

Contemporary painters bring dynamism, drama to N.E. landscapes

ART REVIEW
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MANCHESTER, N.H. — The New England landscape, so varied and rugged, has had endless fascination for painters. But in contemporary terms there's a fear, when you put New England and landscape together, that what you may get is pretty and toothless. Eric Aho and Cristi Rinklin, who both have landscape painting shows up at the Currier Museum of Art, make work that has teeth.

Aho, who was born in Massachusetts, grew up in New Hampshire, and now lives and paints in Vermont, has his first solo museum show up at the Currier. He has always had a dynamic approach to paint. He works with a loaded brush, which he smears and slashes over large canvases, often depicting elemental forces such as fire and ice.

This exhibit, with works of the last 10 years, describes dramatic developments in the artist's approach, as he moves away from the traditional landscape painter's investigation of space. It's as if that languorous pillow of land stretching back to the horizon is a picnic blanket that Aho has snatched off the ground, and he's giving it a great shake. The work is more frontal, the forms more abstract. The sense of landscape remains. Indeed, there are some lively, more traditional works here. But in the best, the landscape comes in bare hints amid a wilderness of juicy marks.

Aho used to paint what he saw. For years, he was a plein air painter. He still makes sketches outdoors, but then he retreats to his studio, where images percolate. Now the artist sees, and lets that ignite something visionary in his mind's eye, which he translates to canvas. It's evident that he's been released from the shackles of form and has surrendered to his own internal experience of seeing.

The artist had long contemplated one of Rembrandt's rare landscapes, "Landscape With the Rest on the Flight Into Egypt," in which a shroud of darkness envelops figures at a campfire, and a pale moon shines above. Then, on a drive at around dusk, Aho saw a farmer burning brush as the moon rose, and he stopped his car and started painting.

One of the results is "March Fires," a great, dark, scarified field with jagged orange flames bursting from the blackness, choking gray smoke, and a deep breath of moonlit sky over the rim of the horizon. Aho traps us at the bottom of a dark bowl in this landscape, with the horizon line arcing up, and the fire and smoke sliding off the bottom edge of the canvas, right toward us.

There is no horizon line in "Ice Field," a collision of ice blocks on black water. Aho again foreshortens space, as if to imperil the viewer with the cracking shards. There's a great

plate of ice dominating the middle of the painting, flip-flopping between form and void with its white blankness. But other whites shade to blue or refract green and yellow. This artist's whites thrill with their secret gleams of color, and the textures of snow and ice he evokes with the paint's tactility.

Aho has a fascination with the clean, modernist trapezoid depicted in that block of ice, and reminiscent of forms in work by Ellsworth Kelly and Kazimir Malevich. You can see it in "Ice Cut (1932)," which describes a hole in the ice — sheer black water framed by white shaded and primed with blue, green, and gray. The contrast is chilling. Minimal as it is, this work brims with personal references. Aho's father was an ice-cutter during the Great Depression — hence the 1932 date in the title.

The painter utterly gives himself over to his medium in works such as "Second Approach to the Mountain." The canvas flames with flicks and dashes of stray paint, which fly like sparks around a central column of white and yellow. Our one clear marker here is the sky, a small chute of it at the top center. The agitated dark forms surrounding it take on the sway and stab of tree branches. At the bottom, pale brown suggests a forest path. And that column of light? Perhaps it's the sun striking the eye as a hiker emerges from the shadows. Or maybe it's inspiration itself, gilded and alluring and impossibly bright.

Boston painter Cristi Rinklin, like Aho, constantly borrows from and reinterprets art history, and for her impressive mural installation, "Diluvial," in the gallery adjoining Aho's, she specifically draws on Albert Bierstadt's "Moat Mountain, Intervale, New Hampshire," a painting in the Currier collection.

Rinklin has taken over the floor-to-ceiling windows with a translucent mural that has the cartoon verve of anime and references to Leonardo's "Deluge" drawings. The glowing mural — it recalls a giant flat screen as much as stained glass — careens with crisp foreground images of looping ribbons of water and clouds. The mountains, which run along the bottom and make a blurry row in the middle ground, were cadged from Bierstadt. The background is even fuzzier. This mural was painted, then scanned into a computer, and Rinklin built in the blurring levels with Photoshop. Rinklin fiddles with distance to play with ideas of digital resolution — a way of seeing Bierstadt couldn't have conceived of.

There are two wall murals — one, a repeating pattern of water and clouds, was also painted and then scanned to create a wallpaper. The other, a more straightforward (although still cartoonish) landscape, was simply painted directly on the wall. The many landscapes create a cumulative effect of rushing water overtaking the land.

Rinklin titles the piece "Diluvial" after geological deposits in the White Mountains. In the 19th century, they were believed to be remnants of the biblical flood. Now we know them to have origins in glacial melting. With the recent news that sea levels along much of the East Coast are rising more quickly than in other places due to climate change, Rinklin's watery work is particularly timely.

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