

The Oak Of Flagey

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Lois Dodd, Benji Grignon, Ull Hohn, Brook Hsu, Richard Mayhew, Beaux Mendes, Erwin Stolz, Daichi Takagi

*“His realism did not imply a finicky verisimilitude nor a painstaking reduplication of minute detail: it was rather that courageous confrontation of reality, that sounding of the hollowness of rhetoric, outworn traditions, and formal conventions, which is the Realists’ mission”*

- Linda Nochlin, *Courbet*

According to art historian Paul Galvez, Gustave Courbet’s landscape paintings are less about the representation of individual bodies and more about the bodily experience of landscape, one in which viewing is recast as a return to the origin through layers of substance. Courbet does this through his portrayals of French grottoes, seemingly insignificant forest scenes, and intimate waterfalls. The paintings he produced are both egalitarian and ethereal. The elasticity of the landscape is magnificently portrayed in his work ‘The Oak of Flagey’ from 1864. Although one could initially read it as a self-portrait (the tree was from his native Flagey, near Ornans) the work had veiled political undertones. Subtitled “Chêne de Vercingétorix, Camp de César près d’Alésia” (Oak of Vercingétorix, Caesar’s Camp Near Aleesia) the artist references the tree of Vercingetorix, named for the Gallic king who was killed during the Gauls’ struggle against Julius Caesar at the Battle of Alesia. Courbet likely chose this inscription as a subtle nod to his contemporary French leftists’ struggle against his own personal Caesar: Napoleon III. As Linda Nochlin summarizes: “In short, without being directly symbolic, the painting of the oak – like landscape in general – could convey a range of implication, rooted in local meanings and certified in the historic oak of Flagey”.

For this exhibition, the works presented dissect and interpret contemporary ideas of landscapes through painting, performance and film. As with Courbet, these artists carry on traditions of portraying these scenes while simultaneously challenging the mythology of landscapes. They understand the implication that these works can be more than just depictions of vistas.

Lois Dodd has for over 70 years painted the world around her. Whether from the interior of her isolated cottage in Maine or in the nearby woods her paintings are often done on intimately scaled panels. Like Courbet, she focuses on the overlooked pockets of beauty hidden in the depths of nature, the humble scenes reserved for a single observer rather than a grand audience. Beaux Mendes follows a similar praxis of archiving the concealed and democratic scenes in forest. Their modestly sized paintings, often done en plein air, interpret details of trees, rivers, rocks that hover between representation and abstraction. Again, their choice to prioritize these humble subjects parallel the theories embraced in the Romanticism of Courbet. If Mendes balances on the line of image and its obfuscation, Richard Mayhew takes it to full transcendence. An artist of Native American and African American descent, Mayhew work is inspired by the duality of his heritage and creates poetic visions that push landscapes to the very edge of abstraction. His panoramas no longer belong to reality but are rather indebted to a spiritual idea of scenery.

The work of Daichi Takagi, Erwin Stolz and Benji Grignon work against the traditional mythologies of the figure in a landscape. Historically reserved to showcase man’s dominance over the sublimity of an awe-inspiring terrain, each artist presents anonymous figures, modestly shrouded within the scenery. Grignon and Stolz subvert the commanding masculine character in the wilderness with androgynous

figures paired with a horse and swan respectively. Takagi's verdant moonscape dominates over a miniature, shadowy silhouette. In direct opposition to Friedrich's confident "Wanderer", here the figure is submissive and appears to be floating into the celestial orb as if sucked into a black hole.

Perhaps the closest in resemblance to the titular reference of the exhibition is Brook Hsu's *Tree In A Landscape*, 2023. Opting for her familiar palette of green and blue with subtle embellishments of orange and auburn, Hsu portrays a circular tree framed within a clearing in a forest. Despite its modest size the sapling is like a religious icon, a virginal cherub protected by the wilderness surrounding it.

Lastly, the most democratic example of contemporary landscape can be found within Ull Hohn's egalitarian depictions of forest trees. Having been the Meisterschüler under Gerhard Richter at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, it was a radical shift in the artist's conceptual practice to draw inspiration from TV painter Bob Ross. Seemingly naïve yet brilliantly executed, this series of work that began in the early 1990's are still challenging in their opposition to popular contemporary aesthetics. It's unpretentious subject matter and rendering manifest the Romanticism that Courbet sought to embody, that the landscape is not reserved for the bourgeois but is a divine gift for the hoi polloi.