

ALEXANDRE GALLERY

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

DECEMBER 09

Tom Uttech: *Enassamishirinjweian*, 2009, oil on linen, 103 by 112 inches; at Alexandre.



TOM UTTECH ALEXANDRE

In the 17 large and small landscapes on view in his most recent exhibition, Tom Uttech continues to probe our experience of the great American wilderness as filtered through imagination and longing. Uttech was born in Wisconsin and has lived there most of his life, exploring the North Woods in Quetico Provincial Park, then returning to his studio to paint from memory what he "sees" on his sometimes lengthy excursions. As these marvelous paintings and artist-made frames testify, his is a romantic eye, as much trained inward as outward, in the tradition of Caspar David Friedrich and Albert Bierstadt.

The scenes combine observation and invention in equal measure. Mists lie heavy and the sun sets roseate on lonely swamps we feel must be particular places. Yet vast flocks of diverse species of birds, nocturnal and diurnal, share the same airspace, and contemplative bears lounge about looking like super-hairy humans. The paintings are steeped in over-the-top nostalgia for a prelapsarian world; I couldn't help thinking of Audubon's descriptions of the teeming animal life that was being obliterated even as he wrote in the early 19th century. The centerpiece of the exhibition (all works 2009), for example, the huge (nearly 9-foot-square) *Enassamishirinjweian*, titled like all the paintings in annoyingly untranslated Ojibwe, has a sky brimming with geese, ducks, owls, bluebirds and myriad other avians; otters and squirrels scurry over the land, and a lone bear sits

with his back to us, scanning the horizon at dawn or sunset.

One of Uttech's tricks is to fly his birds through the pictorial space everywhere, top to bottom, even well below the horizon, so that the air seems thick with them, like the mosquitoes and flies that must surely plague the artist on his outings. You almost find yourself swatting at them. Like all the paintings, *Enassamishirinjweian* is surrounded by Uttech's own painted frame, which offers counterpoint imagery; here it is relatively unembellished, but in each corner bears perch in trees as if attending to the scene within.

The frames for the dozen small, nearly luminescent works in the front gallery were more elaborate. In one scene, a shadowy elk ruminates amid boulders beneath a glowing sky, echoed in the frame by a more mythic-seeming antlered dancer and some elk riding in a canoe, barely picked out in the stained wood grain. The light in some of the small paintings is downright otherworldly. As night falls in one, clouds are lit silver by an unseen moon; in another, a big, visionary, Blakean sun casts radiating beams. In such a world, it is no wonder that a bear suddenly turns around and looks out, as if to declare, "Mine."

—Faye Hirsch