

Harmony in Nature

“Harmony in Nature,” at Susan Powell Fine Art in Madison, Connecticut, offered fresh evidence of the perennial allure of a certain kind of landscape painting. The four artists represented—Ira Barkoff, Peter Bergeron, Sandy Garvin and Dennis Sheehan—share a love for liminal zones where sky, water and earth meet. In threshold spaces like coasts and wetlands, the principal drama comes not from some striking topographical feature, but from the play of light, especially on the border between day and darkness. Atmosphere becomes palpable in Bergeron’s paintings. A soft grey-white mist unites water and sky in *Quiet Harbor* (2012), and lends a tender poignancy to green marsh



Peter Bergeron, *Quiet Harbor*, 2012

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grass. While Bergeron’s palette gestures back to the Tonalists in *Quiet Harbor*, in other works, he pays homage to the Luminists. He consciously follows nineteenth-century American landscapists, citing John Kensett, Sanford Gifford and William Trost Richards as influences. Bergeron establishes a contemplative mood, intensified by strong color effects, in *Sunrise* (2012). Vivid streaks of molten yellow and red cross a deep teal-blue sky. In *Sunrise with Faulkner Island* (2012), the low island in the distance provides structure for layers of color, stretching out from a foreground shadowy beach through grass reddened by the sun to light turquoise water. Bergeron’s paintings are smaller in scale than most of the nineteenth-century landscapes he admires. *Sunrise with Faulkner Island* is just 8½-by-17 inches. But like those older masters, he has an eye for natural effects that, while observable under the right conditions, also seem otherworldly.

While Bergeron tends to simplify forms, Sheehan’s landscapes have a more classical sense of illusionistic depth, and he saturates his vistas with spiritual energy. In *Sunset over the Marshes* (2011), a meandering stream leads the eye from a foreground of low green grass through the marsh to the horizon, softly fringed with trees, and the sky—lemon-yellow and lilac, streaked with orange in the afterglow but already blue in the twilight shadows. It’s a lovely painting, a living work in the tradition of the Wordsworthian epiphany, where the landscape reveals a glimpse of “something far more deeply interfused, / whose dwelling is the light of setting suns” (“Lines Written above Tintern Abbey”). Sheehan, who studied with two of R.H. Gammell’s Boston School followers, cites as influences the French Barbizon painters and the nineteenth-century American mystic George Inness. Like Inness, Sheehan combines thickly pigmented surfaces with a sense of atmospheric space. He wants, he explains, “to

have the painting emanate light, rather than just be a surface that records the reflection of light—the power comes from the shadows.” He achieves that goal in *Sunset Over the Marshes*. The stream picking up the many colors of the sky is not just an interesting optical effect; it’s a thread of incandescence linking the viewer to the deeper meaning of the natural world.

The other two painters in the exhibition are working in different strains of the contemplative landscape genre. After years of plein-air observation, Barkoff is distilling his experiences in the studio. He plays on the tension between the illusion of a three-dimensional natural world and the physicality of the painted surface. He may find breathing room in a landscape that is three-quarters sky, yet his gestural style reminds us that brushstrokes can evoke clouds without losing the tactile viscosity of paint. In *The Cove* (2011), a close-up study of rocks and water, his impasto becomes almost sculptural. Dragged paint effectively captures the texture of water-slicked rocks and the tidal movement of waves. Since the nineteenth century, the landscape genre has been an area where painters have felt free to explore the continuum between representation and abstraction. Of the four painters in the exhibition, Barkoff seems most interested in that dynamic, yet he remains rooted in and inspired by direct encounters with nature.

Garvin works with a limited value scale, parsing the subtle color harmonies of twilight. She is particularly adept at snowscapes, a genre with its own palette, whether in the hard glitter of urban scenes (as masterfully employed by George Bellows) or in the eerie stillness of the countryside. Garvin’s pictures of snow-blanketed country lanes are nocturnes saturated in blue shadows. In *As Above, So Below* (2012), she contemplates an inlet in early evening. A tiny line of luminous dots on the far shore suggests twinkling lights and human habitation, but aside from that far-off grace note, this is a world left to sky and water. The movement of the water is embodied in an almost-impressionist dapple of brushstrokes. The surface reflects, in a more muted key, the coloristic drama of the sky—lemon-yellow, violet-grey, pink and blue. Garvin’s title acknowledges the nuanced interchange of color between the fluid, reflective elements of air, water and—implicitly, through the setting sun—fire. But “As above, so below” also articulates a principle of occult teaching: every material thing on the earthly plane mirrors something in the spiritual realm. These “correspondences” can be made visible by perceptive artists. “Harmony in Nature” was on view June 15–July 15, 2012, at Susan Powell Fine Art, 679 Boston Post Road, Madison, Connecticut 06443. Telephone (203) 318-0616. susanpowellfineart.com