HYPERALLERGIC

Jake Berthot's Nowhere Land

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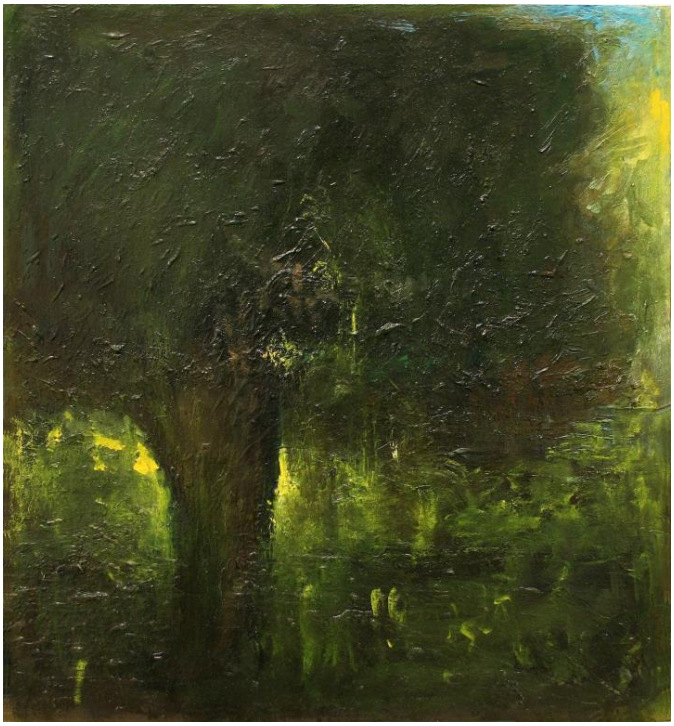
David Carrier February 8, 2020



Jake Berthot, "Early Morning" (1998), oil on gessoed panel, 18 x 15 inches (all images courtesy Betty Cuningham Gallery, New York)

After a long, successful career as an abstract artist, in 1992 Jake Berthot moved to upstate New York and became a landscape painter. He lived there until the year of his death, 2014. And so *Jake!* at Betty Cuningham Gallery, an exhibition of 24 paintings and 10 works on paper, all with images of trees, is a marvelous record of his late style.

Normally modernists moved from depicting nature to doing abstractions. How, then, should we understand Berthot's evolution which goes in the absolute reverse direction?

Sometimes a distinctive chosen motif is important for landscape artists. Paul Cézanne's landscapes needed Mont Sainte-Victoire; for Claude Monet's late style, the water lilies in his pond were essential; and the verticals and horizontals of the windmills of his native Holland made the perfect subject for Piet Mondrian's early paintings. For this reason, visiting these European sites is worthwhile for anyone who wants to fully understand their artworks.

Jake Berthot, "After Rain" (2000), oil on panel, 21 1/2 x 25 inches

By comparison, Berthot's relatively formless woods are a hard subject to identify. And so I'm not sure that visiting Accord, New York, would help you understand this exhibition. If I were lost in the woods and had to use these paintings as a guide, I wouldn't be able to find my way out.

If you roller-skate, as it were, through the two floors of the Betty Cunningham Gallery, you will get almost nothing from this exhibition. When I did that, coming off the street near the Bowery, I was initially a little worried. How could I review this show? All that I saw were some small and medium-sized paintings, mostly very dark, apparently almost indistinguishable, and his drawings of the countryside. But then when I

slowed down, I gradually learned how much there was to see here. Berthot's late art is an exercise in small discriminations. And so once you look with proper, careful, slow attention, you will discover that his figurative works are surprisingly varied.

"Early Morning" (1998) is a small painting with some golden light on the left, and "Moonlight on Winter Field" (1998), another small painting, shows trees in the distance and snow in the foreground. Compare then, if you will, "Summer" (1997-2002), with its mass of green surrounding the tree at the bottom and glimpse of blue sky breaking through the upper right-hand corner, with "After Rain" (2000), in which a bit of sunlight seeps through on the right.

Jake Berthot, "Chapel Trail Near Alter Road" (2000), oil on panel, 26 3/8 x 26 1/8 inches

And contrast the dimly lit path in "Chapel Trail Near Alter Road" (2000), the solitary tree of "Old Birch" (2000), and the bright red sun at the upper right in "Approaching Night (For Ryder)" (2001). (Albert Pinkham Ryder, the great American artist of the late 19th and early 20th century, now a cult figure, painted landscapes that are notoriously dark.) As for Berthot's large graphite on paper drawings, they show

individual trees more clearly that the paintings do, sometimes set at a distance, but at other times close-up. All seem immersed in twilight.

The more you look, the more variety you will find. The critical question, then, is how to understand these pictures. The catalogue contains three quotations, all of them short, from the marvelous painter and writer Andrew Forge. For a fuller statement about depictions of nature, see Forge's essay "Art/Nature," (*Philosophy and the Arts*, Macmillan, 1973). It makes no reference to Berthot, but it helps explain this show.

Before Impressionism, Forge argues, drawing was used to separate forms from the background — all European painting up until that time had been "based on drawing." The Impressionists, however, discovered "that the whole view is potentially a picture," and so for them "all-over light comes to take the place of the figure-field discriminations that one had relinquished."

Jake Berthot, "Approaching Night (For Ryder)" (2001), oil on panel, 13 15/16 x 17 1/4 inches

Berthot might be called a post-abstract nature painter. I mean by that, the figurative works in this show are indicative of the way abstraction, as developed by Berthot and his peers, allowed him to rethink the basic

character of paintings about the natural world. The Impressionists loved to paint outdoors.

But these Berthots, as Forge explains in the catalogue "are not plein-air paintings"; instead, an elaborate grid, which is "most clearly seen in the drawings," underlies each painting. What Berthot is doing, this observation suggests, is acting like an abstract painter — like the abstract painter he was earlier on — but with subjects selected from the nature immediately outside his studio.

I believe that this analysis helps us understand the immediate visual qualities of these paintings, and suggests, also, why it was important to exhibit them alongside some drawings. In many of Berthot's paintings you are enveloped, as it were, by the woods, in scenes that make it devilishly hard to locate your own position.

Jake Berthot, "Old Birch" (2000), oil on panel, 22 x 23 inches

That's perhaps why initially I mistakenly thought that these were all twilight paintings. The scenes are dark, not because are they are naturalistic close-up images of the woods, but because they are recollections of countryside views, as developed indoors in the studio.

And that, I think, is why they are strikingly different from the nature pictures of Camille Pissarro or any other 19th-century Impressionist. Living in the countryside, Berthot discovered a way to create art based upon nature that draws on his prior experience of abstraction. Nature, it would seem, turned out to be a more complicated (and diverse) subject than expected. That said, I'm not attempting to characterize Berthot as a conceptual artist. He was a painter who found a new way to present his subjects, teaching us to look more closely at nature and thus see more.

Jake! *continues at Betty Cunningham Gallery (15 Rivington Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through February 23.*