

The Quiet Landscape

Nature has always had an influence in my work. The subtle changes in the light that comprise each day translate into changes of monochrome in colour. The romantic landscape and memories of places I have experienced at different times in my life are a subject that I continue to return to in my work. The English Romantic painter, John Constable, is quoted as saying that painting is another word for feeling and I would add that, for me, landscape is another word for spiritual. The Native Americans worshiped the landscape claiming kinship with every hill, valley, rock, flower, the sky and the water, the wind and the rain, and with all creatures of the earth. Nature needed to be cared for and above all, respected. It was sacred. This is a belief I also hold true and I am at my most inspired and most humbled when I think of the poetry that is nature.

Today, a search for tranquility more often leads to the neon glow of electronic media. The warmth of the sun's last light and whisper of the breeze is replaced by omnipresent pings of incoming texts. But how quiet should the landscape be? The landscape has changed drastically since humankind first made its mark. The ancient forests have been cleared. The great flocks of migratory birds that once darkened the skies are gone, as well as many of the songbirds. Our oceans are acidifying. Our foods are at risks with genetically modified farming, chemicals and pesticides. And the gentle buzzing of the honeybees is in danger of colony collapse disorder. Albert Einstein is quoted as saying that without the bee there would not be humankind. No more bees, no more pollination, no more plants, no more animals, no more man." The use of chemicals, the clearing of the pastures of wildflowers, the lack of variety in what is planted, all has damaged the bee's ecosystem. And our ecosystems are one. Our present way of life is laying waste to the environment that supports us.

Bees and humans have maintained a close relationship for hundreds of years. The ancient cultures, harvesting honey, soon discovered that wax, when combined with resins, could act as a stable binder for pigment. The discovery of encaustic as the first painting medium begins the art history of painting, long before the discovery of pigment in plaster for fresco, pigment in egg white for tempera, or pigment in oils or acrylic polymers. The Etruscan Fayum portraits, dating back to the 1st Century BC, show how archival and vibrant these colours and hues could be maintained in wax, as most of the first drawings and paintings in charcoal and other plant and mineral based colourants had faded with the elements unless protected in caves such as at Lascaux. The plants and minerals available in the environment such as cobalt and saffron had allowed vibrant hues and with a binder, could now be made permanent. Our image of the Parthenon and Greek statuary as pristine white purity is incorrect and these temples and sculptures would have been highly coloured with pigmented wax. For encaustic painting, heat is the solvent much as turpentine is with oils. The ancient Roman naturalist from the 1st Century AD, Pliny the Elder, speaks of a certain spatula used for applying the wax, but the secrets of this encaustic medium were lost through conquest, war and natural disaster. The labour involved and the complexity of technique required were replaced by simpler means, and the technique disappeared.

The honeybee colony is a highly complex societal structure. For the microcosm to function as a whole, different tiers of tasks are organized between Queen, workers and

drones. During spring and summer thousands of worker bees collect pollen and nectar from flowering plants, flying from four up to seven miles. Through a bee dance, the returning workers communicate to others the direction of the best nectar by indicating the sun's degrees. Honeybees visit about two million flowers and fly about 50,000 miles to collect enough nectar to produce one pound of honey. Ten pounds of honey must be produced to make one pound of wax. I use roughly one to three pounds of wax per painting, depending on size.

Encaustic painting is a biologically pure art. It is time consuming, labourious to control and all painting must be done in a molten state. For me, there is something mysterious about encaustic. No other material encompasses the feeling of nature and the beauty of diffused light. In my art I look to bring something peaceful into the world. The idea of the profound and amazing intricacy of nature in a microcosm of so many humble little golden and brown-banded insects is never far from my mind. God save the bees.

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