
The New Expressive Landscape

April 21 through May 19, 1985

Sordoni Art Gallery, Wilkes College

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Exhibition selection and essay by William H. Sterling

Exhibition organized by Judith H. O'Toole

Funded in part by a grant from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts.

Introduction

It is surprising how we so easily take landscape painting for granted considering that, in the context of the whole of art history, it is a relatively new concern of artists.

Painting and sculpture began as a form of communication as much as a form of decoration. Until comparatively recent times, landscape elements were used in art only as a backdrop for the unfolding of human drama. Abstracted botanical motifs were used in Greek vase painting to set the scene for great battles and important historical or mythological moments. All throughout European art history landscape themes — mountains, trees, clouds — are the stage settings for historical and religious events. In fact, great artists such as Rubens would delegate the painting of background landscapes to their apprentices because it was not the important part of the picture.

Even the great Dutch landscapists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were interested in recording specific geographical places rather than in responding to or interpreting the natural world. True, the seventeenth

century Frenchmen, Poussin and Lorraine, created huge, lush landscapes which dwarfed the figures of their central theme, but the great expanses were lifeless, idealized and sentimental.

It was not until the nineteenth century that the evocative aspect of nature was explored by western artists on both sides of the Atlantic. It was then that an emphatic shift began and landscape was used to express internal rather than external phenomena — emotions, ideas, perceptions.

William H. Sterling has recognized an important new movement in contemporary painting which concerns landscape. I am grateful to him for his careful selection of the artists represented here and for his insightful comments in the following essay.

As always I am grateful to the artists and lenders involved in the exhibition and to the Pennsylvania Council of the Arts for its support.

Judith H. O'Toole
Director

Lenders to the Exhibition

Baskerville Watson Gallery, New York

Brooke Alexander, Inc., New York

CDS Gallery, New York

Berenice D'Vorzon

Fabric Workshop, New York and Philadelphia

Ingber Gallery, New York

Kraushaar Galleries, New York

Robert Miller Gallery, New York

Sharpe Gallery, New York

Mr. and Mrs. Sid Singer

SoHo 20 Gallery, New York

Ann Taylor

Edward Thorp Gallery, New York

Vanderwoude Tananbaum Gallery, New York

Bette and Herman Ziegler



1. Gregory Amenoff
Presage (On Loop Road), 1983
Oil on canvas, 55 x 60
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Sid Singer



3. Louisa Chase
Storm, 1982
Oil on canvas, 72 x 72
Collection Bette and Herman Ziegler

The New Expressive Landscape

For the past several years, there has been a visible renewal of interest in landscape, as a central theme and inspiration, by painters whom one would consider progressive rather than traditional. In this exhibition, we hope to capture some of the variety and energy of this development.

In order to establish some conceptual and logistical parameters, we have chosen only recent works by established American artists, and only works in which landscape appears to be both the primary subject matter and the source of strongly evocative meaning. Some of the works are assertively avant-garde, while others belong to mainstream modern styles. In all of them, however, the emphasis is on personal vision and a profound relationship with nature.

The selection of artists was difficult only in the sense that there are currently a great many exciting painters of landscape, and so we had to make some arbitrary and personal choices. We wish to express our deep appreciation to those artists, collectors, and galleries who kindly loaned the pictures for this exhibition. The project was supported by a grant from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, for which we are also most grateful.

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"I do not paint in front of, but from within nature."
(Arshile Gorky, 1941)¹

Let us open on a local note. When Wilkes-Barre native George Catlin went west in 1833 to record the world of the American Indian, he passed through a vast and often majestic wilderness. Catlin was primarily a portraitist, but more than once this experience turned his brush toward landscape. When another Wilkes-Barre native, Franz Kline, went in the opposite direction about a century later and became one of the leaders of the New York school of Abstract Expressionism, he carried with him memories of snowy hills and black coalbreakers, images which seemed to haunt his abstract black and white canvases.

The point we are stressing is that few American painters of prominence have been uninspired, to some degree, by the landscape. In the nineteenth century, American painting was coming of age at the very time landscape was emerging as a preeminent theme in the Romantic movement (not only in the visual arts but in music and literature as well). Nature's vast repertory of dramatic, exotic, and mysterious images reflected the Romantic spirit in all its facets, from the spiritual to the sensual, the pastoral to the demonic. The Hudson River School, the Luminists, Allston, Cole, Homer, and Inness — almost every prominent name in the 19th century American art is profoundly linked to the landscape tradition.

Toward the end of the century, the Realists and the Impressionists charted a new course toward more objective interpretations of the physical world, while the Romantic spirit veered into territory of a more deeply psychological kind, giving rise to the Symbolist and Expressionist movements. In Europe, painters such as Van Gogh and Gauguin, and in America Ryder and Eilshemius, announced this important shift which fed directly into the stream of twentieth century Modernism. Many forms of abstraction, in fact, arose out of landscape imagery. Kandinsky, Mondrian, and the Americans Arthur Dove and Georgia O'Keeffe, artists who created some of the first non-objective works in Modern art, had been primarily painters of landscape.

The evocative and unpredictable aspects of nature have always made it an ideal foil for human feelings. In America during the twenties and thirties, painters as diverse as Marin, Hartley, Burchfield, and Hopper found their voice in the landscape. Whether we call them Expressionists, Surrealists, or something else, these artists openly shared an empathy with nature. In the fifties, many of the Abstract Expressionists — Kline, Pollock, Rothko, and

Gorky among them — drew much of their energy and inspiration from nature. Although we don't call them landscapists as such, these artists perpetuated America's long devotion to that spirit.

The subsequent rise of Pop Art, Color Field Painting, Minimalism, Conceptualism, and other fashions marked a decided turn toward other concerns in the sixties and seventies. The only significant avant-garde movement associated with landscape during that period belonged to the sculptors of Earthworks, who employed the actual (and sometimes inaccessible) landscape as their medium. Toward the end of the seventies, a new force appeared in the art world, bringing with it a context in which landscape could once again flourish. Usually called *Neo-Expressionism*, this force has become the pervasive fashion of the eighties, even as it revives many of the characteristics of early twentieth century art.

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The foregoing overview of past American landscape painting is, of course, grossly simplified. The pluralistic character of contemporary art does not allow for easy generalizations, either. Individualism reigns healthily supreme in Modern art. Because landscape, as a subject, has different meanings and purposes for different artists, little homogeneity can be expected at the individual level. Nevertheless, the artists in this exhibition do have in common their basic historical circumstances, as painters working in America in the 1980's and as artists very much aware of their artistic heritage. These are inescapable factors which, in various conscious and unconscious ways, influence their perceptions and attitudes. Certain generalizations, then, may be extracted from the variety which confronts us.

One thing immediately noticeable to anyone who thinks of typical pre-twentieth century landscapes is the infrequency of panoramic views in our present works. Most of the artists here focus on fragments of nature — a few rocks, a cluster of trees, or a bank of clouds — sharing an intimacy with those things. There is even a spirit of identity between artist and nature in much of this work. As Louisa Chase recorded while painting one of her storms, "During the process, I do become the storm — lost — yet not lost. An amazing feeling of losing myself yet remaining totally conscious."²

Landscape becomes virtually animate in many of these paintings, embodying emotional and physical forces with which we can empathize. Deborah Kass remarks of her work:

I am trying to remove *distance* in my work. By avoiding distancing tools (like perspective) and sometimes impacting the space, I am seeking to undermine the natural separation between the viewer and the viewed. I want the experience to be more physical than looking. I want the viewer to have specific feelings in their body — to be aware of their position in relation to the *activity* in the painting. The idea is to suck the viewer into another subjective space, to other physical feelings in order to return the viewer back to themselves with an awareness that they are a body primarily. I have equated distance with alienation. In my work I'm trying to find a way back, so I'm starting with the body.

The mystery and potency of nature expressed here are usually felt most strongly at close range. They also involve a degree of removal from topographical reality, but not necessarily a total transformation. Many of the landscapists seen here retain a strong sense of place in

their works. As Berenice D'Vorzon says of her "Louse Point" painting, "Very often my works refer to specific places . . . but it is a particular or an all pervasive *experience* that I respond to at these places." Ben Frank Moss describes the origin of "Silver Trees:"

All of my work is based on a memory — a recollection of an impression. Although my mind holds very specific settings and visual material, I don't set about to illustrate what is already realized in my mind. Rather a work develops on its own terms. It's only after the completion of the work that I am reminded of someplace I've lived or traveled.

The painting "Silver Trees" was so named because it reminded me of a grove of beautiful trees I remember visiting and being amazed by almost daily. These remarkable trees were on a grand scale with milky white trunks and leaves that were green on top and white on the under-side. When the wind blew the whole tree would become an atmosphere of light — like flickering silver. I didn't set out to paint this subject and the titled work at best is an echo of what I would like to believe was in part the source — the subconscious attachment to something that repeatedly moved me. In any case the painting was born in the studio miles away from those trees as well as years after we had left the beauty of that place by the Little Spokane River.

Less tranquil phenomena of nature are also associated with the Expressive Landscape. Storm clouds and churning seas, for example, as already described by Louisa Chase and Deborah Kass, are spectacles which never fail to arouse awe or excitement. They are natural mirrors of human passions, which become kinesthetically alive through the painter's manipulation of pigment and color.

As a matter of purposeful selection, none of the paintings in this group contains a human figure (except one), but the artists are still palpably present through their vision and style.

One of the few artists among the Expressive Landscapists who deals with the traditional panoramic view is Eve Ingalls, who has written of her work:

In this landscape the only set of coordinates that holds for me is a body-based one. I have always been intensely aware of the vertical center of my body as an active orienting device. Marking off left from right, up from down, front from back, it helps me to grasp the cardinal points and to transform space into place. This vertical has been projected onto the canvases, appearing as the crack between the panels which divide each drawing. These strong verticals challenge and experience the strains, the tugs, the tears that the discontinuities of time and space force across the surface of the canvas.

I often feel that I am standing in the midst of a modern sublime, marked by a vast and unbounded landscape. This landscape almost overwhelms and, in so doing, works to stretch the mind and body beyond their normal capacity; It 'gives us courage to measure ourselves.'

These words could almost have been written by some Transcendental landscapist in the nineteenth century. Only the emphasis upon the self fixes them in the modern era.

For many painters in this exhibition, the Expressive Landscape is an imaginary one, where nature may be transmuted into a set of symbols, coded images of particularly affecting visual experiences. Elena Sisto's

black sun and Gregory Amenoff's organic apparition exemplify this approach, of which Ernest Silva has written:

My recent works continue to represent landscape in a language indebted to abstraction. (They) refer to stages, inhabitable spaces, objects as props, and to the viewer, as potential participant. All of the work present themselves as the balance of conflicting forces. Trees move in dance-like rhythm, blown by strong winds and driven by internal force. Logs lie scattered in the landscape, remnants of wounds inflicted by some agent that is now absent. Fires burn in a feverish infinite moment. Figures are called forth by our awareness of their absence or presence as the shadowy witness to these scenes. The objects are, at once, toy-like and malevolent. They invite playful examination, but lead to the conclusion that the moment is suspended in potential drama.

This drama becomes truly Surrealistic in the case of Cheryl Laemmle's "Red Spruce." She creates a veritable icon, where the centered subject is protected from secular intrusion by a real fence, attached to the canvas like an altar rail. The virgin spruce stands in its own *hortus conclusus*. But the bizarre incongruity of the child's wagon and the vaguely *naïf* style in which the entire scene is cast transport the picture from religious metaphor to psychological allusion.

The exact relationship of the artist to nature is never clear. The one picture here with a human figure is Vera Klement's, but her figure is not *in* the landscape; it is outside of it, as we are. It is *apart* from it in space, yet a *part* of it in substance and energy. For Klement, the apartness is poignant:

My paintings always have two parts, a comfortable resolution between them avoided. The landscape is

never alone, but in relation always to another object . . . the landscapes can provide many roles. They are always generic, not specific places. They are usually fields. They have to do with the distant, the unattainable, the longing for the unattainable, and the alienation from the longed-for place. When it is in relation to a figure, it refers also to Expulsion.

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Generalizations about artistic style may also be drawn from works produced in a particular era. In the 1970's, the most prevalent style among progressive artists was that austere geometric mode called, in its most extreme forms, Minimalism. The seemingly very divergent movements of Photorealism and Conceptualism also held strong positions in that decade; nevertheless, they shared with Minimalism a preference for cool detachment and almost mechanical technique.

In reaction to those ascetic qualities, many artists of the present generation have turned to more hotly emotional and physically aggressive manners (now collected under the term *Neo-Expressionism*). Brashly painted or sculpted images of figures and places have succeeded those clean, severe geometries of the last decade. Garish color, clotted texture, and primitive drawing reveal the emotional pulse of the artist as clearly as they do his energetic hand. Artists as diverse as Amenoff, Campbell, and Steir variously employ such techniques in their individual ways, but with a debt to Expressionist forebears like Hartley and Marin, or DeKooning and Guston.

One thing which has interceded between those masters and the present generation is the "vulgar" aesthetic first generated by Pop Art. Silva's "cartoon" trees outlined in neon and Chase's "comic book" clouds spitting day-glo rain draw upon the images projected in mass media as

much as they do upon earlier art. Perhaps the most extreme use of Pop Culture aesthetics appears in Jedd Garet's "Properties", where a deliberately amateurish technique has been manipulated into a perversely evocative image.

The more austere values cherished in the seventies have not been entirely abandoned in our decade, however. Almost Minimalist simplicity remains a significant factor in the contemplative works of Warren Rohrer and Ann Taylor. Rohrer says that his abstract paintings

are deeply indebted to the landscape response in their concerns for matters of air, light, and space. Certainly the processes of my work over the last ten to twelve years have paralleled the various processes that relate to the land, its appearance, how it is worked, seasonal changes, and most of all are responses to that glow of the landscape which is so often hard to believe.

My paintings have to do with hard, meticulous work, are nurtured by patience and accompanied by risk. In the work of the last several years the painting usually begins when a color idea is triggered by an experience — it could be as simple as placing a color in a blank space or naming the color of a day. The painting germinates from that seed through layered shifts of color in its attempt to arrive at some altered state, a metaphor for that original bloom.

No profuse or agitated style could satisfy this spirit.

Geometry also persists. Rohrer's canvases are square. Taylor works on cylinders. Her rectangular planes, like Sylvia Plimack Mangold's rectangular overlays, sufficient unto themselves for artists in the seventies, now act as rationalist foils to indeterminate nature. Eve Ingalls, on the other hand, has retained something of a Photorealist's cool

and precise technique to express a similar dichotomy. But whether the style is cool or hot, precisionist or raw, the Expressive Landscape is invariably about a person's relationship with nature.

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Why has landscape returned as a force in contemporary art? A few years ago, some critics pronounced painting dead, in the belief that the medium had run its full course. Certainly landscape had been put through every conceivable permutation, or so it seemed. The easy answer to our query is that history circles upon itself. The human need for change and the equally human bent for nostalgia eventually uproot those interred styles and find new life in them.

But more specific and contemporary motives may also be involved. It is often suggested that as man poisons and desecrates his natural environment to an unprecedented degree, the artist has been moved to portray it out of fear for its survival. This must certainly be true for some, especially those who adopt realistic and idealistic styles. But for the Expressive Landscapists, the fear may be for their own survival, not so much physically as psychologically and humanistically. It may be that they once again seek salvation in nature.

William Sterling
Chairman, Department of Art

Notes

1. Julien Levy, *Arshile Gorky*, New York, 1968, p.30.
2. The words of Louisa Chase and Eve Ingalls are drawn from exhibition catalogues produced by the Robert Miller Gallery and University of Bridgeport, respectively. We are indebted to the other artists quoted here for their remarks.



8. Deborah Kass
Stormy Weather, 1984
Oil on canvas, 70 x 100
Courtesy Baskerville Watson Gallery, New York

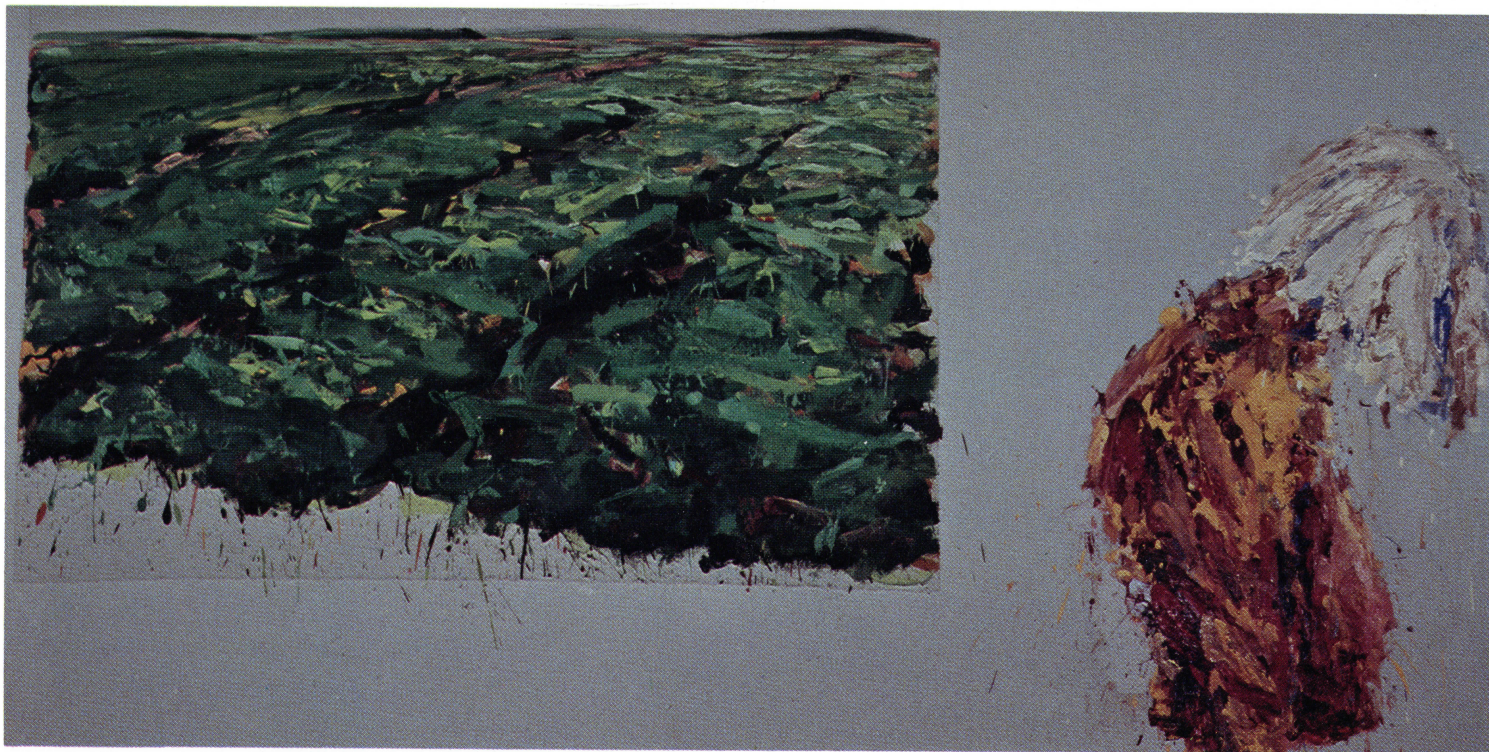
Checklist of the Exhibition

All dimensions in inches unless otherwise noted. Height precedes width.

1. Gregory Amenoff
Presage (On Loop Road), 1983
Oil on canvas, 55 x 60
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Sid Singer
2. Gretna Campbell
Arbor in Snow, 1984
Oil on canvas, 45 x 56
Courtesy Ingber Gallery,
New York
3. Louisa Chase
Storm, 1982
Oil on canvas, 72 x 72
Collection Bette and Herman
Ziegler
4. Berenice D'Vorzon
Louse Point Low, 1984
Watercolor, 22 x 30
Courtesy of the artist
5. Jedd Gareth
Properties, 1982
Acrylic on canvas, 54¹/₂ x 54¹/₂
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery,
New York
6. April Gornik
Trees in a Storm, 1982
Oil on canvas, 60 x 72
Courtesy Edward Thorp Gallery,
New York
7. Eve Ingalls
Moving Through, 1984
Ink, graphite, acrylic on canvas,
80 x 60
Courtesy SoHo 20 Gallery,
New York
8. Deborah Kass
Stormy Weather, 1984
Oil on canvas, 70 x 100
Courtesy Baskerville Watson
Gallery, New York
9. Vera Klement
Far Away, 1983
Encaustic on canvas, 50³/₄ x 98¹/₂
Courtesy CDS Gallery, New York
10. Cheryl Laemmle
Red Spruce, 1984
Oil, 84 x 56
Courtesy Sharpe Gallery,
New York
11. Sylvia Plemack Mangold
June 2, 1984, 1984
Pastel on paper, 19¹/₂ x 30
Courtesy Brooke Alexander, Inc.,
New York
12. Ben Frank Moss
Silver Trees, 1983
Oil on paper, 33⁵/₈ x 27³/₄
Courtesy Kraushaar Galleries,
New York
13. Warren Rohrer
Recollection, 1983
Oil on canvas, 60 x 60
Courtesy of CDS Gallery,
New York
14. Ernest Silva
Beneath Fiery Clouds, 1982
Oil on canvas, 48 x 60
Courtesy Vanderwoude
Tananbaum Gallery, New York
15. Elena Sisto
Landscape in a High Place, 1984
Oil on wood, diptych, 28 x 48
Courtesy Vanderwoude
Tananbaum Gallery, New York
16. Pat Steir
Calligraphy Screen, 1983
Silkscreen on linen mounted in
wooden frame, 63 x 80 x 191
Courtesy Fabric Workshop,
New York
17. Ann Taylor
Boundless, 1984
*Oil on canvas, 70 x 15 (diameter)
Courtesy of the artist
18. David True
Cross China, 1983
Oil on canvas, 78 x 108
Courtesy Edward Thorp Gallery,
New York



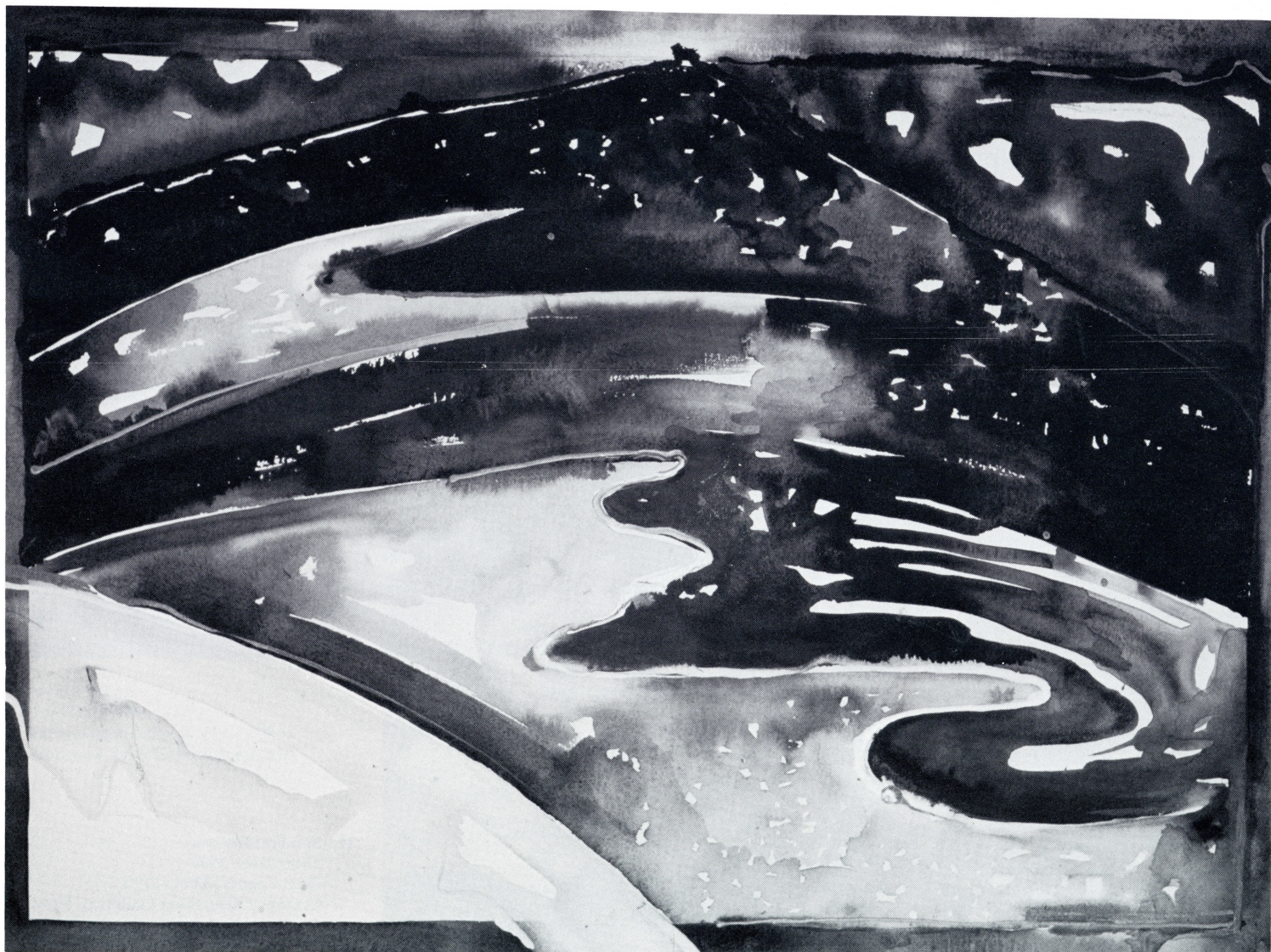
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Louse Point Low, 1984
Watercolor, 22 x 30
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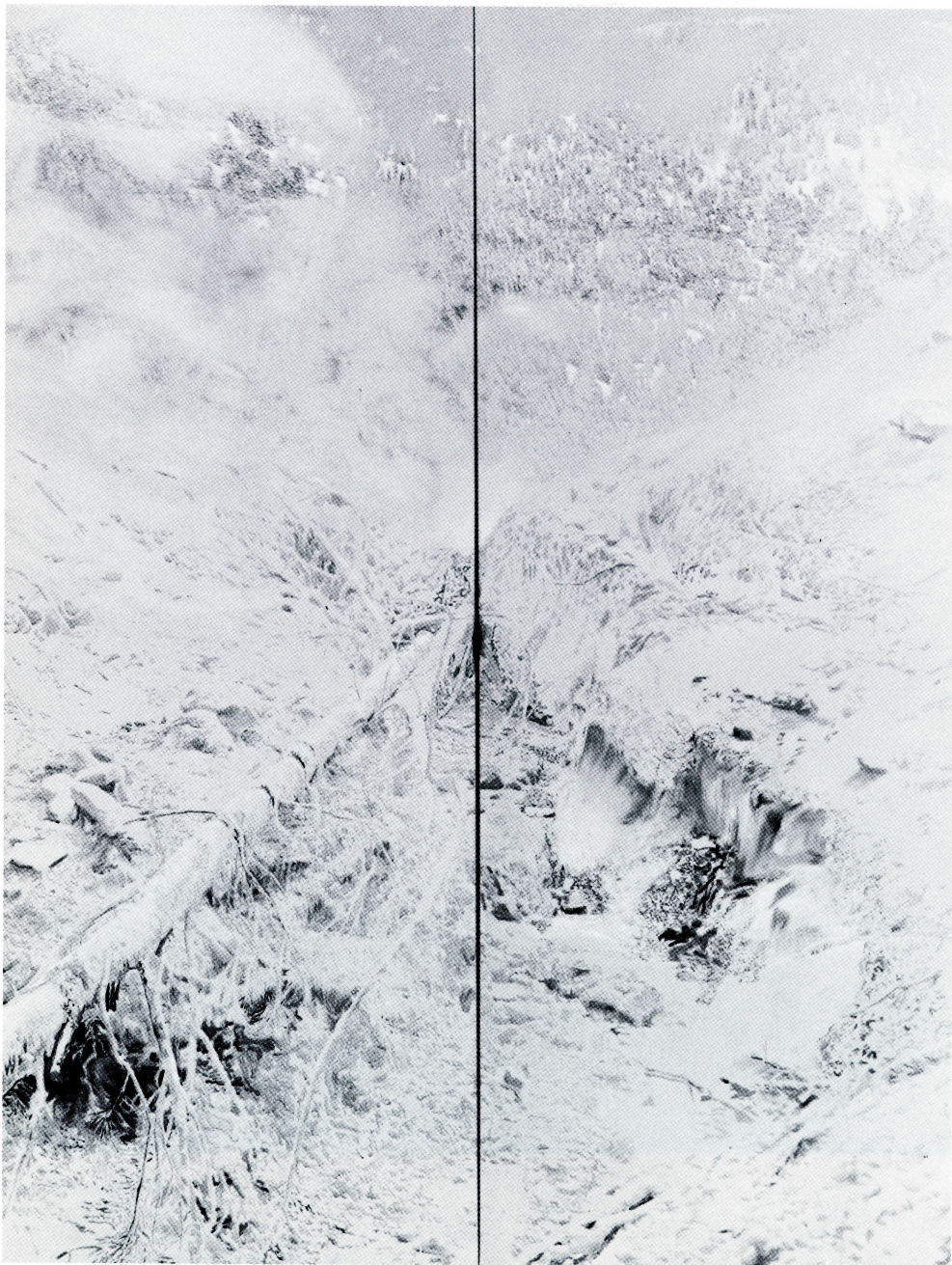
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Properties, 1982
Acrylic on canvas, 54 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 54 $\frac{1}{2}$
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York



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Recollection, 1983
Oil on canvas, 60 x 60
Courtesy of CDS Gallery, New York



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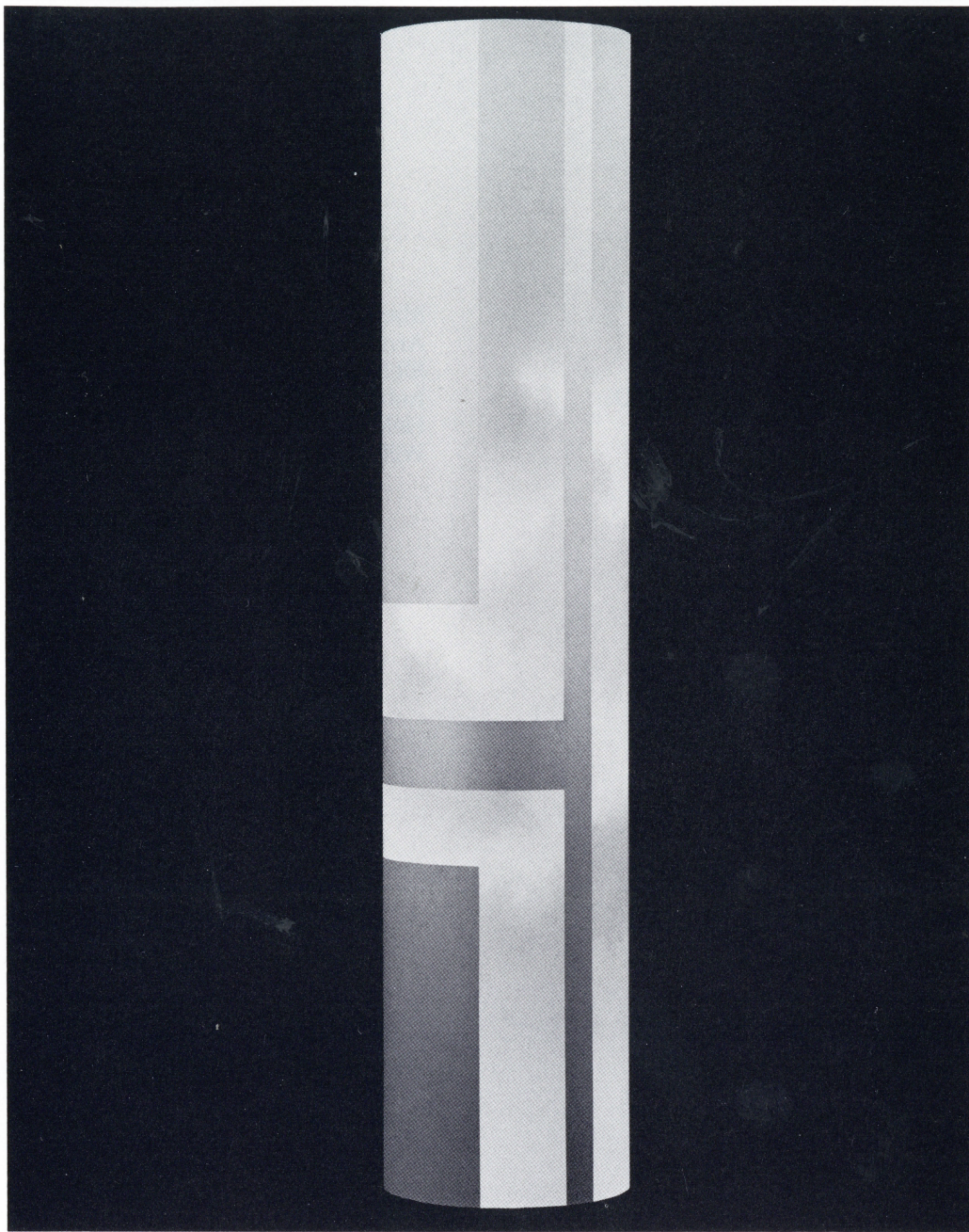
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17. Ann Taylor
Boundless, 1984
Oil on canvas, 70 x 15 (diameter)
Courtesy of the artist

Sordoni Art Gallery

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Sordoni Art Gallery
Wilkes College
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Wilkes-Barre, PA 18766
(717) 824-4651, Ext. 388

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& McKane Inc.

Please join us for an opening reception for

**The
New Expressive
Landscape**

An exhibition of works by twenty
contemporary artists.

Friday, April 19, 1985
5 - 7 p.m.*

The exhibition will continue through
May 19, 1985.

Special curator for the exhibition is
William H. Sterling.

The exhibition is funded in part by a
grant from the Pennsylvania Council
on the Arts.

*Please note change of time from previous announcement.



**SORDONI ART GALLERY
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