

Romancing Nature

December 1 - December 29, 2004

Mark Kurdziel

Betsy Stewart

James David Thomas

Sung-Soon Yang

WALTER WICKISER GALLERY

568 Broadway, Suite104B New York, NY 10012 (212)941-1817 wwickiserg@aol.com
www.walterwickisergallery.com

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We now live in a post modern world, in which a romantic view of nature is looked at with intense skepticism, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that our relations with it have become ever more complex, made distant by the overwhelming importance of electronic media. The television and the computer have taken over as mediators of experience, with nature losing its impetus as a world of immense influence on our mores, even our virtue. As a result, we look askance at the environment, wondering whether it can make a difference in our lives. Much of contemporary art is tied to a more or less jaded view of nature's ability to transform our sensibility, and so there is an increasingly distant relationship between internal and external states of being. In theory, there is nothing wrong with this, but in practice, because the world of nature has so little to do with the very self-aware art being currently practiced, its representation has come to be seen as naive, as happens in the genial but egregious art of Thomas Kincaid, to use an extreme example.

The struggle, then, is to invest nature with contemporaneity and see it with the gravitas it possesses and truly deserves. A romantic view of nature is possibly problematic in contemporary life because we remain beyond its pale; we no longer have the close relations we used to have with it, with the result that our position is more tentative vis-a-vis an active interaction with what it may offer. Indeed, it would be easy enough to dismiss any attempt at contact with the outside world as inherently naive, especially now that both art and its criticism invoke an intellectually driven, politically astute reading of the world as a created, that is to say a made, thing, which cannot sustain the ephemeral sweetness of an innocent relationship with nature. But despite this difficulty, it would appear that some artists continue to struggle to affirm the deeper possibilities of nature. The four artists in "*Romancing Nature*"--Mark Kurdziel, Betsy Stewart, James David Thomas, and Sung-Soon Yang--evoke a romantic reading of the natural world without succumbing to naiveté or coyness. Theirs is an active vision, intent on rendering what they see with involvement and palpable energy. In more than a few respects, they go against the rising tide of indifference or cynicism.

Mark Kurdziel offers us the subtle nuances of an abstracted landscape of colors and forms that merge in a nearly mystic fashion. A colorist of genuine achievement, the artist mixes and matches blues and greens and reds in a continuously fluid motion, the hues complementing each other across the expanse of the canvas. In *Landscape #1* (2004), a thick green stripe outlines two hills, above which float two blue shapes, one organic and cloud like, the other more resolutely squared. The middle of the painting is taken up with reddish forms, with a horse and a stand of trees occupying the lower middle of the painting. The landscape triumphantly celebrates the joys of nature, in a way that underscores the transparent light emanating from the hills and skies he is describing. Another painting, *Lost in Juarez* (2003), is replete with square and rectangular patches of color that abut and overlap each other in a way that reminds the viewer of Hans Hofmann. The painting's abstract sequences are undercut by the presence of several trees, which remind us that this is a painting about a place as much as it is about painting itself.

Betsy Stewart is a painter of marine life, a landscapist of the pond and sea. Her language is inherently, and cogently, lyric. There is an interest in decorative effect and Asian thought (the artist studied Asian philosophy in college), but Stewart moves past her influences into an active relationship with her forms, which are animated by color and a close regard for the shapes she finds in nature. Interestingly, in the tall, narrow painting *Water Stills #16* (2004), the artist extends the work nearly 3 inches from the wall, painting the sides in hard-edge, Mondrian-like abstraction, so that the sides of the painting sharply contrast with the Japanese delicacy of the water forms facing the audience directly. This format is repeated in the totem like pieces *Aquatilis #1*, which are alive with aquatic nature. In *Aquatilis #1*, the thin strip of wood faces the viewer vertically; its 10-inch width allows Stewart to paint a cross-section of pond life, sensuously rendering the layers of water in a fashion analogous to the layers of geological rock; one can get lost in the detailed particulars of the painting, so attractive is the palimpsest of layers of green and gold, highlighted by clusters of white bubbles. In works, as well as the two examples of the "Fontis" series, Stewart pushes out the painting into low relief, so that she can decorate the sides of the composition with her Mondrian-like designs.

James David Thomas's explorations of nature are informed by both Western and Asian traditions. There is a sense of mystery in his dedication to certain kinds of space, which conceals as much as it reveals. The artist's mother was Japanese, and so there is in his art a finesse and a sense of the magical moment that connects him to her culture. In the very small painting *Night Pool #7* (2004) four blue-green fish throw shadows beneath them; they swim in blue and mauve water, which is divided into sections by brownish-red lines. The fish, which may be carp, suggest an Asian tradition in painting, as does the quiet, but masterful, sense of discipline and mystery in the composition. In an equally small work entitled *Singularity* (2004), the center is devoted to a spiraling galaxy of stars, beneath which two fish swim in the darkness together. The combination of the image is lyrical, almost to the point of being past words: two kinds of nature are being poetically evoked. Another painting, a much larger oil on wood (14" by 60") is titled *Point of Origin*. It presents a broad horizon, divided into halves: the top part is blue sky that grows paler as it moves down to the dark green and black landscape that meets it halfway. Thomas, who lives up in the hills of Los Angeles, is privileged with a long and broad viewpoint, which he beautifully relates in this painting.

The Korean painter Sung-Soon Yang effectively uses oil on canvas to communicate her deep sense of natural beauty; she works in a studio in the mountains near Seoul. In the striking oil painting, *Blue with Wind* (2004), white tree trunks angle upwards toward the right, ending in green, gold, and yellow foliage. The painting is graphically compelling in that it portrays the wind as supremely powerful, blowing invisibly but forcefully through a stand of trees. In *Blue Smiling* (2004), we see the trunk of what looks like a birch tree on the left; bare branches move to the right and cover the blue background with complex interweavings of linear form. Yang's belief in an animated nature is evident here, despite the fact that the tree has been pictured as leafless. She trusts in the spirit of nature to invigorate her art and make it attractive to her audience. *Blue with Joy* (2004), an oil on canvas, complements its representation of a small copse with black and purple butterflies, which, in their delightful subtlety, appear to highlight the attractiveness of nature and its attendant joy. The trees both cross to the right diagonally and stand up straight; they are like people in a crowded group, while the butterflies define the painting with a lyric note.

By now it is easy to see that all four artists are working out of an idealized understanding of nature. Their lyricism is based upon choice, and they imply that such a choice--the active witnessing of natural beauty--is available to the viewer, who is meant to perceive the art with open emotion as well as thought. Yet the four painters move quickly beyond a simple romanticism, preferring to invest their point of view with a representational, at times closely realist, underpinning--even Kurdziel's abstractions seem rooted in a specific, as opposed to generalized, understanding of nature. The point is that all four artists move toward a conscious process in their recording of nature, a strategy which is compelling in part because it has been made to become part of our world, no matter how urban our lives may be. In a sense they have exchanged irony for joyfulness, their pleasure acting on our own perceptions of their art.

"Romancing Nature" shows how very far we can go in the pursuit of a realized world of natural form; the exhibition's paintings remind us that the correspondences between what we see and who we are die hard, engaging us in the best sense of that word.

Jonathan Goodman

Jonathan Goodman is a poet and writer who specializes contemporary art. He is currently an editor of *Art Asia Pacific*, a quarterly devoted to contemporary Asian art.