

JOELLYN DUESBERRY

Recent Paintings

ESSAY

As a self-taught young abstract painter in an age of Pop, Op, Minimal and other "ism's" of the sixties, my stance within a painting tradition seemed to me more open-ended than the self-consciously modern. I trained as an art historian and worked 20 years as an appraiser, so the art of the past has always been a strong influence on my thinking, especially when, in the early seventies, my subject changed from the mental furniture of abstraction to landscape. As the next two decades obsolesced "ism's" into "wasm's" and the very ideas of easel painting, landscape, and beauty itself were routinely rejected by various new trends of ideological activism, older art became my only renewable resource, even as I came to challenge it.

In the eighties, subject and art began to compete for my attention, almost as if I were trying to reclaim my abstract beginnings. I had moved West unprepared for the landscape there, and I had to fall back on raw energy and wide brushes to respond to the quirky shapes and absolute light and dark of an arid climate so different from the humid East where everything shares edges. In the desert, insistent detail invited an all-over painting approach, flattening my compositions and closing down the panorama. The relentless space and contradictory scale of Western plains and mountains made me search for a new mental light. I knew less and less and was freer for it. It puzzled me that I constantly returned to certain locations that didn't conform to conventional ideas of beauty or "realism" until I understood it was the provocation to self-expression that I sought in painting forms in nature. I used the landscape as a means not an end. That the abstract sense was masquerading as landscape was incidental, because the subject had become internal. Thus location became incidental as well, and when I returned to well-worked painting places in the East, unimagined compositions came forward from the old terrain which I found galvanizing, and even shocking in their novelty.

Good painting comes to me now when I seek not to know, not to preconceive a goal, but to maintain a steady awareness of the ideas served up by process. Paintings reproduced here are from Martha's Vineyard to New Mexico, but regardless of where I paint now, the subject of place feels less like limitation and more like freedom.

Joellyn Duesberry, September 1994

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108 South Main St. Livingston, MT 406-222-0337
34 West Main St. Bozeman, MT 406-522-9946
1715 Wazee St. Denver, CO 303-292-0909