



In Showing Mastery of the Form, an Abstract Landscape Painter Raises Issues

By Alex Hanson
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The fuzzed out landscape isn't exactly an innovation -- see Turner, J.M.W. and the many painters, Impressionist and post-Impressionist, who followed.

Whether it still has value is likely up to an individual viewer. The abstract landscape asks questions about perception and memory, movement, light and the nature of how paint or other media represent what we see. A persuasive argument could be made that Monet answered those questions, but much of contemporary art is less about innovation than it is about fresh eyes and hands reworking time-worn ideas.

Brooklyn, N.Y.-based artist Allison Gildersleeve has developed a mastery of the form, balancing her paintings on the line between concrete depiction and gauzy perception. "Written Under," a sharp, compact show at Cynthia-Reeves New England in Hanover, is replete with color and the lushness of summer, but a summertime of the mind, a metaphor for the fertility of the imagination.

About that color: Gildersleeve isn't shy about using colors that walk the border of the natural world, or that don't precisely correspond to the substances she's trying to evoke. She layers her paintings with earth tones, brown, black, green and dark purple, then uses a final color scheme to create a sense of movement and surface tension.

She's cheeky about how she uses that color. In *What About Yellow?* she makes clear her use of color isn't exactly drawn from nature. The traces of yellow draw the eye up the canvas and conspire with the forms in the foreground to create depth. Could she have used orange? Yep, because that's what she did in *The Gully Behind*, another of the seven paintings in the Hanover show.

In the painting that gives the show its title, Gildersleeve overpainted with tan to make a stream that runs down and across the canvas. As a title, *Written Under* evokes the idea of the palimpsest, a parchment that's been written on two or three times, with the previous texts erased, but still visible, a ghostly presence. And since the paintings take us into the forest, the title also calls to mind undergrowth.

Gildersleeve takes a narrow view of the forest. These aren't grand landscapes, but tight, focused ones, like emotional snapshots.

I wrote about a show of Gildersleeve's paintings a couple of years ago, and these works were made in 2010 and 2011. I cited a line from her artist's statement -- "Space is restructured by the emotions it houses" -- that remains in the statement attached to the

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current show. It continues as follows: “what might have been a linear, internal narrative becomes a topography of uncertainty, loss and retelling.”

I had been looking forward to this show, and I like Gildersleeve's paintings, but I wonder whether a line of questioning or an approach to painting can lapse into shtick. Even Monet's waterlilies, lovely as they are, can become monotonous in too large a quantity.

And the question about the continued relevancy of the abstract landscape is worth considering. The artists who employ it are asking us to share their blurred vision. It's reasonable to ask whether we could use a bit more clarity.

It isn't fair to ask an individual painter's work to be something other than what it is, so I'm not faulting Gildersleeve, but it is fair to ask such questions about abstract art in general.

The more abstract work I see, the more I question what the artists behind it think they have to offer beyond a personal vision of the manipulation of paint. Abstract painters tend to champion something they call “openness,” and the implication is that by suggesting an artist's vision is unduly hermetic a viewer reveals that he or she is insufficiently open -- or, more bluntly, too closed-minded -- to appreciate the work.

I'd like to suggest that an artwork's failure to reach a viewer doesn't sit solely on the viewer's account, and the continued insistence on the part of many abstract painters that it does constitutes a failure of the genre. It isn't the paintings so much as it is the vaporous language that tends to gather around them like so many clouds.

Gildersleeve, to her immense credit, lodges her abstractions in the tangible, a deep woods that she invites us to walk into.

“Written Under,” paintings by Allison Gildersleeve, will remain on view through Aug. 7 at Cynthia-Reeves New England in Hanover. Call 603-640-6155.