

Something and Nothing

“To sit in the shade and look upon verdure is the most perfect refreshment.” So said Fanny Price, the underdog heroine of *Mansfield Park*. Yet while she sat overlooking the landscape, on a bench where her handsome cousin had parked her, she was jealously preoccupied with what that cousin was up to with minxy Miss Crawford. The chapter ends with Fanny noticing, in the carriage home, that no one seems refreshed by the day’s outing. Austen’s declaration, through Fanny, about the restorative powers of nature, was sincere; it is our 20th century deconstructive training that prompts us to see Fanny’s words as undermined by her nervous speculations. Still, it is an example of the way in which our experience of ‘the landscape’ can carry within it the after-image of its opposite – Fanny’s refreshment shaded by worry, Albert Cuyp’s drowsy summer cows shadowed by winter’s hunger, the Group of Seven’s ‘virgin landscapes’ in which, off-screen, lurk both industrialisation and colonisation.

Or, vice versa, in landscapes observed from groomed walking-trails or behind the window of a moving, as in Mara Korkola’s and Monica Tap’s work respectively, an experience of landscape that feels raw and immediate. Korkola and Tap hold within their paintings moments of the inscrutability of nature, made possible, I feel, through the idea of distraction, the painters’ mediation with landscape experienced in time. For Korkola, this is a function of the paintings marking travel, her passage through a familiar landscape. In Tap’s work, the time of seeing is in constant negotiation with the obdurate, glassy eye of the video camera as well as the speed (a moving car) with which she passes through the landscape. The codes that mark landscape painting – perspectival recession, simplification of complex form, horizontality and verticality, palette – are deployed and retracted throughout the paintings. Equally, there is codification of time – blur, gesture, stuttering of form. These are foils for moments within the paintings that resist landscape or temporal codes. In Korkola’s and Tap’s work, these uncoded

moments act as silence does for John Cage: sound which is as audible as whatever surrounds it, but which is unintentional, outside of a system of notation’. I see Korkola and Tap’s ‘silence’, as well, through Mircea Eliade’s idea of hierophany. According to the historian of religion, hierophany is “[t]he manifestation of ... a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our profane world”². Both painters have moments of silence and hierophany in their work that exist within a ‘profane’ world of gesture, code and event.

Mara Korkola’s small panel paintings are based on photographs taken while walking the Bruce Trail. Each series of paintings describes part of a single walk and Korkola’s observations as the landscape presents itself as more, or less, ‘scenic’. “No Place 241” begins with a view in which large trees block the foreground of the painting. The second and third panels are inscribed with a tangle of wiry branches through which the viewer must peer in order to see the curve of the landscape. The fourth panel indicates a gentle slope, the vantage-point, in historical painting, from which the land-owner could survey his domain. A body of water appears, followed in the next panel by a band of sunlight falling on two slender birches. The sixth panel includes an avenue of trees, organised along a perspectival orthogonal: we are ready now to see the view! But panels seven and eight refuse to clarify themselves into landscape displayed for ready consumption; perspective is closed off, the foreground is a scribbled scrim.

This obfuscation of the field is a visual form of distraction akin to the ‘looking awry’ that has been part of painting’s language from Holbein’s *Ambassadors*, to Bonnard’s dazzling light, to the optical effects of hard-edge abstraction. Looking awry stands in contrast to a traditional idea of presentation, in which the world is laid out directly before us. Looking awry is looking sideways, catching form unaware, or, as in Bonnard’s and Riley’s work, being dazzled and distracted by overt forms such that we only gradually become aware of other, quieter experiences within the painting.

Monica Tap, originally from Alberta, completed both her BFA and MFA degrees at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. She is the recipient of many grants and awards, including from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for her project, “Translation as a Strategy of Renewal in Painting.” Tap’s work is represented in private, corporate and public collections. She lives in Toronto and is an Associate Professor in the School of Fine Art and Music at the University of Guelph.

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What we are able to distinguish through looking awry can be startling, outside the conventions of what we expect to see. It allows for perception, as Canadian painter Jack Chambers describes it, “... the instant before consciousness; it precedes the conscious identification of objects. It is the instant of vision.”³ Throughout Korkola’s series of paintings, colour acts as the ‘hierophanic moment’ that appears silently within the busy field. In “No Place 243”, a luminous passage that appears in the first panel as a drift of sienna-rose, darkens, over the series, to a mysterious cobalt violet, irreducible to its presence as a specific plant, ‘dogwood’. It is just such a moment of vision, detaching colour from object, so that it acts as an arresting, un-nameable moment within a field of nameable parts.

For Monica Tap, distraction is a function of her evocation of accelerated time. Each of the six large paintings in “Going to the Sun” is based on a digital image of one-tenth of a single second of video footage. At this speed, while the human eye may be able to perceive, it cannot code sufficiently quickly to understand – or ‘see’. (There are moments such as in the rich, dark passages of the sixth canvas, in which the digital recorder can’t make speedy enough decisions about the relative value of light and dark to determine form). Throughout these paintings, there is a mighty effort to wrest form and space from the onrush of data. Groves of trees dissolve into dashes of bright paint, forms tremble with the effort of maintaining a coherent contour. In contrast to these legible passages, there are sweeps of energetic paint where sprayed drops from Tap’s paintbrush indexically perform the dot-and-dash description of form collapsing into blur. The painter – and the camera – make a heroic effort to describe the landscape for us before it rushes past.

Within this dizzying field, however, are moments of utter stillness. These are the result, technically at least, of the camera being blinded by dazzling light on its glass eye. It records these light-blasts faithfully, in colour – white, pale violet, soft pink – that is incoherent with the colour and value field

of the landscape. These passages, that Tap calls ‘shards’ can play with perspective orthogonals (as in “Going to the Sun IV”, lying along an implied horizontal plane), or replicate a photographic lens-flare. Occasionally, though, the shards turn into a flat, unmoving passage that halts the onrush of the painting and suggests a sudden moment of silence within hubbub. “Going to the Sun II” has just such a passage, a rough square of ice-white paint in which the energy of the landscape description seems to fade away. It is as though we are no longer looking at the landscape, but it is looking at us.

Sequence and Passage brings together landscape and time. In both Korkola’s and Tap’s series of paintings, one understands the passage of the body through, or past, the landscape, and through the past of landscape painting. Within these movements, within our distracted experience of landscape in time, are places of startling stillness, where our response is just to see.

Sara Hartland-Rowe

¹ Jill Johnston, “There is No Silence Now”, from *John Cage*, ed Richard Kostelanetz, Praeger, NY, 1970, p 146.

² Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, Harcourt/Brace, NY, 1959, p17.

³ Chambers, Jack. *Jack Chambers*, Nancy Poole, London ON, 1978, p142.



SEQUENCE AND PASSAGE



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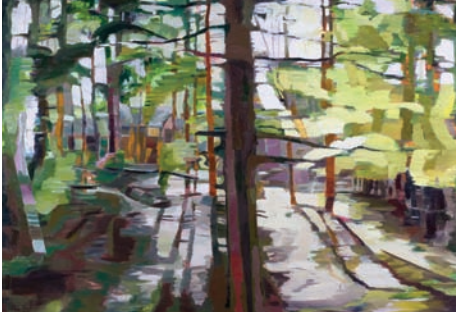
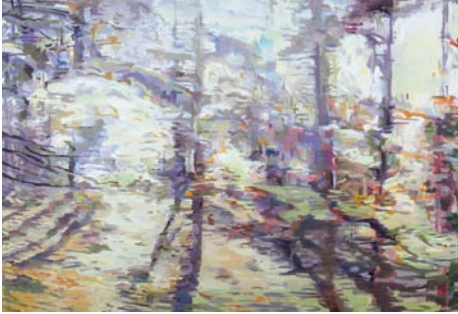


No place 241, 2010, oil on 8 panels.

20 x 25.4 cm each



MONICA TAP



Going to the Sun I, II, III, IV, V and VI, 2010, oil on canvas.
Photo: Rick Johnston Photography.



152 x 216 cm each

