## From Banality, Beauty

With a history that dates back several centuries, the landscape tradition is a long and varied one. No matter how disparate the work that falls under its rubric, however, landscape tends to revolve around a rather strict set of oppositions, most importantly, process versus product, immediacy versus mediation, history versus modernity, and idealism versus realism. The most compelling examples of the landscape genre relish these contradictions. Keith Crowley certainly does so, and it accounts for much of his work's strength, integrity, and relevance.

Crowley has been painting landscapes for many years. His work favors shades of violet, blue, green, rose, and hazel. It lavishes attention on light and water, especially the disorienting effects that result when light bounces off water, reflecting the world around it. The point of view, likewise the mode of address, varies from painting to painting. In some cases, the viewer is placed slightly above the landscape. Here the perspective is both neutral and stable, thanks largely to an assertive horizon line. In other cases, though, the composition is simultaneously compressed and destabilized—this has ramifications for viewer and subject matter alike. Instead of merely looking, the viewer starts to feel, and instead of hovering over a landscape, she gets the distinct impression she's standing inside it. Landscape is thus transformed from scene into habitat, from view into environment.

The landscapes Crowley represents are assembled, not seen—assembled, in fact, from photographs the artist took and later cropped, carved, and collaged in the studio, often with aesthetic precedents, such as Chinese and Japanese painting, in mind. For these reasons and more, Crowley's paintings are believable without being realistic. Instead of slavishly copying nature, the artist uses it as both source and resource. Here nature serves as the starting point for landscapes that exist first and foremost in the mind, landscapes whose visual, emotional, and psychological impact are heightened by having been filtered several times over. For all this, though, Crowley's are not romanticized views of nature: the artist favors industrialized landscapes in which the organic and the inorganic, the natural and the manmade exist side by side. Surprisingly, the signs of human intervention on display—dams, trucks, blocks of cement, and the like—do not seem out of place. Indeed, in Crowley's paintings, they are integrated into—of a piece with—the natural world.

As debates around the use, status, and ownership of land reach a fevered pitch, the genre of landscape has resumed renewed importance today. Indeed, to operate in the landscape mode at the beginning of the twenty-first century is necessarily to address the myriad events and crises in which the environment is implicated. For his part, Crowley prefers discretion and poetry over didacticism and polemics. Like that of Robert Smithson, moreover, his work benefits from a refreshing lack of nostalgia and naïveté. In both Crowley's and Smithson's case, nature always has and always will be bound up with culture. Even if there once existed something like a natural nature, it was lost to us centuries ago, and this is cause, in their view, for neither lament nor grief. Crowley parts ways with Smithson in one important respect, though: he discovers beauty in spaces and places that others dismiss as banal, impure, and adulterated, which is to say he seeks and creates beauty in the midst of (and not in spite of) historical change and ecological pressure. We might say that Crowley's is a realist's perspective tempered by a redemptive, affirmative spirit.

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