

Breaking the Square

I can't always fit the swath of countryside I'm looking at onto a rectangle. The countryside doesn't always conform to a rectangle. The foreground dwindles in comparison to the middle or far distance; or an area shifts down, up, left or right as the angle of my gaze alters; or an area expands or contracts relative to another area, depending on which area is more impressive; or the swath of countryside falls into parts because it's too wide to take in by looking in one direction. A distant building looms, relative to the nearby weeds my eyes shoot over. I look at a tree that's to my left and up, and as I do so a car that's to my right shifts further right and down. When I look at a sugarhouse, it occupies my vision, and when I look from it to a distant mountain range, it occupies my vision, supplanting the sugarhouse. Wanting to include all I can see within a one-hundred degree arc, I look all the way to my left, all the way to my right, and the visual field splits. I sometimes have to swing my easel around so the painting doesn't block part of my view.

The problem is that of mapping three dimensions onto two. Linear perspective and its mechanical counterpart, photography, use the projective geometry of optics to solve the problem. But optics don't define perception, and we don't experience the world as a geometric projection. Perspective and photography are fixed and static, our perception is variable and dynamic. The difference is profound, and is best described by Merleau-Ponty in his chapter on space in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Working on an unstretched piece of canvas measuring four by five feet, I develop a painting and its shape together, sometimes using a chalkline to snap lines across the wet paint. I don't decide on the shape then make the painting on it; I plot and readjust the shape as the painting progresses. The shape is as uncertain, as much a part of the search, as is all the rest. The only rule is that the shape must stand for how the countryside presents itself to me. The countryside doesn't have a shape, to begin with. I must assign a shape to the countryside in order to paint a picture of it.

When I've done all I can with a painting, I lay out the shape on a sheet of plywood and cut a stretcher for it. Sometimes, I take the painting on its plywood stretcher to the spot where I painted it, to re-work it a little more, on the shape. Once in a while, I decide to change the shape by adding or subtracting plywood, a job involving a circular saw, glue, nails, maybe adding canvas and paint. I feel at times that I'm drawing with the saw, aware of where my fingers are.

I know these pictures disconcert, and I know why. They are landscape paintings done on the spot, from observation, in the plein-air tradition, but they describe the dynamics of visual perception in ways related to Analytical Cubism, Giacometti, Pollock and de Kooning. And they occupy radical shapes that slant and are bitten into, giving unusual form to the formless, the visual field. It's all a jostle to the eye. A feeling of conflict, even of disquiet, is engendered, a feeling consistent with my intentions, my sense of what's fitting and necessary, rising from long involvement with these issues.

Not that the rectangle is to be lightly given up. It's very stable, and it's a prevalent convention, defined as a "rule, method, or practice established by usage." Viewers are so accustomed to the rectangle they tend to look past the squared-off container to its contents. They notice the picture, rather than the shape it's painted on. With my irregular shapes, viewers run aground. They are unable to get unstuck from the shapes, move from container to contents, and see the paintings as wholes. It's a matter of their coming to terms with the unfamiliar and difficult.

Norman Turner, July 8, 2013