

# Turnings and Returnings

The Art of  
Jake Berthot

How easy it is to glance at/glance off so much contemporary art. Sometimes it seems partly a result of the postmodern repudiation of subjectivity and passion, which have always relied on images of depth for expression. One of postmodernism's more dubious contributions is to have substituted surface for depth. As if the self, with its dreams, passions, ideas, and longings can be so easily abolished. Given that Jake Berthot's recent work has located and explored depth through images drawn from the natural world, and has found a guide in Emerson, we might let the American philosopher's words orient us in the story of depth in nature and consciousness: "How shallow seemed to me yesterday in the woods the speech one often hears from tired citizens who have spent their brief enthusiasm for the country, that Nature is tedious, and they have had enough of green leaves. Nature and the green leaves are a million fathoms deep, and it is their eyes that are superficial." This depth of nature is a reservoir of life energy. In the words of the Victorian Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins: "There lives the dearest freshness deep down things." The vitalizing depth of nature speaks to the depth of human consciousness. Which is not to say that all is sunlit. If nature can be dark at night, human depths have their own mirroring and corresponding darkness and danger. The same poet, Hopkins, put it this way: "O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall / Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap/ May who ne'er

Detail from "November (For That Which Was Not): oil on linen over panel. 2005  
(COVA-TIS' AT'IIIICUNINGHAM GAU.ERV.N (I YYOIII:K)

hung there." But whether the imagery is of darkness or light, jeopardy or joy, the conversation between self and nature is reciprocal.

Instead of the viewer's gaze skimming off the surface like a skipped stone as in so much contemporary painting, Jake Berthot's paintings *hold* you-stop you and engage you, stir you and disturb you. When you stand in front of one of Berthot's recent paintings, you immediately become aware of depths in the painting and you are drawn out into them, feel some part of yourself emptying into them. But then the mysterious mutuality of reverie takes hold: into your newly created emptiness, something flows from the painting. And gradually, steadily, the experience of gazing at the canvas becomes a reciprocal emptying-out and filling, an ebb and flow. Depth speaks to depth. And when at last, after successive, calm, reciprocal emptyings and fillings, you break the spell of the encounter, you emerge changed in some quiet but definite way.

## The Turn

For a New York painter to move to the country, to move upstate to live alone in the Catskill Mountains where they fold fiercely down into the Hudson Valley, is not so unusual. Such a turning away from the urban toward the rural could



"Pasture," oil on linen over panel, 2004

be circumstantially or existentially motivated, could be a mark of success or a final enactment of that fed-upness that periodically overcomes all city dwellers, and especially artists. Still, Jake Berthot had lived for thirty-three years in New York City before moving to the country in 1994. His whole career had been woven into the fabric of the city and its art scene. Essentially self-taught, he had educated himself in the city's museums and art galleries and through his association with other abstract painters. Then, in his midfifties, shortly after his move to the country, landscape imagery entered his work. Such an abrupt shift from abstraction to figuration is not without precedent. Twenty years or so earlier, the Abstract Expressionist Philip Guston dramatically abandoned the abstraction his reputation rested on, but Guston had been a representational painter in his youth, before he embraced abstraction, and he was able to signal the continuity of his artistic quest across this late-life rupture by including images and themes from his youthful work. Berthot, in his turn to figuration, couldn't do that—he'd been an abstract painter his entire life. Nothing could disguise or mitigate the radical nature of Berthot's shift.

## Turning as Returning

When Berthot began to fill his canvases with images of trees and fields, it represented an unprecedented turn in his art, but the countryside to which he had moved also echoed a world he'd known before, in childhood and youth, and so there were significant elements of return as well. Although he was born in Niagara Falls, New York, his mother fled her abusive husband when Jake was only two and returned to her parents' truck farm in central Pennsylvania. His mother was so young that his grandmother took over the parenting role. Having raised eleven of her own children, she declared Jake to be "her twelfth." But he had no father, and all his aunts and uncles were grown except two who were still in high school when he arrived. The farm itself was self-sufficient and austere; it had electricity, thanks to FDR's rural electrification program, but not indoor plumbing.

His childhood was both solitary and chore-filled, and he spent many hours, as a boy, wandering and exploring the surrounding woods and fields. That long-ago solitude in the face of the natural world resurfaced in his work when he turned, late in his career, to figuration.

But there is yet another turning that is also a returning in Berthot's art. His decision to utilize the imagery of trees and fields in his recent paintings also signals a larger, transpersonal backward arc—an arc that passes far above his childhood and swoops down to roost among the nineteenth-century Romantic and Transcendentalist thinkers who had such a formative influence on



American consciousness. Chief among them was Emerson, whose eloquence about the human encounter with the natural world Berthot found to be an inexhaustible inspiration for his new life. Berthot notes the impact of Emerson's "Self-Reliance" on his thinking and art, how it "inspired (him) to rethink what it means to be an American spiritually and emotionally. We don't really have monuments like the Europeans do—I mean their ancient cathedrals, old palaces, buildings, and so on. Our monuments are the bigness of nature." Berthot's turning toward nature also represented a turning away from a contemporary art scene whose premises he no longer shared.

Early in his career, Emerson had experienced his own turning-away: he gave up his pulpit because he had ceased to believe in key elements of traditional, inherited religion. He sought instead an authentic religious experience as a personal event and found it in his solitary encounters with the natural world. In the opening passages of his essay "Nature," he urged his readers to share his impatient restlessness for authenticity: "The foregoing generation s



"Tables Measure": oil on canvas, 1978-79 (courtesy of THE NEW SENGALLERY)

beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?"

When Berthot takes up Emerson's challenge, and, as a painter, renders his own two-dimensional records of phenomenological encounters with nature, it does not mean he lives outside history or the history of painting: his circling-back is also a reconnection to American landscape painters. Shunning the "grand effects and theatre" of the Hudson River School, Berthot seeks instead the "paradoxical earthboundness that resides in a phenomenological poetic otherness of the dream" captured by Albert Pinkham Ryder or Ralph Albert Blakelock, and fuses it with the more formal elegance of a George Inness. Nor does such a circling-back to an earlier century repudiate all that has happened since then in painting. Berthot's landscapes acknowledge and assimilate key congenial developments in painting since the mid-nineteenth century—Mark Rothko's darker existential broodings no less than Cézanne's dynamic geometries of nature.

### Orphans of the Spirit

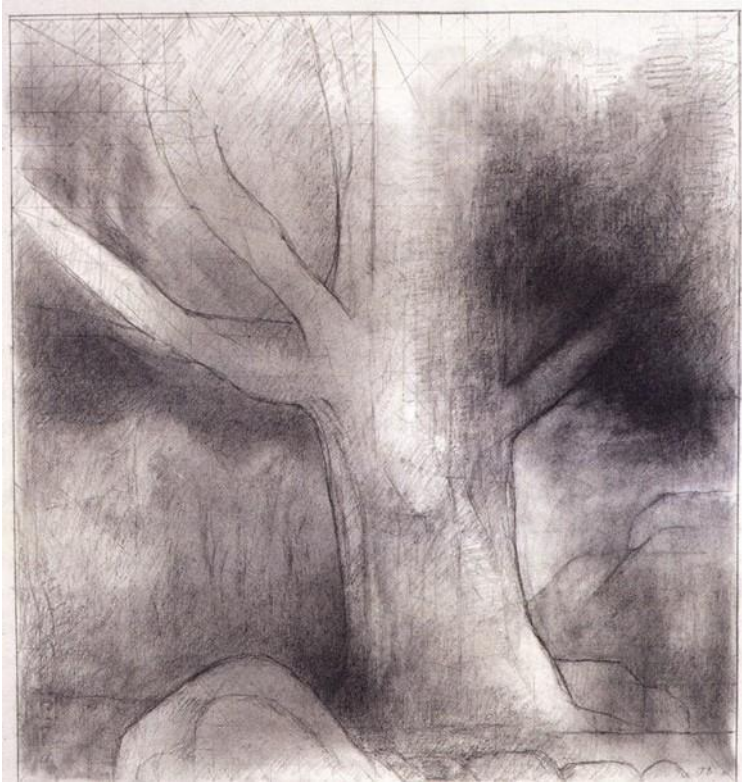
"A certain man asked a master-poet, 'As for the Way of Poetry, what sort of training is necessary?' He answered, 'The crescent moon over the tall grasses of a withered moor,' This was pointing to something unsaid, something bleak and lonely, that is to be intuitively grasped."

—Shinkei (1399-1474): quoted in R. H. Blyth's *A History of Haiku, Volume Two*

In an essay entitled "Freud and Jung: Contrasts," C. G. Jung lauds his erstwhile mentor's insights into identity formation in the individual, but claims that Freud's vision leaves the self trapped inside "the sterile family drama"—the dynamic of interrelationship between child and parents that offers no release for the growing child. He goes on to note that tribal societies, through the rituals of initiation ceremonies, have devised a means for the adolescent self to transcend its intimate and stultifying origins. Jung speculates that a deep purpose of these ceremonies is to create a situation of rebirth for the initiate; one in which the biological mother is replaced by Nature and the biological father by Spirit. The initiate thereby attains an adult identity freed of the personal past, an identity that permits a changed and expanded relationship to the natural world as well as an integration into the structuring institutions and sacred beliefs of the tribe. The vastness and scope of nature and culture have replaced the confining intimacy of family relations.

But Jung's vision is one of nontraumatic transition. In the case of orphans, I'd speculate that this transition is traumatized. The orphan's intimate relationships are ruptured prematurely by the parental absence, before the tribal guidance of the initiation rites are prepared to take over. Such was Wordsworth's case, the greatest poet of nature in English and the person who could be said to have created the meanings of Romantic nature for us, even more than Rousseau or his own American follower, Emerson. Wordsworth's mother died when he was eight, his father when he was thirteen. After his father's death, he was separated from his siblings and spent his youth at a rural boarding school deep in the wilds of the Lake District. There, he established a substitute for the ruptured intimate relations of family: an exuberant connection to nature. But it was a nature experienced in solitude, not experienced and interpreted tribally and socially. It didn't integrate the young Wordsworth into the "tribe" of his social and cultural milieu, but instead both deepened

and shadowed his individual inner life. Nature had already been important to the child Wordsworth, as it is to many children growing up half-wild in a rural landscape, but when he became an orphan, nature had to perform double duty, flowing into and filling other spiritual spaces as well—nature had to enter the emptiness inside him created by the traumatic absence of the mother. And spirit had to fill the space of the absent father. Spirit, like the father, has to provide structure in experience; but without tribal guidance and institutions, spirit has no obvious shape. A fatherless child is prematurely de-



Unrled, graphite on paper, 2005 1couomv a,nv cuNINChMCAUm . NEwVOR<l



"That Which Before Was Eden." oil panel, 1999 1couRTmOf"" NELSENcLLEIIVJ

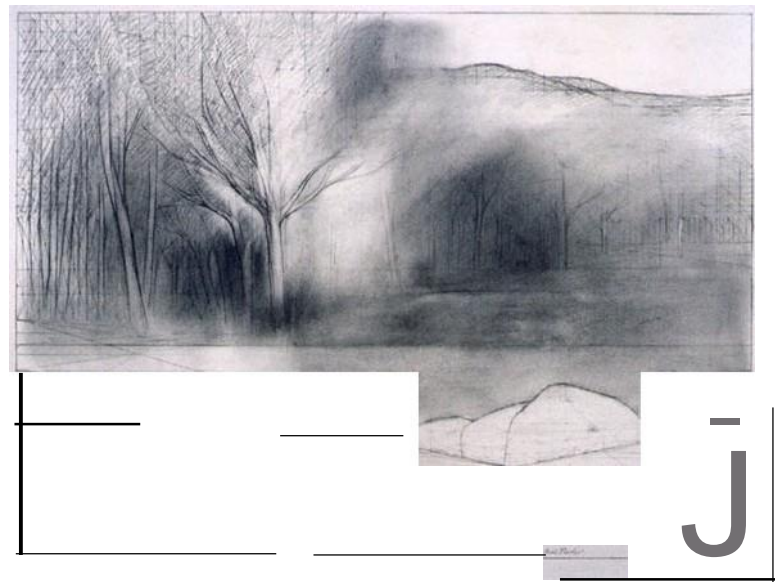


prived of structure and may well be forced to establish sustaining substitutes on his or her own, or else face disintegration and destruction as a personal-ity. Among the possible substitutes for culture-as-father is the individualized spiritual structure we call Art.

If Art is chosen as spirit father, then the response to the world will be creative. The self will shape and create its own meanings-the artifacts of art-rather than depend on those the tribe supplies.

Wordsworth's story, as recorded in his long autobiographical poem *The Prelude* and in shorter lyrics such as "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood;" also tells us that the intensity and gratification of the childhood and adolescent relationship to nature cannot be sustained into adulthood- the relationship diminishes over time as the workaday world and its demands change the self. Wordsworth, in the "Ode," put it this way:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,  
The earth, and every common sight,  
To me did seem  
Appareled in celestial light,  
The glory and the freshness of a dream.  
It is not now as it hath been of yore-



"Study for Horse's Meadow," graphite on paper, 2004 (cou,mv,mvcuN1NGHAMGALLERY,NEW,011<)

Turn whereso'er I may,  
By night or day,  
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

But that inevitable diminishment persists as a residual joy and a haunting:

I hear, I hear, with joy I bear!  
-But there's a Tree, of many, one,  
A single field which I have looked upon,  
Both of them speak of something that is gone: .

It is this "Tree, of many, one" and this "single field which I have looked upon" that we encounter again and again in Berthot's later paintings. Berthot resembles Wordsworth in significant ways-I'd call him "an orphan of the spirit." Like Wordsworth, he experienced, in childhood, a lack that, perhaps, human contact could have filled, but circumstances were such that instead it was filled by experiences in the natural world and a relationship to that world. Such relationships to nature may not be as complicated as human relationships, but they can be passionate and volatile in their own right. I myself first felt such stirrings as a lonely boy growing up in the country-in the same Hud-



"Horse's Meadow; oil on linen over pane,l2004 l cou,ns,amvcuNINGHAM c,mov.N,w,011<1

son Valley where Berthot paints, though he lives in the wilder, forested foothills of the Catskills, whereas I grew up in the more settled area of orchards, fields, and woods closer to the river itself. As a kid, I used to wander for hours in spring and summer along a small drainage ditch in a shallow valley behind our farm. The backhoe that had gouged the ditch to drain the swampy surround had left a mounded seam of clay that followed the stream like the raised welt of a scar. I'd walk along that rise of ground, keeping an eye out for the turtles that scurried into the water when they sensed me coming, but periodically looking up and out over the sunlit marsh spread out flat before me in all its bleak beauty. Red-winged blackbirds, perched on the swaying tips of cattail stalks, sent out their haunting spring song over the pale reeds, under the blue, cloudless sky. The scene entered into me until I felt myself about to burst with an inexplicable fullness and yet, in the same moment, a sense of deep emptiness—as if all this was real and perfect, yet utterly indifferent to my existence. In those moments of intensity I felt both plenitude and desolation.

### Returning to the Source

“... if a painter has source and belief in that source, then form will come.

I want to be clear here in that form in itself will never give source.” What is your source? “The closest I can come is . . . the promise and longing that I feel in nature. I don't know *what* that longing and promise is, but I know *when* it is and is not in the painting.”

—Berthot, in conversation

This relationship to nature is powerful and yet, as Wordsworth noted, it changes over time, can even fade past recalling. But this relationship, like all relationships, has created an inner space in the self, and when the relationship fades over time and nature recedes, that space remains and can be discovered again.

But that powerful rediscovery is often mediated by art. I think that's one way to express what happened to Berthot's art when he moved to the country and changed his work so radically. He didn't go out into the Catskill woods and upland meadows and become a plein air painter. He rediscovered nature as an artist, as someone for whom, as he puts it, “painting is reality.” That is, he couldn't ignore what he was experiencing as he lived alone, in the deep solitude of the Catskill woods. And what he was feeling had to do with the woods, but not in a way that drawing and painting accurate renditions of trees and meadows—mere realism—would have addressed. Instead, he responded as someone to whom painting and paint and canvas had become primal tools and for whom art had become a primal spiritual structure. He took the imag-



“Night Meadow (Summer),” oil on linen over panel, 2004 (COURTESY BETTY CUNNINGHAM GALLERY, NEW YORK)

ery of trees and landscape inside him, into that space that childhood solitude had hollowed out, and he painted *those* trees, *that* landscape: a landscape of “mystery, spirit, and memory.” A transformed or poetic landscape. One saturated with the existential implications of that primal hollowing-out: with longings of the spirit, with desolation and plenitude.

In a painting such as “That Which Before Was Eden,” the essence the painting seeks isn't the essence of tree but the essence of the encounter between self and tree. It's just such an encounter that we find in Rilke's poem “Prelude:”

Whoever you are: at evening step forth  
 Out of your room, where all is known to you;  
 Last thing before the distance lies your house:  
 Whoever you are.  
 With your eyes, which wearily  
 Scarce from the much-worn threshold free themselves,  
 You lift quite slowly a black tree  
 And place it against the sky: slender, alone.  
 And you have made a world. And it is large



And like a word that yet in silence ripens.  
 And as your will takes in the sense of it,  
 Tenderly your eyes let it go . . .  
 (translation by M. D. Herter Norton)

That tree your eyes “lift” and place against the sky: is it a tree the “you” has perceived or created, seen or imagined? The poem withholds any definitive answer to that question in order to emphasize the primal power of the human creative act (“And you have made a world”). The “black tree” in Rilke’s poem is both reality and symbol, distinct form and emblem of longing. And Berthot’s solitary trees are its near kin and painterly equivalent. Even the ordered human geometry of room and doorway that Rilke’s poem invokes finds its painterly



“Untitled (Naoto’s Painting),” oil on linen, 2005 (COURTESY BETTY CUNINGHAM GALLERY, NEW YORK).

equivalent in the rectangle of Berthot’s canvas. And the invitation and challenge that Rilke’s speaker extends is the same Berthot’s painting proposes: “Stand here on this threshold, approach this mystery.” In both poem and painting, a parallel drama: an opening onto “distance” and otherness, and the image of the tree proffered as a mediating object between the order of the human world and the huge vastness of surrounding nature. We hold the tree in our minds and in our eyes—aware of its rootedness hidden in the earth’s opacity, its trunk rising with the architectural stability and purpose of a temple column, and its branches spread wide to the light like arms raised in perpetual praise of being. We enter into reverie as *our* mystery confronts *its* mystery: the mystery of being confronting the mystery of otherness against a backdrop of vastness.

If images of single trees or clusters of trees provide a focus for perception and a mediation between self and “distance,” then another kind of painting—vista or landscape—offers to place us in direct contact with dream-images of vastness, with only the shape of the canvas itself to hold and order that which we sense is unbounded.

## Moments of Existence

“There are moments of existence when time and expanse are more profound,  
 and the sense of existence is hugely enhanced.”

—Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*

Berthot has felt the encounter with nature and its primordial hauntings so powerfully and evoked them so effectively that the paintings can open up an equivalent space in the viewer. A space of contemplation where the viewer, pausing, comes under the spell of the painting. It can be disturbing: it’s an opening to a yearning that may not be satisfied. The shapes on the canvas and the distances and mysteries evoked are not answers, they are questions. Questions that have no answers, but that awaken strange longings in the self.

And when you stand in front of Berthot’s paintings, when you give yourself over to them (as they demand you do) and surrender your impatience (that wishes to take in an image, any image, quickly, and move on)—then a state of reverie asserts itself. It’s a state neither passive nor active, but an opening of the self. An opening of that space inside you, that emptiness. And then the ebb and flow begins: you feel the emptiness in you filling with what’s on the canvas, and then emptying out into the space the canvas makes. A long, slow process of emptying and filling. Feeling the self, your self, alternately, achingly empty and then richly full—one true emblem of how it feels to be in the world. ■