

Cruson's Colorful Landscapes

Dynamic, rhythmic patterns

In "Where the Road Leads Me," an exhibition of acrylic landscapes at the White Lotus Gallery through May 29, Jon Jay Cruson seeks and extracts the patterns of the land.

When he lived on the Oregon Coast and painted seascapes, Cruson spent countless hours studying and sketching waves. Born of rigorous observation and understanding, those sketches mapped the dynamic patterns and shapes of ocean waves. Moving inland, Cruson examined the patterns inherent to landscape during several months spent on the road each year. We may more readily think of the dynamics of water than of landmass, but Cruson's analytic eye discerns it unerringly in the types of landscapes he favors: gently rolling, open rural land with its agricultural markings and few trees.

While remaining representational, Cruson's paintings tend to the abstract, a double pull that is one source of creative tension in his art. Composition and design have primacy over precise representation. He plays with shape, line and color to create vibrant yet serene patterns, and his concern with composition leads him to ultimately question the nature of representation, especially perspective, in some works.

Cruson's compositions are based on almost geometric patterns of well-defined color areas corresponding to hills, fields, hedges, roads, rivers. Space is constructed as a series of tight-fitting, colored shapes, flat rather than shaded areas of color with little sense of volume, reminiscent of space in traditional Japanese art. Except for trees, there is no modeling, no representation of light and shadow. Notwithstanding the cast shadows of trees, light imbues these landscapes uniformly. It is the land itself and its properties, independent of light, that interest Cruson.

Similarly, line even when indicating con-

tours is not meant to suggest volume. Rather, line dynamically defines both landscape and composition. His travel sketches are all about the dynamic, rhythmic lines of landscape, as if he were mapping the directions in which its energy flows.

Cruson makes both analytical and expressive use of line. Linear patterns divide the canvas into broad tonal areas. Although *Rising Ground #2*, for instance, relies on strong alternative diagonals forming triangular areas, most of Cruson's compositions are dominated by horizontal lines complemented, contrasted or accented with verticals and diagonals. In *Patterns. Natural* curves (hills, contour lines, ponds, rivers) play against straight, man-made lines (fields, hedges, furrows, roads).

Contour lines, rows, furrows, tractor marks — variously and contrastingly oriented — create strong rhythmic patterns. The rounded forms of trees act as a counterpoint to line. In *The Lone Tree*, the dot patterns of grouped trees fill a diamond-shape area in the center of the painting. With diagonal accents, the dot patterns present a dynamic counterpoint to the strong horizontals of the composition.

Cruson's colors also obey laws of composition, rather than being strictly realistic. Skies may be black or pale yellow. Fields and hills are blue, green, mauve, purple, pink, yellow, ochre, brown, black — tender or intense, in tints and in shades. The complex relationship of echo and contrast among colors is one of the dynamic patterns that inform Cruson's paintings.

Mauves and purples often dominate, contrasting with yellow accents to which Cruson adds a little purple. Areas that seem chromatically uniform often actually contain traces of other colors that appear elsewhere. Edges or outlines often consist of repeated lines in different colors borrowed from the rest of the canvas as in *Evening Blue*.

Another crucial structural element is perspective, and Cruson toys with its conventions. The paintings in this exhibition fall into three broad groups in terms of their approach to perspective.

Farmland #1 and #2, Ridge Line, Green Field #2, Near the Ravine, Near Green Field loosely follow the rules of traditional Western



The Oaks by Jon Jay Cruson. Acrylic.

perspective, such as diminishing scale, aerial and linear perspective. *Rural Landscape* is most naturalistic and unique in that it even models in subtle chiaroscuro the folds of the hill in the foreground.

However, Cruson's familiarity with Asian art influences his treatment of perspective in a large number of paintings. In traditional Japanese paintings and prints, the sides of a represented object remain parallel, or even diverge, as they recede. The same scale is used to represent height and width, but depth is reduced.

In Cruson's work, parallel lines don't necessarily converge toward a vanishing point either. In paintings such as *Lavender Fields*, the viewer's vantage point appears to shift as we move our gaze from the bottom to the top of the canvas. In the foreground, the viewer is looking down at the hills below as if from a promontory. As our gaze moves up, the plane appears to tilt up. As we face the background at eye-level, we perceive it to be much closer than if linear perspective were used. Cruson described this as "a tilted or lateral perspective, where things appeared stacked on top of each other."

In a few of the paintings, Cruson frees himself further from the constraints of both Western and Asian perspective. Such a breaking away from conventions is hinted at in *The Oaks*. Although the work as a whole follows traditional rules of perspective, one area eschews perspective altogether: A hill rises

straight and flat as deck card, flush with the picture plane, its vertical furrows aligned with the sides of the canvas.

In *Tilted Orchard*, the geometry of the composition goes a step further in thwarting the illusion of perspective. The middle-ground seems closest to the viewer. In a reversal of scale, trees there are larger than those in the foreground. As indicated in the title, the orchard in the middle-ground tilts at an unexpected angle in relation to the rest of the landscape.

Finally, in paintings such as *Steep Incline #2* and *Burnt Fields*, Cruson's most abstract compositions, the idea of perspective is itself subverted. In his other works the viewer's gaze is first instinctively drawn to the view of the foreground below, then slowly makes its way up the canvas. But here we feel the need to start from the top, at the horizon, where a few horizontal bands of sky and land offer a measure of stability. Then we face a sheer vertical drop. If we follow the logic of representation, we need to accept that a whole section of the landscape has folded 90 degrees along a straight line like a paper construction. In an orchard — now tilted at a sheer vertical flush with the picture plane — we get almost a full side view of trees placed in a neat row. In this way, Cruson slides the ground from under the very notion of representation. Cruson clearly enjoys his journey.

Do not miss this superb exhibition. **EW**

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