

ALEXANDRE

Lisa Sanditz

by Barry Schwabsky

I seem to remember that my first question to Lisa Sanditz, when I visited her studio last summer, was whether her paintings were typically based on specific places, or whether they were inventions fueled by memory and imagination. In truth, I was surprised at her answer, which is that very often they hew closely to the appearance of particular sites where she has spent time and made notations. I'd have thought invention played the larger role. In a way, my reaction is the contrary of Alfred Mac Adam's response to one of Sanditz's paintings a few years ago, where he thought, "you'd think you're back in the real world," before having to caution: "Not for a second."¹ I'd have thought it was all made up, but no, it's the real world. Painting creates a reality—not a record of things seen but a realization of them, an activity through which, as Wallace Stevens wrote, "Things as they are / Are changed."² Notice how his repetition of the word "are" (or "Are"—even visually, it appears differently) torques the word's meaning, activates the differences it harbors. Art, as Stevens reminds us in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," bends reality to its own ends.

That's always the case, of course, but these days, a number of painters have been interested in reinterpreting landscape—the very idea of landscape, but also its empirical condition, which we can no longer deny is being transformed by human beings and their technologies—through mediating artifices other than those specific to painting. First among these intervening mechanisms is the camera, of course. At this point, exactly two centuries after we began habituating ourselves to its monocular gaze, we experience its influence as second nature. Maybe that's why some artists, seeking more evident disruptions of what we like to think of as natural vision, have resorted to less familiar techniques for refracting our view of the natural landscape—whether through analogue means, as Rachel MacFarlane

does when she makes three-dimensional shadow-box models of the (real) places depicted in her painting, and then paints the model rather than the place, or through digital means, like Emma Webster when she renders her motifs using virtual reality technology, "rendering them 3D and developing what might be called digital landscape sculptures," as Emily McDermott describes it.³

Such artists have taken up the timely task of denaturalizing our view of nature, reminding us that we can never again see it as artists of the past did, artists of times when other ways of seeing and depicting predominated. Sanditz is among their number, and she is as determined as any of them to reconfigure the sense of what landscape painting can be and mean today, but she engineers her recomposition of the way things are, her denaturalization of nature, with less *outré* means—quite traditional ones, you could say. She works from drawings and other notations made on site—*en plein air*—that she subsequently synthesizes in the studio; nothing about this procedure, beyond the fact that photography has been added to the repertoire of notational means, would be immediately unfamiliar to nineteenth-century artists such as Camille Corot or Thomas Cole.

But what Sanditz does with this traditional methodology is, to put it mildly, not something any nineteenth-century artist would countenance, or accept as true to things as they are. And while twentieth-century painters starting with the Fauves and Expressionists, artists such as Picasso who inspired Stevens to write "The Man with the Blue Guitar," would not be as surprised at her doings as their predecessors, Sanditz is up to something as different from twentieth-century landscape painting as it is from that of the nineteenth century. Here's the difference: Matisse, for instance, distinguished his art from that of Impressionists as a turn away from rendering shifting appearances toward a search for the motif's "essential character," with a willingness "to risk losing charm in order to obtain greater stability."⁴ No more concerned than Matisse was to record the effect of meteorological specifics, Sanditz is also not as eager as he was to offer the viewer a sense of stability.

Today, we can no longer imagine a landscape as the solid ground under our feet, immutable and reassuring. Our being here changes everything.

Not that Sanditz means to knock us fully off-balance. The sense of shifting ground is subtle, the kind of thing that might provoke just enough unease to set the viewer's sensorium on alert—to elicit a heightened perceptual awareness. A painting like *Spring Ephemeral (Lily)* gives a good idea of her approach. It presents a view across what appears to be a vast distance, with layer after layer of hill giving way to hill reaching back to a horizon right up near the top of the picture. And yet all these spatial layers are pressed right up to the picture plane, all equally present. So far, so modernist. What's less familiar is the way the scale and placement of things defies our ability to read a firm order into the space.

In different ways, both classical and modernist representational paintings read from bottom to top, that is, they place what is to be understood as near at the foot of the painting and what is distant in its upper region. Ground equals proximity, sky equals distance. But *Spring Ephemeral (Lily)* doesn't work quite like that. It reads, not from the bottom up, but from the middle out and around. If there's anything like a foreground to this painting, it's right at the center, in the mostly light blue area surrounding a pair of heavy-headed blossoms hanging from a single stem. One of these lilies is yellow, its bright hue advancing forcefully against its azure environs; the petals of its companion are faded, little more than faint outlines in tones of green and light blue. Likewise, a couple of other pairs of lilies are just ghostly traces. But its scale, as well as its greater chromatic specificity, tells us that the central flower is what's nearest in this painting, and if its companion flora are smaller and fainter, still, they loom larger than any other feature in the painting.

Then consider what's just to the left of this central field of flowers: an outlined image of a boy in a baseball cap, sitting with his arms around his knees next to a rock that reaches about to his shoulder height. Smaller than the plant in the central zone, he is spangled with yellow, pink, and white brush marks—like petals

scattered over him, though not those of a lily. In his little oblong zone, vaguely pentagonal, he seems to have found a snug spot in which to rest, a pleasant enclosure. But he's sideways—at a ninety-degree angle to everything else that we see. Why this peculiar turn? I suspect it was an intuitive move on the artist's part, something that just seemed like it would work, and the "why" could come after, but it has the effect of alerting us, ever so understatedly, that things can enter the painting at any angle and that the painting's field of gravity, and its orientation toward the world and the body of the person looking at it, is not fixed: Even if it generally accords with conventional usage in these matters, it makes no promise of consistency. The painting makes space for vastness and intimacy thanks to devices that owe us no explanations. Once we've rotated our expectations enough to see the boy and the flowers as part of one visual ensemble, we can begin to work our way around the rest of the composition in a counterclockwise spiral moving outward in flattened space.

True, sometimes Sanditz manipulates relations between the depicted elements in her paintings for more pointedly thematic reasons. *Cat Cove*, for instance, is a waterside scene with three relatively small figures near its center—but one of the figures, a boy carrying a pail, towers over the other two like a giant. Because they're so small it might not be immediately apparent that the two tiny people accompanying the boy are adults. It's a more exaggerated expression of the same feeling that Charles Ray expressed in his well-known 1993 sculpture *Family Romance*, its four painted fiberglass figures—young parents and two toddlers—all the same height: the indelible sensation, familiar to anyone who has ever been a parent, that it's always really the child who carries the most significance in the family's life together.

That said, I don't think *Cat Cove* is essentially a painting about family, any more than I think *Spring Ephemeral (Lily)* is a painting about a little boy in a baseball cap. The paintings are about worlds that encompass parents and children, not one that's

organized around them. Like most of Sanditz's works, *Cat Cove* takes landscape as its subject—and while the land where we live and work and play makes a place for our little personal or familial or social dramas, it is so much larger than that. The place itself has its own life, its own energy—something we experience thanks to the verve, and the appealing lightness of touch, with which she has conjured it. For me, at least, the encounter with the mis-sized humans amounts to a mere incident in a painting whose primary fascination comes from the way everything in it seems slightly off-kilter and therefore in motion—somewhat drunkenly so, I'd even say. Look at the horizon, and you'll see it's not, dare I say, horizontal: It tips down to the right. And that makes everything else seem a bit unstable, as if the ground itself were shifting beneath one's feet. It's not an unpleasant feeling, mind you—in fact it's rather exciting. It somehow makes everything feel more alive, and it spurs that heightened perceptual awareness I mentioned before.

The world, as Sanditz paints it, is just a very strange place. Our being here—inhabiting it, seeing it, disturbing it—is what makes it so. I have my answer to the question I first posed to her: Does she paint from life, or from memory and imagination? The answer is, simply, yes. She has described her working method as one of “hyperaccumulation.” In looking at just two of the paintings in her present show, I've hardly scratched the surface of how many “colors, marks, stories, places” accumulate there, how much “joy and struggle” they contain. Well, I didn't want this essay to devolve into an exercise in list-making, though sometimes I was tempted to, because each of the colors, marks, stories, and places is interesting in itself. How they get put together is an improvisation. What's improvised is the place itself where one finds a view to the multiplicity of circumstances subject to continual change. It's a challenge and that's why it's exhilarating.

NOTES

- 1 Alfred Mac Adam, "Unnatural Nature: Post-Pop Landscapes," *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 2022, <https://brooklynrail.org/2022/06/artseen/Unnatural-Nature-Post-Pop-Landscapes/>.
- 2 Wallace Stevens, "The Man with the Blue Guitar," <https://allpoetry.com/poem/14327935-The-Man-With-The-Blue-Guitar-by-Wallace-Stevens>.
- 3 Emily McDermott, "Emma Webster Is Reinventing Landscape Painting Using VR Technology," *ArtNews*, September 2, 2022, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/emma-webster-perrotin-landscape-painting-1234638040/>.
- 4 Jack D. Flam, editor, *Matisse on Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978), p. 37.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Barry Schwabsky is art critic for *The Nation* and an editor at *Artforum*. He recently published his sixth book of poetry, *The Bone China Years* (Black Square Editions, 2026). Forthcoming is an essay, *We Work in the Dark: Artists at Midcareer* (Ten O'Clock Project, 2027).