FORUM GALLERY

Deeps of Peace

March 17 – April 30, 2022

"There are years that ask questions and years that answer."

-Zora Neale Hurston

Painter Charles Hawthorne wrote, "You have to do the obvious thing before you do the superhuman thing." My paintings present the landscape in the same way I learned to see it, by lying on the ground, flat on my belly with my chin in the dirt, foreground so close I could taste it and background far away. No middle ground. Here was the whole of a view, not from above looking down, but from a mollusk's vantage point, a million miles close. Seeing from a bug's-eye view instantly compresses space, like closing an accordion, and makes the viewer complicit in reconstructing the landscape; I provide the close-up and the far away, and the viewer supplies the middle. This is nothing new. The Canadian Group of Seven painters, from the 1920s and '30s, eliminated middle ground to give the spectator the impression of being in direct proximity to the raw power of nature and, in the words of poet Seamus Heaney, "catch the heart off guard and blow it open."

When you stand in front of a painting you are standing in the same spot that the painter did as he or she applied every delicate skin of color. Two people, the maker and the taker, share one footprint and consciousness. Together, they manufacture a place that has never existed before and will never exist again. I am obsessed with fixed views and study images by artists ranging from George Caleb Bingham to Minnie Evans because of how they compressed ideas and emotions into carefully crafted views. Their paintings are not depictions of landscapes but carefully articulated affirmations of place.

I am the product of one place that has two faces. Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, where I was born and raised, is a resort town full of amusement parks and arcades buzzing with neon lights and All-U-Can Eat Calabash Seafood signs three

stories tall surrounded by some of the most ravishing landscapes on the East Coast. There is transcendent beauty in the slow-moving water of Lowcountry rivers, but artificial landscapes rinsed in nickel and neon are equally beautiful. I paid attention. Two landscapes, one natural and one artificial, collided head-on at breakneck speed, secreting a liquid that was bright and combustible. That liquid has been the jet fuel for my paintings for four decades. Forcing two places that didn't go together together made me a painter.

Other than painting, two of my favorite things are barbecue and magic, both of which can be found at amusement parks and state fairs. As a teenager, I admired the local artists who painted carnival banners for their design acumen, clarity of intention, and purposeful execution. Whether for the Ten in One show, the Pie Eating Contest, or The Human Cannonball, each banner was a visual description not of what will happen, but of what could happen. An eye not told what to see, sees more. It was as if reality had been questioned, reexamined, and improved through the process of exaggeration and ornamentation.

I titled many of these new paintings "Banners of the Coast" to address how those signs created a formal familiarity in my memory and, from that visual Rolodex, manufactured an aesthetic that intensifies the wondrous strange of a specific, local experience. American Scene painters from the 1920s through the 1950s were guided by what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz referred to as "local knowledge" and based much of their philosophy on the belief that "To know a city is to know its streets." Painting is local knowledge. Unlike other mediums such as literature, photography, and theater in which the artist modifies and edits before we experience the work, a painting bears all of the tattletale evidence of its creation; whether the kernel of one color peeking from behind another, drips meandering to the bottom of the canvas, or the ghosts of the initial drawing, a painting is the physical consequence of one person's efforts, eternally in the present tense.

That's why I put so much emphasis on the physical surface. I don't apply oil paint like sticks of butter because I like how it looks. On the contrary, I detest impasto; I'd rather look at a George Tooker than a Leon Kosoff. I use thick paint only to establish spatial orientation; thicker is closer and thinner is far away. Content in my work is a direct function of how near or far something appears from your face. I

don’t look for compositions in nature, I make compositions from nature. Painting from nature doesn’t mean copying it but registering thoughts and emotions on a surface with all of the contemplative energy, luxurious beauty, and the strange incantatory spell that comes from the marriage of sense and sight. Applying skins of color to suggest light where there is no light and space where there is no space is a comment on how we ascertain the truth. But in our quest to find meaning, we sometimes overlook reverie. Art history shows us over and over that the thoughtful arrangement of form and the calibration of color can transmit emotions and stir cognition in ways impossible to verbalize. That's why it's visual art. You can't recognize beauty until you’ve seen it. You can't take someone else's breath away unless it's been done to you. Pleasure is itself, knowledge.

Copying those carnival banners as a teenager taught me that, if you are going to impinge on someone’s consciousness, even for a second, you have to grab them by the earlobes with a composition that looks good from twenty-five feet away. Many of these new paintings feature large forms at the edges quickly shifting to atmospheric space near the center which is punctuated by percussive flecks of intense color that appear to thrust outward. Nature is made up of convex lines; trees canopy, mountains bulge, and rivers swell. Concave space creates sagging lines that lack elasticity. I don't use linear perspective to push back deeper into pictorial space, I start in the back press forward. I learned this from studying seventeenth-century Dutch landscape painters like Aelbert Cuyp and Jacob van Ruisdael who used intervals of dark and light value and low sightlines to coax our gaze inward towards the center (or climax) of the composition which appears to bulge out like squeezing a water balloon at one end causing the opposite end to bloat. The result is an inverted landscape, as if being viewed through the wide end of a telescope in which the whole view is compressed down to the size of a diamond and shot directly into the retina. Peering through the wide end of a telescope is a metaphor for doing everything wrong and not learning anything; you’re not seeing the big picture but magnifying the problem. A painter is someone who is good at being wrong.

I’ve come to realize that my paintings would not have been possible thirty years ago; I had neither the skill nor the circumspection that comes with age. Plus, I’ve been away from my subject for more than half of my life because I choose to live

in a city (New York) that has amplified my treatment of light and space. When you put all of those things together, what you get are paintings that belong to their place. I've never needed a position because I have a place. I don't paint South Carolina; I manufacture a place, and South Carolina becomes it. After forty-five years of painting, I no longer peer through the lens at invisible herds, grass-skinned lawns, and the clattering train of air. Now, I spin the telescope around and look until there is nothing left to see.

-Brian Rutenberg, New York City, 2022