

Plein Air Barriers

Patrick Dunford paints nature between the law and the wild. The landscapes he depicts in "Welcome to Sidewinder Pass," are mostly of the dry-desert regions of California, outside San Diego or near other vast tracts of land split open by a horizon line. These works represent regional parks during recent government shutdowns and take a bird's eye view of folks recreationally digging for crystals at the annual Gem-o-Rama in Trona, California; rendering worn landscapes in thick, high-key slabs of ochre, ultramarine and pelican-green oil paints. In the more austere of these pictures, we see a roadside monument marking the site of the Manzanar Internment Camp where Japanese-Americans were held during WWII. Another shows a private property sign that marks the gated access into the Owens River Valley, home to a now hollowed-out lake whose water was extracted to supply the City of Los Angeles.

The artist's other meanderings map abandoned entryways to the goldmine caves at the Cargo Muchacho Mountains and alternative routes into the county's canyons with ink and wet charcoal marks done en plein air and from the artist's recollection of the sites. The drawings reference places that are frequented almost exclusively by home insecure surveyors. Individuals whose absence from the pictures signals the ongoing invisibility of hardship as associated with nature, even as their work, the paths they trace remain in each detailed line, smudge and blur of graphite and ink the artist sets against the paper.

Dunford's drawings are programmatic. They are produced in a series of sequenced gestures that roam the page like promenades. The twentieth-century palette and chiseling schema of his paintings slows down time and behavior. The landscape he portrays is continuously subject to change and to projects of beautification and gentrification and he investigates it, not as a romantic place to escape to, but as an emblem of alienation and human and resource exploitation. He launches the viewer into an alternate, outcast position, one haunted by a lack of possibilities for being in the world while asking them nonetheless to look up at the sky. It is blue.

What comes across in the images is a certain diligent want or a willingness in the artist's process, to stare into the abyss and bounce out of it by making the field plush with an intonation, or with an attunement to the environment. This is most obvious in the drawings where the process of memorizing and transcribing details the artist arrived at by way of layering lines can be best observed. Something similar occurs in the fat strokes Dunford paints. They exude a worry about the future that can only be offset by the assertion that he must learn quickly the ties between land, power and domination. We all must. We can learn them through careful observation and visual analysis. We must learn them if we are to form any appreciation for art or for what needs to survive in this wasted world. And yet somehow Dunford's paintings appear to want to be left alone rather than to be consumed. These are the works of survival, even though they appear to want to be put to rest or allowed to exist as remnants at the end of the road. He was equipped only with twilight and a camping tent on a hot night during the trip that set off his impetus to paint these pictures. These images stop precisely where we ought to pick up from next, like a rumpled roadside map in the glove compartment of a vehicle when the cell phone is out of range. They are an unplanned roadside encounter with new directions. They prophesied— Welcome be those who are lost and dismayed for they too shall find avocation.

Dunford once told me that you can tell a dedicated painter by looking at how they produce their blacks and whether or not they select these from the commercial range of readily available paints or mix them on their own. A truly devoted painter is not without optimism. Dunford's blacks are not apocalyptic. They torture us but do so with optimism. They're never truly depressed but the grey and contaminated orange glow of a Californian sun as it is about to set permeates them. These blacks are yellow, golden, brown and absorbent. They are interspersed with a kind of personal realism that comes from knowing that the world could have many possible ends, and nonetheless being alive, drunk in the gaze of paintings that appear rotten, gives us viewers a sense of place.

In these works paint sits like mold in anticipation of the advent of dust. Their impasto recalls the droopy, psychedelic aesthetic of the seventies and not without reason. The seventies was the era of wood veneer and shag carpets, of cultish grooves and the promise of politics in the hands of common people. What that era offered is rendered as a question— What promise is there?

The works sometimes feel interior and traumatic when the enormity of the desert's absence is represented by a resonance between strip mining and abandoned industry, between capitalism, its workers and their communities and not by a sheer sense of loneliness. Dunford's paintings, like slippery layers of mud in a humid cave recall that instant before subtle thought changes a sad frown upside down. They bring about the notion that no matter what we are always-already implicated.