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The Ghost in the Trees / Ron Milewicz at Elizabeth Harris Gallery



Ron Milewicz, Down the Meadow, (2019), oil on panel, 13 1/4 x 19 1/4 inches (all images courtesy Elizabeth Harris Gallery)

By PATRICK NEAL March 2020

The painter and philosopher Nigel Wentworth, who has written beautifully on the phenomenology of painting, surprised fans of his work, when he mentioned in 2018 that he had all but stopped painting. The understated admission, which appears in Wentworth's book *Infusion*, came out of a profound and prolonged search that led the author toward non-duality, a heightened state of consciousness of oneness with the universe.

This spiritual journey that Wentworth underwent culminated in the apprehension of a "timeless now" which devalued his prior struggles for continual attainment, and resulted in diminished interest in things he had previously enjoyed, including art and

history. At the height of this awareness, when he was most resigned to simply being, Wentworth found himself letting go, walking the streets of London in almost trance-like state, and watching the leaves on treetops appear in a radiant glow.

This experience of withdrawal stands in sharp contrast to the enhanced creative output inspired by the natural landscape in the painter Charles Burchfield, particularly the landscapes near his home around Buffalo, New York. In Burchfield's case, rather than an ebbing of artistic output, these encounters heightened his creative powers, leading to a prolific body of works on paper.



Ron Milewicz, Fall, (2019), oil on linen, 12 1/2 x 15 1/4 inches

Charles Burchfield: Solitude, which recently closed at DC Moore Gallery, featured a small watercolor and gouache painting, *Tree Ghosts, 1919*, depicting the living spirits of a few dead trees rising up in a spectral arc. This painting, with white haze animating the tree stumps, could be a kissing cousin to *Fall, 2019* by Ron Milewicz where a fallen tree lays indisposed before an enchanted golden arbor. Milewicz's solo show, titled *axis mundi* is currently on view at Elizabeth Harris Gallery in Chelsea.

This show consists of small oil paintings depicting landscape scenes of upstate Gallatin, New York where the artist lives. The paintings are based on drawings executed *en plein air*, and the tree form becomes a contemplative motif representing the axis mundi, the Universal Pillar connecting the three planes of sky, earth and underworld. True to the locations they depict, the paintings are notable for their mystical, almost ecstatic auras. It's not difficult to imagine Burchfield as an influence on Milewicz, with both painters similarly enthralled by the beauty and peacefulness of the woods, and working on the cusp where realism ends and imaginative forays take flight.



Ron Milewicz, Oak (2019), oil on linen, 13 1/4 x 19 1/4 inches



Ron Milewicz, Meadow Moon (2019), oil on linen, 10 3/4 x 25 inches

There are recurring motifs in *axis mundi*, such as clusters of trees that open to meadows and small rolling hills, and sometimes a pond in the distance or foreground. From the depiction of these elements, we can intuit the season, and time of day. Milewicz organizes his compositions using a limited tonal palette of negative and positive shapes, which helps to simplify details while playing up abstraction. The flat shapes are orchestrated into lushly interlocking surface designs, with knots and tangles of foliage, staggered branches and leaves, and loopy shadows that gather and cascade downhill. Some of the paintings, such as *Sugar Maple, 2019*, are so subtle in their high key value shifts as to almost disappear into blindingly white fields.

Maple and Cedar, 2019 is flooded with pale pink and orange twilight, while *In the Woods II, 2020* is shaded, and takes place deeper in the forest, dappled highlights swimming around a shrub. Several of the works, like *Maple and Meadow, 2019* are panoramic, sweeping left to right, with its sap green and hot yellow patches that singe to umber. *Thicket, 2020* surprises with crisp trees trunk and fuzzy bushes set amid fantastical, flickering sunspots. In all of these works, Milewicz evokes the poetry and mood of a unique place at a particular moment in time, through geometric orchestrations and a few closely calibrated colors.

Standing in front of the work, *Meadow Moon, 2019*, which has a elegant minimal palette of sap green and Naples yellow, one notices how the oil paint seeps into the linen and how there aren't discernible strokes. The fiber of the linen makes the paint palpable as dashes, and Milewicz appears to layer the paint carefully, stain over stain, emphasizing the mechanics of the piece's creation. The measured technique complements the limited tonal range and simplified shapes of the leaves, branches, sky and snow and brings us back to the original drawing source.

At times, Milewicz's compositions build up to heavier accretions of paint, and the combination of technique and media bring to mind an array of other painters. *Meadow, 2019* reminded me of Gauguin's Tahitian scenes rendered in waxy oil on burlap, whereas *Across the Meadow, 2019* evoked the faux-fresco mural paintings of Kevin Paulsen, which were in turn inspired by New England folk art. *Oak, 2019*

with its stylized precision and steel blue and bone cast, has the hushed sanctity of a Song Dynasty landscape by Mi Fu. But in most cases, I kept thinking of the velvety drawings of Post-Impressionist Georges Seurat, rendered with conté crayon on Michallet paper. The fine parallel grains of Seurat's paper behave like Milewicz's tight linen weave, assisting in the dematerialization of solid forms into expanses of light and shadow.

One experiences Milewicz's landscapes as sanctuaries, places of restful contemplation without distraction, and in communion with nature in a biophilic eden. Nigel Wentworth would surely appreciate the phenomenal fusion of painter and place, and Burchfield might relate to the peculiar vocabulary with which Milewicz filters nature through his own body. Whether the path traveled to get there is spiritual, quasi-religious or philosophical, all three painters ponder the universal that stems from the particulars of nature. **WM**

Ron Milewicz *Axis Mundi*, is on view at Elizabeth Harris Gallery (<https://www.ehgallery.com/>) (529 W 20th Street, Chelsea) through March 28.



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