

MUSEUM CURATOR

Secret Visions

Defining landscape painting in 2006: Does the past fit in with the present? *By John O'Hern*



Today's landscape painters are increasingly turning for inspiration to the moody atmospheric style made famous by Hudson River School great, George Inness.

Inness, (1825-1894), was one of this country's great landscape painters. He painted in the style of the French Barbizon School, noted for its celebration of the landscape for its own sake, and for painting in a darker palette with loose brushstrokes. His paintings capture the mood of changes in the weather and times of day and suggest a spiritual basis to Nature.

Ann Lofquist celebrates the moods of the Maine landscape, often out-Innessing Inness, with her subtle paintings of scenes at dusk, in snow, and in rain. "Orchard in the Rain" (2001), pictured on page 56, is a monumental 10-foot long poem to the bleak, bone-chilling times on the Maine coast that drive people into their sturdy homes to warm by the fire. Each season has its unique beauty and she captures the essence of them all. Her tiny plein-air studies have an immediacy that is miraculously sustained in her large studio paintings.

There are many times when I declare "Now that's an Ann Lofquist landscape," when I gaze at a field where sycamore trees are highlighted by the setting sun. Ironically, another Maine landscape painter gets the same response, "Now that's an Alan Bray landscape!"

Alan Bray paints the impossible perspectives and unlikely colors that exist all around us. In a statement for an exhibition of his work Bray wrote: "I'm after the topography and the structural nature of a place. I'm not flaunting the laws of physics. A

Low Sun, Rising Shadow, oil on panel, 23 x 15 5/8", by Ben Aronson, Courtesy Alpha Gallery



On Track, oil on canvas, 34 x 44", by Daniel Morper, *Courtesy of the Robischon Gallery, Denver*

Evening in Auburn, oil on canvas, 25³/₄ x 71³/₄", by Ann Lofquist, *Courtesy of Hackett-Freedman Gallery*



“Kahlil Gibran wrote “Art arises when the secret vision of the artist and the manifestation of nature agree to find new shapes.”



Midtown Taxis, 12 x 12", by Ben Aronson
 Courtesy Alpha Gallery

lot of times people just don't really look. Their relationship with the natural world is very superficial."

Bray's "Path to the River," (2004), opposite, is a bird's eye view of a freshly-tilled field and a path leading from it through the chartreuse trees of spring to a river whose surface reflects the clouds and becomes the sky itself. The path disappears into the mysterious hollows between the hills and reappears ascending the opposite side. The painting can also be read as a path leading uphill to the sky at the top but the small strip of opposite bank brings us back to earth. "Flood" (2006), see page 58, is a painting of pink and blue tree trunks rising from and reflected in a body of water—an unreal image.

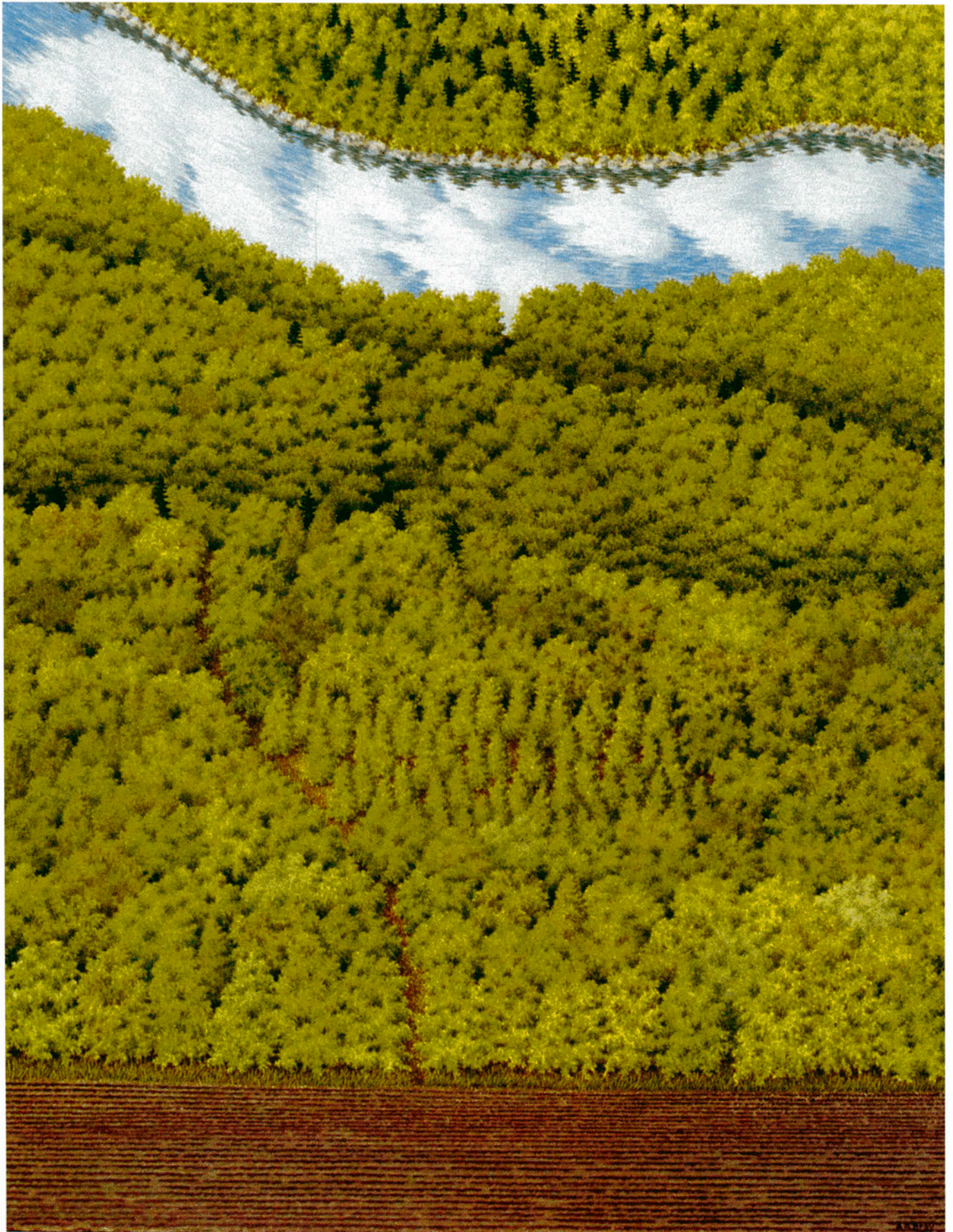
Ben Aronson paints the extraordinary effects of light in metropolitan areas where the inhabitants are too busy to look. "Low Sun, Rising Shadow" (2006), see page 54, captures the quintessential effect of the clear late-afternoon light of San Francisco on its streets and buildings, plunging the streets into shadow and illuminating and highlighting the details of the tops of buildings. "Midtown Taxis" (2006), this page, is a similar moment in Manhattan where direct light seldom reaches the canyon floor. Aronson is a painter's painter. At a recent exhibition at the Arnot Art Museum every artist who visited paused in front of a grouping of four 12 x 12" San Francisco scenes to study his technique and to contemplate their beauty. It was an extraordinary phenomenon.

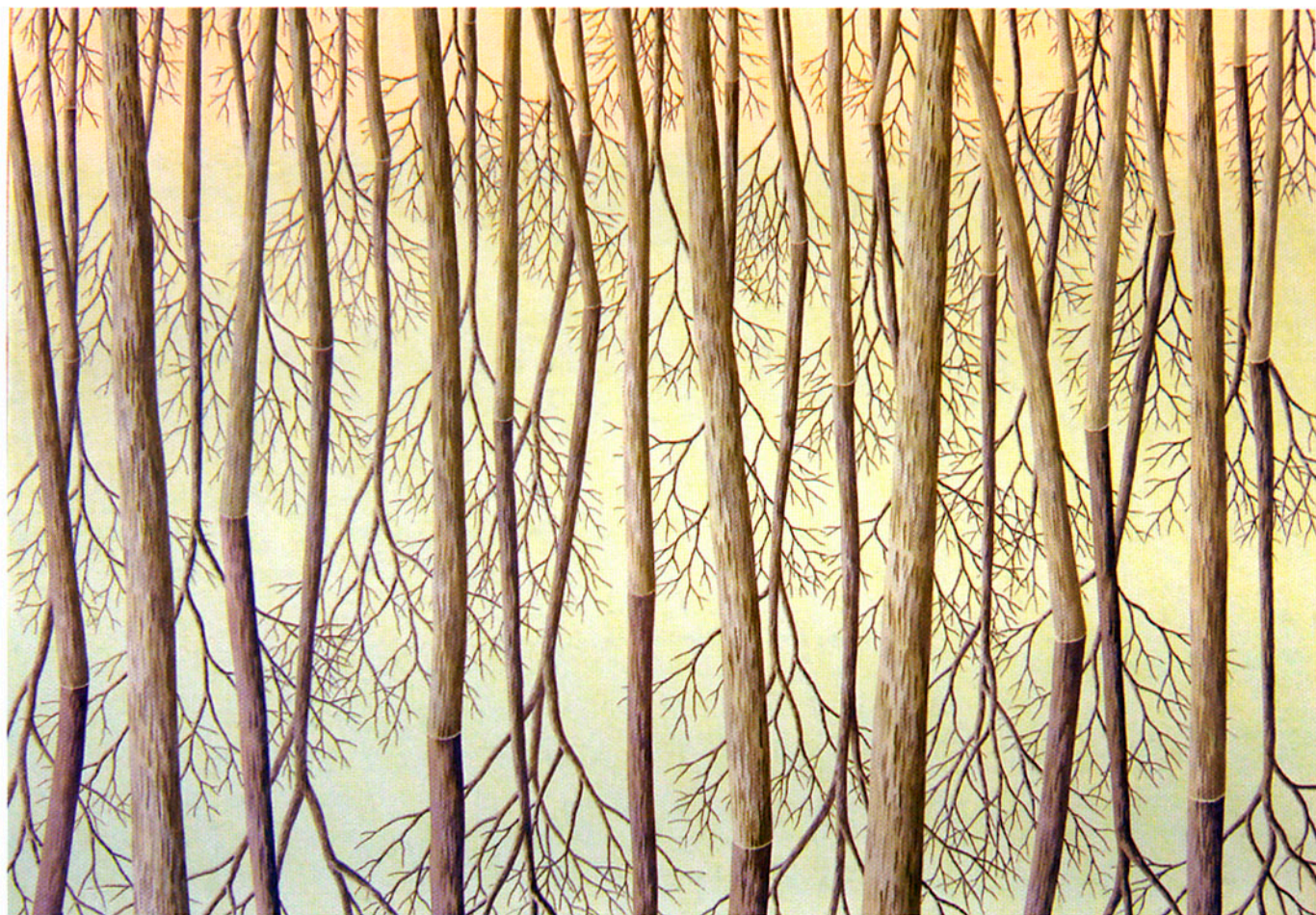
Rail yards and rail cars are seldom seen as objects of beauty. Even when they occur in

Orchard in the Rain, oil on canvas, 30 x 120", by Ann Lofquist
 Courtesy of Hackett-Freedman Gallery



Path to the River, casein on panel, 30 x 24", by Alan Bray, *Courtesy of Caldbeck Gallery*





Flood, casein on panel, 20 x 28", by Alan Brady
 Courtesy of Caldbeck Gallery

the majestic beauty of the high desert of the Southwest, they are overlooked or regarded as eyesores. **Daniel Morper**, see page 55, has never seen an eyesore. "On Track" depicts the waning light of a midwinter day at a nearly empty rail yard. The last light of the sun reflects off the rails, turning them into mysteriously energetic markers for the roadbed of a journey. A lone box car is sidetracked awaiting its turn to travel on the main track.

Morper is a phenomenal observer of the effects of light on flora, fauna, and the built environment. His skies rival the real thing. He paints the dramatic sunsets and cloud forms of New Mexico that change in an instant onto canvases we can enjoy for a lifetime. Often, like Lofquist and Aronson, he chooses times of day and conditions that the layman would most likely just pass through. He paints peeling box cars reflected in puddles so that the puddles become jewels

scattered on the ground. He wrings the last bit of color out of a monotonous scene and makes it come alive.

An avid bird watcher, Morper can spot the most esoteric of tiny birds in a vast landscape patiently guiding my gaze, aided by field glasses, to the spot where I catch a glimpse before the bird takes off for another perch.

Kahlil Gibran wrote "Art arises when the secret vision of the artist and the manifestation of nature agree to find new shapes." My own experience of Nature has been enriched immeasurably by this agreeable collaboration with artists. The manifestations of Nature and artist open our eyes to the invisible that underlies and inspires both. You and I may not have what Gibran calls the artist's "secret vision" but we can learn from the artist's highly-developed powers of observation to enjoy the rainy day and the appearance of the world in a puddle. ●

John O'Hern is Executive Director and Curator of the Arnot Art Museum, Elmira, NY, and the originator of the biennial exhibitions, Re-presenting Representation. He feels guilty for having



too much fun at his work. His fun began at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, NY where he was in charge of public relations and publications. He served as chair of the Visual Artists Panel of the New York State Council on the Arts and writes widely about trends in contemporary realism.

*Alpha Gallery Boston (www.alphagallery.com)
 Caldbeck Gallery (www.caldbeck.com)
 Hackett-Freedman Gallery
 (www.hackettfreedmangallery.com)
 Robischon Gallery (www.robischongallery.com)*