Clockwise from top left: *Interior*, 2020, oil on linen, 60 x 50 in.; *Ruralia*, 2015, oil on linen, 52 x 48 in.; *Incident Two*, 2014, oil on linen, 48 x 52 in.

shaded by dense growth of trees. “They’re dark worlds but not black holes—they’re worlds of less light,” Aho says. “These aren’t rivers seen from a bridge or public overlook. They’re private places in the woods which I’ve discovered. The river had to find its way, much like the process of the painting. The river just pushes its way. Metaphorically, it feels akin to the path of one’s life.”

Aho calls his paintings “unabashedly materialistic.” By that he means that the materials used aren’t just a medium of expression, they themselves are the subject of the work. “The paintings are about the oil paint and my wish for them to transform into something that’s not just the landscape,” he says. “The paint is fatty, like protein; it forms the skin. I think a lot about Marsden Hartley, who created undercurrents of flesh and blood in his landscapes. What I take from Hartley is the deeper possibility of the landscape reflecting something else. We have these veneers that we put out for the world. The painter’s challenge is to peel all that away.” 