Magnetic North: 2004
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Tom Uttech's turf is the northern forest, its scrubby natural grandeur and spiritual power. "I sit down, stare at the blank canvas, and start to draw a place where I'd like to be," he says. That place is always the north woods of the Midwest—especially his native Wisconsin and Quetico Provincial Park, across the border in Ontario, Canada. He went there first around 1967 and realized instantly that "this was home. This was where my spirit resides." (1) There in the woods and wetlands he learned to be alone, to deal with blackflies and thunderstorms, to "walk like a hunter," and to feel his way confidently through the woods in the dark, every sense quivering—a metaphor for finding his way through art by immersing himself in nature.

Behind every one of Uttech's haunting and clearly contemporary images lies a hard-fought battle to be true to nature, to be as real as possible, and then to transcend reality, to reach another plane that communicates his feelings for the great mysteries of the northern wilderness, mysteries that remain unspoken but can be painted. His is an extreme case of self-identification with place, a visceral awareness of a landscape that nurtures self and art, more common among indigenous artists and others who live their lives in one place. Uttech says that his paintings are always of the north woods "because that is what I am." They are "self-portraits of those conditions, " (2) indicating the extent to which a chosen environment can physically invade the self and the psyche. "So the image is in the artist, not he in it," wrote Ananada Coomaraswamy. (3) When he first went to Quetico, Uttech was about to quit painting for a while but "didn't know it at the time." (4) When he did quit—from around 1969 into the early 1970s—it was "an act of defiance and resignation that I wasn't going to try to participate in the art world. I sat around and watched TV and played with my daughter, purging the funny images I had been using and hated. The mindlessness emptied me." Nature filled the void. He returned to Quetico every year, but "it was not related to painting at all. I just found northern things more interesting than southern things. Then I realized since it is home why not make it my life?" He began to paint a nocturnal scene of sky, moss-and-lichen-encrusted tree trunks, and a female nude with an antlered deer head who was to inhabit his forests for several years.

In the 1976 diptych Skull River, Ghost Falls, the buck-female crouching at the left is played against an albino deer with a curiously long, fluffy tail and a rack of antlers with too many "branches," like a tree full of tiny twigs. Both stare out with the same unintimidated gaze. Thus began a successful series of mythical deep woods paintings that led to Uttech's inclusion in the Whitney Biennial in 1975 and 1977. He enjoyed the success but was still wary of the New York art world. After five years, when he was tiring of the "mythical stuff," the daughter of a Quetico outfitter friend asked him to do a plain landscape. This set his course to true north and led to the banishment of the human from his wilderness garden.

Uttech has been said to claim that his paintings "are more about life than about landscape," (5) by which I take him to mean life in the larger sense of everything living, rather than autobiography. At first, he recalls, his landscapes were "sterile, vacant, with maybe one animal staring at you. I became aware that there was the absence of small,

moving life forms. The sky is full of moving things. My paintings allude to a life that can be there." (6) His nature is not a stage set waiting for something to happen, as is so common in western painting traditions. It's already happening. Teeming with wildlife, these works are less what we call landscapes than elusive portraits of place complete with inhabitants—animal, elemental, vegetable, and mineral. Uttech's bears, deer moose, or wolves fearlessly return our gaze, holding their place with uncanny dignity, defying humanity to imagine that it can dominate nature. Their presence is one of almost biblical solemnity. Often they stand out, or stand up, in the foreground, confronting the voyeur: "The creatures have a dialogue with the viewer," he says. "They're standing up and saying 'take a look at me. I'm watching you and not just being observed'; they've revealed themselves. They've given their presence to you. 'What are you going to do about it'?" (7)

When Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote about his friend Henry David Thoreau's "intimacy with animals," he declared that "his determination on Natural History was organic, He confessed that he sometimes felt like a hound or a panther… His interest in the flower or the bird lay very deep in his mind… He would not offer a memoir of his observations to the Natural History Society. 'Why should I? To detach the description from its connections in my mind would make it no longer true or valuable to me; and they do not wish what belongs to it.'" (8) Thoreau should have been a painter, and Emerson might have been writing about Uttech.

Seeing Things

Uttech's forests are solid, substantial, almost tangible. But in virtually every painting there are also wetlands, lakes, waterfalls, swamps—places of ambivalence and change. If this is an earthly paradise, where nature pursues its course without interruption by her human component, it is full of snares for those not accustomed to the ground underfoot. Here is a landscape that is human in scale, without the towering cliffs, vast valleys, or looming mountains of earlier Romantics. Horizons are few and far between in Uttech's paintings. Distance, often across water, is always interrupted by trees—tall trees, often dead trees, snags and stumps. The foreground is usually where the action is, just as it has to be when walking in marshy woods. (But when the walker looks up, there are the birds.)

The camera has brought us to this intimate place. Uttech's photographs isolate fragments of the world he paints. They are "a totally separate activity," he maintains, never used as studies for paintings. "I quit shooting in the mid-eighties, sort of accidentally. I needed to spend time on the paintings which were going smoothly. I'm not shooting again yet, but I'm going over old prints and proof sheets, making big digital prints. I have thousands of images that have never been printed. Thy might be better than I ever thought they were."

The photographs are black and white, and beautiful. But they cannot compete with the light, atmosphere, and color—"the fragile peace and delicacy of American luminism"(9)—that form our first impressions of Uttech's paintings. Of German ancestry, heir to the spirituality of the Protestant north, Uttech talks about the "colors that seem to happen at twilight and dawn that are just unbelievable. Very evocative times of day." (10) (In Irish mythology such liminal moments, or "times between," are particularly significant.) His paintings are lit by sunrise and sunset, dawn and dusk, moonlight, northern lights, lightning—unearthly glows that are actually very true to nature by very difficult to translate into art. It takes a certain courage, or nerve, to tackle the "lurid" red and orange

sunsets, the purple and yellow dusks, the great sheets of northern lights, the multiple twigs of lightning that nature produces with such insouciance. (Overwhelmed, we tend to relegate such phenomena to postcards, calendars, and “bad painting.”)

The eerie, moss-hung dead or wintering trees, mossy stumps, and lichened rocks of Uttech’s places recall the landscapes of the eccentric, proto-modern seventeenth-century Dutch artist Hercules Seghers. (11) The two share an almost gritty approach to nature, Uttech’s work is never slick, perhaps because passion ultimately overcomes, or complements, technique. As with Seghers, there is an appealing honesty, the faintest vestige of awkwardness in the highly educated Uttech’s skillful renditions of places he loves—an uneasy, disturbing quality that gives an edge to his evident ease and familiarity with his subject. He seems to be fiercely, and almost desperately, combating humanity’s increasing distance from nature.

A painting that Tom Garver identifies as embodying Uttech’s ecological message is the 1994 Osminadon Mokawiodjima, roughly translated as “There are very many” and “I leave him weeping.” (12) It verges on chaos, anchored by a sound underlying design, with a wild variety of trees, logs, myriad birds, several wolves, and other creatures—all fleeing to the left as though from some pending catastrophe. (The relationship between earth and air is heightened for viewers who have recently seen the stunning film Winged Migration.) Uttech intended to “inspire a sense of awe as to how many there were—how many there could be—then let the viewer speculate on the idea for himself.” One writer surveying an unfinished canvas in the studio reports being told by the artist: “I’ll probably add a couple thousand ducks and hawks and owls and flying squirrels.” (13)

The dreamlike detail with which the birds are painted here and else where, when in reality they would be indistinguishable at such a distance, bring them closer to the viewer and draw immediate attention to their flight. This binocular vision is almost a collage strategy. The great flocks winging their way across the canvas become both natural and almost supernatural. They might represent infinity; they might be messengers from the spirit world, as they are in so many cultures. Uttech has actually been called a Surrealist, which doesn’t make him happy. While the animal-human hybrids of his early forest works night suggest such a misnomer, they belong to a different genre that might be called “fantastic landscape,” since the hybrids emerge from ancient forest lore rather than from the self-conscious and rebellious spirit of innovation that fueled the original vision or even a primitivizing animism. Uttech’s animals are totemic in that they stand for an existence larger than their own.

Sometimes Uttech will drive to the Puchyan Marsh, about one hundred miles north of his home in Saukville, Wisconsin. It is a northern sedge marsh, one of many northern outlier biological areas left behind by the glaciers. “I get there in the middle of the night and watch and listen to what’s going on” (heeding Thoreau, who wrote, “He will get to the Goal who stands stillest”). (14) “A marsh isn’t still at all,” says Uttech. “It’s an absolute cacophony of noise and activity. Frogs are croaking, yellow rails are ticking, geese are honking, all under moonlight with fog and stuff.” (15) Wildlife, says Uttech, “is usually hiding; present without being visible. But if you spend a lot of time paying a lot of attention—if you start to act like a hunter or think like a bird watcher—you get around that invisibility. And at a number of magic times you actually run into things.” (16)

The viewer is offered a similar experience. Just as in nature itself, the more you look, the more you notice in Uttech’s paintings. The underbrush is alive with prowlers. Fish lurk

under water. Tiny dotted lines of migrating birds are barely visible in the farthest distance. The wolf in Nin Minenima (1999) is at first glance just another gray shape, like the rocks and stumps. The bear in Mashkigwaatig (2000) could be a stump among others. Sometimes the animals are half in shadow or blend (as they must) into the brush where they have their nests and lairs. In the Mittogami Portage (1990), a bear, almost indistinguishable from his background, stands "hand on hip" next to a pond that offers a second, far clearer image of him and of a figure eight formed by a twisted tree. Reality is reversed.

Stranger sights begin to emerge—or the viewer begins "seeing things." In the sky of The Mittogami Portage, lavender clouds resemble ducks' heads. The landscape too comes alive. Totem-like trees and bristling rocks spring to their own kind of life. "Matter and spirit are human constructs whose changing relationship reveals its evolving social and cultural orientation," writes David Miller. (17) The rocks in the foreground of Wigwaagi (2001), for instance, are oddly formed, like ancient animals frozen in place. In Nin Minenima, a rock resembling a creature of some kind balances with two short "legs" on an arched tree trunk. In Nigigwetagad Onagosh (1997), a rock doubles as a fish head. Many ancient societies, among them the Western Apaches and the Australian Aborigines, read their topographies as similarly frozen monuments to past mythical events. Western societies tend to use their own kind as deities. Unlike the nineteenth-century Romantics—from Caspar David Friedrich to Frederic Church—whose small and solitary human figures were crucial to the definition of the vast god-given landscape they gazed at from the verge of "civilization," Uttech doesn't need to picture himself. He is alone with and part of the forest and the animal, the rocks and trees, seeing everything in the landscape as a sentient being. "I want a rock to be as alive as a bear is." (18)

In a few rare paintings the metaphor is stepped up, ultra charged. There is an albino or white moose, lynx, wolf, or deer. Their auras are sometimes enhance by an unnatural paleness. In one painting, says Uttech, "the lynx is lit internally by fireflies… I'm not sure what I mean by that." The painting may be Waukesha (2001), where a white otter peers from the water, backed up by a white lynx on the shore that seems to illuminate the two whippoorwills, the surrounding trees, and even the fireflies. The atypically simple, centralized composition is almost religious in effect. Similarly, in Ganawaabandiwag (2002-3), a glowing moose is surrounded by illuminated muskeg. Amid the nocturnal blues and purples of Apitwewedjwan (2000), a lynx stands precariously on an unlikely, graphically stunning, almost gridded tangle of branches overlooking a moonlit waterfall. "It's not about painting." Uttech says. "Mostly it's a question of emotional response, a metaphor for being in the presence of something."

Some of these effects are not hallucinatory so much as very subtle. In Dawnipi Lightning Bugs (1990), a standing bear's lower half is brightly lit, and his upper half is in deep shadow; above his head is curious curved and twigged branch that echoes the branched lightning in the sky beyond. In Tibik Nagamowin (1994), where several bears hide, similarly distorted branches are half-lit with red light despite the pale yellow moon framed behind them. Again and again the lines and arcs of trees, broken branches, lightning, and clouds are used to focus a painting, serving as complex compositional devices, leading the eye over the surface. Uttech's canvases are certainly painterly, but he achieves this tactility without building up the surface, citing the "old Gothic egg temperas. I'm much more interested in design."

In Nandawendagwed (2003), a quadruply burled trunk rises at the right like a natural totem pole. The dense brush, blowdowns, and watercourse in the foreground, as well as the lake and blue sky behind, are drawn together by a series of spindly, linear bare trees, while at the left yet another oddly shaped rock echoes the burls. The directional lines of birds flying or wolves running, and the layered planes energy they create, are major compositional elements in Uttech's paintings. Sometimes there is a powerful pull to one side of the canvas; sometimes pulls in both directions ultimately center the gaze, as in Bimawanidiwag Awessiiag (1996), which is further centralized by the presence of northern lights over a white bluff, both glowing in the night, while other creatures move through the shadows in the foreground.

Painters are perhaps more likely than any other kind of artist to respond sensuously to nature. The act of painting is sensual; paint can be an almost erotic medium. In the act of painting, there is physical, even kinesthetic, identification with what is seen and represented. Uttech would like his works "to initiate as real and compelling a dialogue with the viewer as any other highly important experience in one's life might." But finally the painting is the thing. "No matter what motivates the creation of a painting or photograph, that object is only deeply satisfying if it possesses the unexplainable peace which the wholeness and unity of a perfectly organized artwork can project." (19)

Appropriately for his micro/macrocosmic view of the world, Uttech paints either little paintings (about one square foot), which "draw people in," or big ones (about five feet square), which "overwhelm." "These are the two ways to trigger the imagination," he says. "In the middle it's average, it's harder to get that suspension of disbelief." Either way, his paintings attain what Gaston Bachelard calls "immediate immensity," evoking "daydreams of infinity." Bachelard describes works of art as the by-products of an "existentialism of the imagining being"; he writes that the forest "accumulates its infinity within its own boundaries" (which could describe a landscape painting) and that "immensity is the movement of motionless man," who sees "farther than he goes" (which could describe the viewer). (20)

Another level of Uttech's fusion of design and naturalist narrative are his handmade frames—on which fanciful images (insects, animals, flowers, vines, animal tracks, and snakes) are painted, carved, and burned. The frames go on before the paintings are finished and are very much a part of the creative process: "I work on both together and they grow in the final phase together. The frames go in their own direction. They tell another kind of story about the same place from another point of view that would be inappropriate in the painting. They become a context of a greater magic." Among the images are "tricksters"—enigmatic hairy, skinny, horned, and tailed creatures, loosely based on the Ojibwe trickster Maymayguishi, who is "not coyote exactly; he's the guy who takes lost things. In Canada, even recently, people leave offerings near pictographs of these figures." (In Nijinon Wabijeshi [1998], the trickster appears as rock art.)

Uttech has referred (in titles) to "indigenous" landscapes. Although every place is "indigenous" in some sense, his use of Ojibwe (Anishanabe) words for all of his titles since the mid-1990s concretizes this in direct reference to Native lands. "In northern Wisconsin Indians have quite an influence yet," he says. "You become interested in the original meanings of the names of everything you're surrounded with… I started by using names of lakes I'd traveled on; beautiful looking and unpronounceable. When I ran out of lakes and places, I took names from maps." Then he was given an Ojibwe lexicon and he began to find "phrases and names, event and activities similar to what's going on in

the painting. But it's too complex to put into sentences... I had a general interest in the meaning of names, mostly fanciful interpretations. A lot of them are hard to figure out. I went from there to complete immersion, trying to learn about what those things are, my indebtedness to people who had been there originally." He doesn't know the syntax and makes up his own composites in "an effort to create an equivalent of what was happening in the painting. There's a lot of stuff going on...combination of two words with separate meanings, that are probably not combined that way in spoken language." (21) Many Native artists have chafed at the indiscriminate borrowing of tribal imagery by non-Indian artist, and despite his respectful intent, Uttech is concerned about the reception of such mangled language from Ojibwe speakers. (22)

The Artist's Ashes

There has been some debate about the role of landscape painting in the burgeoning tide of "eco-art" over the last two decades. Painter and environmental activist Janet Culbertson (who paints direly beautiful visions of the future after ecological disaster) has bemoaned the fact that only site-specific activist art and large architectural projects attract much attention within the art world. Historically, however, beautiful paintings and photographs of nature and wilderness have swayed large groups and are more attractive to popular audiences, who do not expect polemics with their art. Nineteenth-century American painters such as Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt (with whom Uttech is sometimes associated) preferred grand, large-scale scenery, a view of nature that reflected American national and industrial optimism. In the nineteenth-century railroads commissioned painters to advertise, in so many words, the scenery through which passengers would be swept, omitting industrial development from the views. Photographers followed suit. The vastness of the scenery paralleled the scope of the manifest destiny it was intended to promote. Since then, landscape painters and photographers have been instrumental in influencing the public and the Congress to establish national parks and monuments. Today, especially in the face of the Bush administration's increasing environmental depredations, we are experiencing a rollback of such public support. In his book The Necessity of Empty Places, Paul Gruchow writes, "It is odd irony that the places we call empty would retain some memory of the diversity of life, while the places we have filled up grow emptier and emptier." (23)

To "nature lover," naturalists, and ecological activists, Uttech's images stand for more than personal encounters and nostalgia for "pristine" wilderness. They stand for what we have to lose and what we have to fight for. "People have never been less connected to the natural world," he declares. "They're blithering idiots about how food is grown. It's bleak. They look out the window and as long as things look nice... it's a nice warm day, that's all they care about. Not the problems of global warming. But you have to live your life... And it is really nice to look out the window." (24) (In fact, the first meaning of landscape was a window, or picture of what was out there rather than the topography itself. The word remains understood as a "view" rather than the entirety of a place.)

"Above all else I want my painting to be interesting," said Uttech in 1997. "For interest leads to curiosity and that to knowledge, and since these pictures are about nature and our role in it, the knowledge gained might grow into love of nature, and thus into concern for its well being. This concern could lead to action to protect nature and, therefore, ourselves." (25) On another occasion he said, "I want my paintings to be about the feeling and experience at the moment of perception when every sense is open and magnificent beauty overwhelms." (26)

Artist like Uttech, who paint the heartbreaking aura of those still relatively untouched places that offer increasingly rare habitat for “natural” lives to take their course, obviously feel as passionate about natural beauty and the survival of wildlife as any more militant activist, although they rely on beauty to carry the day. (Photographer Richard Misrach, who also uses this strategy, has had to defend himself against accusations of “aestheticizing.”) “Beauty is neat,” says Uttech. “I’m not afraid of the topic. It may be politically correct to be against it, but I think it’s wonderful if you take it and don’t make a big thing out of it. The opposite would be dumb too.”

Yet behind all this beauty lurks the knowledge that even this protected region, Uttech’s beloved Quetico, is in danger from what happens beyond its boundaries. It is too late to feel that humans are insignificant in the face of nature, because we know now what we have wrought and are still doing. Uttech makes no attempt (in his art, at least) to cope directly with all the devastating information about the environment that he presumably knows. As an artist, he is an environmental participant rather than an ecological activist per se. Nature writer Rick Bass has said that perhaps “the activist is the artist’s ashes,” emerging from the charred remains of a “pure” devotion into more worldly concerns. (27) Uttech would probably agree with this. He says he is an activist “only indirectly. I’m active with whatever I can contribute with my own skills, mostly in the birding area. Other than that it’s mostly in terms of people… This work is as useful as a direct criticism of polluters.” (28)

A purely reverential approach to nature can be said to deny its widespread destruction. Yet intensely personal responses to places can engender active responses. Uttech’s paintings offer the susceptible viewer a chill, a “Wow!”—recalling by association our own experiences of and in nature, hitting us directly where our own emotional memories of time and place live. “I’m fascinated with the history of people and the woods,” he says, hoping that viewers will feel as though they too are “out there in the bush.” (29) But it is usually direct and lived experience of time and place that makes people want to “save the environment.” Eventually we have to define our own relationship to Uttech’s very private and contemplative experiences. Is it passive or active? Awe in the face of nature is contagious, but will it provoke action? Looking at, even being consumed by and drawn into, a painting is a secondhand experience of nature, but it is a firsthand experience of art that might in turn spark a longing to get outdoors, to go to the country or even a “wilderness,” to “get away from it all.” And that in turn leads inexorably to increased awareness, more information, and action. The chain of events is connected, so it’s unnecessary to pinpoint the personal moment when a viewer takes on the cause.

The Wishful Landscape

Unless we spend a lot of time outdoors for work or pleasure, our contemporary relationship to wild nature tends to be based in nostalgia, just as Werner Hofmann wrote of the nineteenth-century German Romantics: “A deep longing for what is open to the skies, unfettered and natural… The landscape is a piece of the world that belongs to everyone… In landscape an aging civilization gains a new lease of youth and, freed from its historico-mythological ballast, turns its gaze towards the timeless and enduring in which history has no place.” (30) This is the fantasy we live out when we back pack into the wilderness, run rivers, climb mountains, one of the goals being to avoid our own kind for a while. Untouched forests, Bachelard writes, “reign in the past… But who knows the temporal dimension of the forests? History is not enough. We should have to know how

the forest experiences its great age; why, in the reign of the imagination, there are no young forests." (31)

These days, however, the ahistorical is decidedly out of fashion, and Ernst Bloch's "wishful landscape" is certainly a social construct. (32) In some views there is no nature outside of history. Roland Barthes has defined "myth in bourgeois society as depoliticized speech," in which history is abandoned. (33) We are at least rejecting the binary in which culture is always shifting and changing, so nature must be timeless and unchanging. Contemporary photographers frequently play on the term "human nature" to point out the possibility of pinpointing a boundary between nature and culture, as well as the deconstruction that has ensued when the two meet. Landscape painting itself has been transformed by environmental crisis. It is no longer possible to look at "Paradise" without thinking of impending expulsion. There is a tension among environmentalists between utopian nostalgia and a dystopian view of the future, which will depend on how much respect for nature (and political outrage) can be inspired in the American populace.

In nineteenth-century Europe and America, landscape was seen as the realm of the divine. As Barbara Novak put it, "In the early nineteenth century in America, nature couldn't do without God, and God apparently couldn't do without nature." (34) At the same time the German Romantics were seeking religion in nature as a revolt against the greed and materialism of their own times. (35) How much more urgent is that search today, in a country that is one of the most "religious" in the world (in terms of rhetoric and churchgoing) but embraces materialism with still more enthusiasm? Twentieth- and twenty-first-century landscape painting rarely aspires to the heroic or to Edmund Burke's sublime—replete with "fear, gloom, and majesty." (36) Uttech does not hit the spirituality chord with a heavy hand, simply allowing it to echo through his images and especially his light. We don't know exactly what he believes or believes in, and we don't need to. We can draw on our own associations and conclusions from the unmistakable awe with which he regards his subjects. He uses the word magic a lot but insists: "There is no connection to religion in my paintings… although I'm magnificently aware of something that's beyond what is here. I'm in constant awe of it. I'm trying desperately to reveal what that is in my paintings. When you get into a detailed study of what's in the world, it's magic beyond belief." (37)

Although Uttech's view of the north woods is primarily benign, his bears and wolves not hostile so much as independent; the unknown always has its dark side. "We do not have to belong in the world to experience the always rather anxious impression of 'going deeper and deeper' into a limitless world," writes Bachelard. (38) Metaphor has always been a way to confront the depths. Uttech does not paint "scenery" so much as he offers metaphors for his exalted experience of nature. Nature confronted on her own turf is always potentially dangerous, and no amount of beauty can erase that undercurrent of anxiety and exhilaration we feel when we sleep alone outdoors or take risks in the wilds in the name of adventure or love of nature. Some lands seem inherently more menacing than others. The swamp is one of them. The northern swamps where Uttech works differ from those of the south; less tropical, they are more open, less melancholic, less fearsome, less claustrophobic, less about loss and being lost than our images of southern bayous and everglades. (Uttech says these are the only other landscapes that he might paint.) In his book Dark Eden, David Miller writes about a common "distrust of the swamp," where "reason might be supplanted by intuitive and unconscious responses," where "the identification of self with environment that normally enlarged one's

perspective and invigorated one's faculties overextended itself and gave way to the prospect of a loss of control signified by unlimited growth." (38)

Water—with its immersive potential, waiting to swallow intruders—is a powerful presence in Uttech's muskeg, wetlands, bogs, swamps, and marshes. Water plays a major narrative role in his paintings, becoming the medium of transformation. His waterfalls evoke a muscular power, like the sea. His reflections do not just mirror forms and creatures, they reinvent them. Water, he says, "is the most wonderful, beautiful thing in the world. I love it best on a still day, when you can look down to the bottom. It's a brand new, alien world. Also water is the most dangerous element… because it cuts off air. But it's always magical, like looking into the subconscious. And then there's the ridiculous magic of reflections." (40) A classic use of this magic is in Min Minenima, where a gray wolf sits next to a still pond at sunrise; the reflection of his head and ears is shape-shifted into the image of an owl.

"The Place I'd Like To Be"

Uttech traces his interest in art to a much-cited early childhood memory of a yellow-tipped, red-winged blackbird flying before a green hayfield. This striking image "really hit home, [setting] in place an absolute devotion to beautiful things and to nature and birds—the two parts of my life that I can never remember not being obsessed with." (41) Having quit teaching in 1998, now he is ready to "seriously study nature," specializing in bird-watching (for a number of years in a row he has spotted more than three hundred species annually in Wisconsin) and wildflowers (as part of the prairie ecosystem). The two can overlap. The dramatically decreasing migration of ducks, for instance, was what called attention to ways in which encroaching farmlands endanger the northern Midwestern wetlands. (42) The native prairie, in its few surviving sites, "supports a wealth of wildlife, resists diseases and pests, holds water, recycles, fixes nitrogen, and builds soil. And it achieves all that while using only sunlight, air, snow and rain… Where the grass covers the land, there's no sign of runoff [or erosion], for the prairie keeps doing what it's learned how to do over thousands of years: holding water, building soil, waiting for spring." (43)

Uttech's passion for prairie restoration "came about as a general consciousness in the back of my mind—that prairies are in trouble, disappearing all over the country, and it's a good idea to try to restore them. Then when I moved out to the country in 1987, after being stuck in Milwaukee for a few years, I bought an old farm where the fields hadn't been farmed for a long time. Eventually I started learning about it, and since around 1990, I've been converting all the old fields into prairies. It's more fun than I could believe, and it's almost developed into a business. I collect seeds, grow prairie plants for some of the nurseries… I'd like to do this for a living," he says. "The art stuff is hard. Painting is not at all pleasant. It's very very hard work and it's frustrating and it really grinds you down. It is not easy because you show yourself so often how bad you are and how little you know." (44)

So how come, I asked, he doesn't paint the prairies? "It's not spiritually in my blood," was the reply. "I thought of it, but the space is so different that it just isn't there. There's just that one part of the world, up north. It's in my body, that image, what's up there." He recalls driving home one day from a foray into the woods: "I kept seeing things in the landscape that would create a very strong feeling, like an aching, a yearning or longing for something, but I didn't know what. But what I think I'm yearning for is to be the

thing, to stop being myself in this body and stop being aware of my life and just be that thing. That's why I paint the stuff. When I'm painting it I can actually be it, because it's my own product. I think that's the closest I'll ever come in my life to being that place." (45)

1. Uttech, quoted in Debra Brehmer, "Echos of Longing," Milwaukee Magazine, March 2000, 56.

2. Uttech quoted in Jerome C. Krause and Tom Uttech: Visions of the North Woods (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Center, 1977), 5, 10.

3. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, The Transformation of Nature in Art (New York: Dover Books, 1956), 69.

4. Uttech, telephone conversations with the author, December 2003. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Uttech are from this source.

5. According to Tom Garver, in Tom Uttech, exh. Brochure (New York: Schmidt Bingham Gallery, 1995).

6. Barbara Joosse, "Tom Uttech: Retreat to Reality" (interview), Porcupine 5, no 2 (2001): 12.

7. Uttech, quoted in, "Into the Woods", Northshore Lifestyle, December 2003, 82-83.

8. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Biographical Sketch," in Henry David Thoreau, Walden (Roselyn, NY.:Walter J. Black/ Classics Club, 1942), 14.

9. Franklin Borough in Brutal Beauty: Paintings by Walton Ford (Brunswick ME.: Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 2000), 12. Although Walton Ford is a very different kind of painter, his Audubon paintings are interesting to think about in conjunction with Uttech's work.

10. Uttech, quoted in, "Thorn into the Woods," 83-83.

11. For example, The Large Landscape with Broken Firs and The Landscape with the Pine Limb, Seghers, a contemporary of Rembrant's, has been a facination of mine since graduate school, and I almost wrote a book on him once even though he is way out of my field. His painted prints on canvas are rare and extraordinary. See Jaro Springer Die Radierungen des Hercules Seghers (Berlin: Graphische Gesellschaft , 1910-12), for extremely high quality reproductions.

12. Garver in Tom Uttech.

13. Brehmer, "Echos of Longing", 51.

14. Thoreau, quoted in Barbara Novak, Nature and Culture: American Landscape in Painting, 1825-1875 (New York: Oxford University Press 1980), 18.

15. Uttech, quoted in James Auer, "It's All Natural for This Artist," Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, March 10, 2002.

16. Uttech, quoted in Thorn, “Into the Woods,” 82-83.

17. David C. Miller, Dark Eden: The Swamp in Ninteenth-Century American Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 10.

18. Uttech, quoted in Thorn, “Into the Woods,” 82-83.

19. Uttech, 1976 written statement, quoted in Jerome C. Krause and Tom Uttech, 16.

20. Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 184.

21. Quotations from Uttech are a composite from Thorn, “Into the Woods,” and phone conversations with the author.

22. I thought it would be interesting to try and translate some of Uttech’s titles with the help of an eighteenth century glossary (J. Long’s Voyages and Travels of an Indian Interpreter and Trader [New York: Johnson reprint, 1968]). All I came up with was the word Nin (I, me) and mukwah (bear); otherwise little seemed to match. I was told by Anishinabe writer Gerald Vizenor that there are several orthographies, and I gave up.

23. Paul Gruchow, The Necessity of Empty Places (New York: Saint Martin’s Press 1988), 12.

24. Uttech quoted in Joosse, “Tom Uttech,” 16.

25. Uttech, quoted in Tom Uttech, exh. Brochure (New York: Schmidt Bingham Gallery, 1997).

26. Uttech, quoted in Garver, Tom Uttech.

27. Rick Bass, in O. Alan Weltzien, The Literary Art and Activism of Rick Bass (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2002).

28. Uttech, conversations with the author, and quoted in Joosse “Tom Uttech,” 13.

29. Uttech, quoted in Thorn, “Into the Woods,” 82-83.

30. Werner Hoffman, The Earthly Paradise: Art in the Nineteenth Century (New York: George Braziller, 1961), 21.

31. Bachelard, Poetics of Space, 188.

32. Bloch, quoted in Lost Illusions: Recent Landscape Art (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1991), 10.

33. Roland Barthes, paraphrased by Denise Oleksijczu, ibid.,6.

34. Novak, Nature and Culture, 3.

35. See Hofmann, Earthly Paradise.

36. Novak, Nature and Culture, 34.

37. Uttech quoted in Joosse, “Tom Uttech,” 17.

38. Bachelard, Poetics of Space, 185.

39. Miller, Dark Eden, 10, 13.

40. Uttech quoted in Joosse, “Tom Uttech,” 13, 14.

41. Uttech, quoted in Brehmer, “Echos of Longing,” 49.

42. Kathrine C. Ewel, “Swamps, a Valuable Resource in Jeopardy,” in, The Swamp on the Edge of Eden (Gainsville Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida, 2001), 43.

43. Scott Russell Sanders, “Lessons from the Land Institute,” Audubon Magazine, March- April 1999, 77, 99. Sanders is writing about the Land Institute in Kansas, and its founder, Wes Jackson whose mission is the promotion of perennial polyculture.

44. Composite quotation from conversations with author and Brehmer, “Echoes of Longing” 50-51.

45. Uttech, quoted in Brehmer, “Echoes of Longing,” 59.