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Nora Sturges *Housing Estates*, 2009. Oil on MDF, 8 x 9 in.

“LANDSCAPES INTO ART” AT C. GRIMALDIS GALLERY BALTIMORE

by Noah Dillon

It can be dramatically reorienting to discover space is not as you thought. This exhibition features 33 small and mid-sized landscape paintings and prints from the past 40 years, by 10 artists. Opened just prior to the 2016 election of Donald Trump as president of the United States— and the upending of conventional wisdom about the shape of the country that event entailed—it reminded me of how disruptive and shocking revisioning can be, whether translating from the world into paint, or from one mental picture of the world to a new one.

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In part this comes from the Impressionist–indebted work on view, namely that by David Brewster, Aschely Cone, and Raoul Middleman. Their daubed, brushy, and smeared marks always retain some relationship to reality, but are principally attentive to light and sensation. Brewster’s *Shafts of Corot*, 2016, with its pale, brisk brushwork, owes as much to Paul Cézanne as the titular Jean-Baptiste.

The show’s artworks are almost exclusively unpopulated, with the exception of a few boaters in Robert Dash’s thriftily rendered pochoir print *Bayman*, 1980. Buildings, but not people, are found in farmscapes by Eugene Leake and Henry Coe, the latter looking like Edward Hopper simplified the bleak farmlands depicted by Andrew Wyeth. Self-taught Greek artist Giorgos Rigas has a handsome, rudimentary technique, painting from memory Hellenic vistas of whitewashed houses dotting the hills of his homeland.

Among the cohort of artists long represented by the gallery are a few younger painters, including David Armacost—whose quick, pensive studies of Brooklyn’s Green-Wood Cemetery are unlike his usual iconographic imagery—and Eleanor Ray. Her diminutive, delicate paintings seduce with their sense of touch and familiarity: quiet rooms, glimpsed through windows or from patios. A few small panels by Nora Sturges imagine surreal landscapes—sci-fi places covered with snow, or maybe dust and ash. In *Control Room*, 2014, one building of an experimental apparatus stands dormant in a land, like Armacost’s graveyard, everywhere veiled with alienation and finality rendered in midnight blue speckled with dusty white.

Most of these artworks depict the American landscape with the exception of Rigas’s (the only non-American of the group), a few images of the Swiss countryside by Cone, and Sturges’s thanatotic dreamscapes. Although the pictures offered by the exhibition are superficially prosaic, they also encapsulate sites of recent turmoil. Rigas’s bucolic villages are now places of transnational strife as Greece has become a battleground for the European Central Bank, fascistic nationalists, political and financial elites, poor people, and pensioners; while Brewster notes in an artist statement that his work documents places on the northeastern seaboard devastated by hurricanes Sandy and Irene, and others before, since, and still coming. Many paintings here show places

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frequently given the platitudinous title of “real America” by cynical power brokers who’ve systematically rotted and uprooted physical, educational, economic, and social infrastructure. In our present day, land itself is constantly contested: The protest in North Dakota at the Dakota Access Pipeline site illuminated what little power we have in exercising cultural, commercial, and legal control over our own surroundings; and, soon, a shady real estate developer will be the president.

Democratic campaign strategist James Carville infamously described the political geography of Pennsylvania as essentially Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, with Alabama in the middle. Riding Amtrak between New York and Baltimore, outside the metropolitan technocracies, the day after the election, I thought I saw something like that out the window: pastoral space, agedness, Jesus, pickups, Trump. In the wake of his horrifying election victory, I was again reminded that America is a pocketed landscape of cities among vast swathes of radically different rural country. The so-called “blue wall” has been obliterated by someone threatening a wall of reinforced concrete and razor wire.

Philadelphia-born reporter James Fallows and his wife, Deborah, have been touring America over the past three years, producing a series of videos and essays for *The Atlantic* on the state of the country. Contrary to what we hear from candidates and the nightly news, the Fallows’ work reflects the nation to be in a state of waiting—well positioned for a productive boom. The green economy is expanding rapidly; the refugees and immigrants that are allowed to settle in the United States are revitalizing American towns; inexpensive post-crash real estate has led to new development projects for artists and innovators; the American economy is growing faster than that of other developed nations and, recently, people up and down the economic scale have begun to share in the spoils. Many of the images on view in this exhibition are similarly latent, ready for use, pre-utopian.

The gallery’s new project space downstairs hosts a separate but related show, “Back in a Moment,” featuring paintings by two young artists, Ylva Ceder and Gretchen Scherer. Their deserted interiors— Scherer’s small, kaleidoscopic remixes of aristocratic spaces, Ceder’s large paintings of traditional Swedish homes reimagined with Islamic

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adornments—use perspective in similar ways to those paintings upstairs. Like Sturges, they create new worlds to comment on our own.

In many ways, Trump's election represents not only a different view of what America is, but a drastically restricted version of what it can be: what freedoms can be had; who can be included; how, or even if, citizens can be merely comfortable; what the scope of the world is. If we can't envision or imagine that, then far beyond fractured, the imagistic, physical, and political nature of the landscape is, and will be, in doubt.