

REBECCA HOYER



LandShapes

A LOOK AT WICHITA

A Celebration of Vision

The first question I ask myself when I enter a gallery or a museum is “What am I looking at?” In this case, it’s pretty easy—40 paintings, each a somewhat abstracted, robustly-colored rendering of a house or tree in Wichita. If that’s enough for you—by all means, be my guest. Put this down and enjoy the show. If it’s not, or if you tried that but it didn’t work, I’ve prepared this little guide to help you orient yourself.

Take notice of the inventiveness that pervades the exhibit. From the backdrops that “situate” the paintings, to the use of computers to produce and display images, to the tweaking of an image as it moves from medium to medium, very little in this exhibit has gone unexamined.

As you walk around the exhibit, two feelings will predominate—“This is kinda familiar,” and “This is not quite familiar.” This is by design, an outgrowth of the artist’s recursive, evolutionary design process. From an initial, fairly realistic sketch comes a series of small watercolors during which the scene is broken down into shapes and patterns. In the course of these studies, the shapes and patterns are simplified and refined.



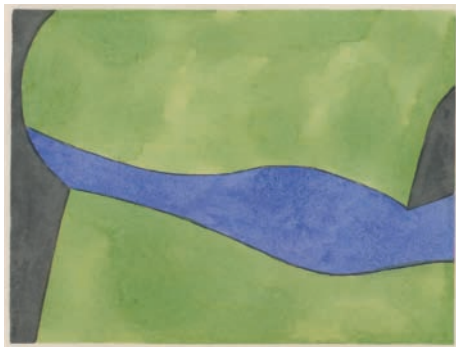
Lincoln and McLean, 2001, watercolor, 9" x 9.5"

Some ideas survive, some don't, but the changes don't stop until something "interesting" results, an enhanced version of the original.

Then, depending on the scale, the final watercolor is "drawn up" into a painting. Initially just a tracing, the surface is designed and redesigned. More changes are introduced, colors and shapes—sometimes entire new works will be spun off (e.g. "River, Two Bridges"). Sometimes, after the painting is complete, an idea for another version will occur, and the process starts over. Invention, the process of re-seeing the painting and the world, is continuous.

Across all this relentless variation, however, is a consistency. More than the style of the paintings, it is a combination of the effect they create and the way they operate on the viewer to create that effect. It starts with the deploying of curious shapes, discontinuous lines. That's what you notice first, all these subtle violations of what you're expecting to see. The colors are inviting, but the design isn't, although at the same time there's nothing so foreign that you have to turn away. It's curious. And so you look.

Once there, however, there's nowhere else to go. There's no 3-D space to get lost in, no hints of significance or symbolism to tempt



River, Two Bridges, 2001, watercolor, 4" x 5"

the viewer from the colors and shapes. As a result, the eye is forced to roam and begins intuiting the complexities of the design. Shapes and colors repeat themselves and mirror themselves, or place themselves in relation to other elements. A cliché, but the more you look, the more you see. Patterns multiply, become part of other patterns, and soon you're aware of your eyes being pulled across the painting, almost as if being told where to look, and it's exhilarating. But it's also a trap. Once the painting has taught you how to read it, you do not forget. Ask yourself—is it sleight-of-hand, or is it magic?



Hilltop, 2001, oil on board, 11" x 14"

Speaking of reading—in the end, all this is just shop-talk, right? Isn't there an agenda here? Doesn't there always have to be an agenda?

Of course. The difficulty is in trying to determine its value. For while one might see the artist's claim of "pastoral and radical" as reference to subject matter and design and dismiss it out of hand, another might choose to combine the two words, as I believe the artist has done, into something of a cultural counterstrike.

The paintings in this show are neither confrontational nor subversive.

They are, if anything, the opposite. Modest—you might even call them polite. But at the same time they are confident, certainly in terms of technique, but also in the appropriateness of their modesty. True, the land is under siege. Forests are vanishing. Unspeakable acts occur behind the doors and windows she has chosen to paint shut. “A Look at Wichita” really just barely scrapes the surface. But there is a time and a place for these things. And in a painting, the artist would appear to be saying, is neither.

Instead, there’s another direction. Previously, invention was seen as primarily a method. However, the wider view is that inventiveness is one of the foundations of the notion of progress. So too are the ideas that human intervention in the world has potential, and that all problems are solvable. All three ideas, and by implication, the idea of progress, in its original sense, are championed by Rebecca Hoyer’s painting. The coexistence of man and nature can be seen in her choices of subjects—houses, bridges, lawns. A belief in the possibility of solutions can be seen in the effort the artist expends to create paintings that neither pander to nor mock the viewer.



House that I see from Kellogg, 2001, laser print, 5" x 4"

Finally, there's the methodology of the paintings, the way they trap you just underneath the surface but don't let you go any deeper. Some might think this an arbitrary and unfortunate limitation imposed on the artist's and the viewer's imagination. But that is not the case. By luring the viewer into the artist's (visual) world, then keeping them there regardless of whether they might be more comfortable elsewhere, she is re-asserting an older model, where the painter is the arbiter, rather than the viewer. By selecting scenes of an everyday nature, by lavishing time and effort on the re-imagining of those scenes, by making them lush and interesting, she is making her case for what paintings are and why they should be valued. Which is—vision. In the end, that's pretty much what this show is about. A celebration of vision and the joys it can bring, in the effort as well as the result.

—Mike Dwyer



Fence, 2001, oil on board, 11" x 14"



225 West Lewis
Wichita, KS 67202
316-337-9040

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