

NORMAN TURNER

by
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“The image I seek is one of burgeoning, of pouring out or spilling forth.... It is ceaseless generation that seems ultimately truthful to me, that can be represented by pictures that form and reform, are in a sense made by the viewer, even as the viewer takes them in.”¹

“Forming and reforming”—this is what engages the eye of the viewer confronting a Norman Turner painting. It is difficult to stop looking at one of these vibrant landscapes because they resist settling into a stable image seen from a fixed viewpoint, even though all the ingredients—rocks, trees, a distant barn, clouds—are there. One’s gaze is held by the effort to resolve all the activity of color and line into a coherent whole, while the image verges on fragmenting into its components; the precarious balance keeps threatening to dissolve as one instinctively tries to hold onto it. Through clearly articulated brushstrokes Turner has managed to approximate the scanning motion involved in taking in a 180 degree field of vision, with the result that the viewer vicariously experiences the sensation of a place as if in the landscape, rather than outside looking in. This kinetic activity results in that sense of “ceaseless generation” the artist wants his landscapes to convey.

The visual process, then, is a central aspect of Turner’s work, but the subject is landscape, a passionate connection with place, whether wild and remote or tamed and settled. He is adamant about painting in direct confrontation with his motif, even when it means hauling a large canvas, easel, and box of paints up a steep trail to a rocky ledge, not once, but over the long course of a work. Since he must wait for the right season and similar quality of light to come around again, it can take several years to complete a painting. Four to eight paintings may be kept going at once—for sunny mornings, sunny afternoons, cloudy days, and for different seasons. Turner alters little back in the studio. “Everything in the painting,” he says, “is justified by what’s out there.”² The resulting image is multilayered, made up of marks responding to the shifting glance as it moves from near to far, downhill and uphill, earthward and skyward. By means of these marks, marks that range from elongated spiky brush drawing to block-like shorter strokes, we follow the track of his eye’s scanning motion. The strokes of paint are in a sense the traces recorded as he scans the visual field, returning again and again, so that one set of notations is layered over another, trapping time into the painting. The resulting canvas projects both an acute sense of the energy of a place—landscape as a composite of myriad forms of activity—and an orchestration of color and rhythm capable of taking on a life of its own.

A deep physical connection to place is at the core of Turner’s paintings, whether the motif is a sweeping panorama of distant mountains, a quiet village graveyard, or a woodland stream making its way along a rocky bed. Some painters of landscape station themselves mentally outside the landscape, while others—Van Gogh being the most obvious example—seem to participate empathetically in a continuum with it. Some see the landscape as if it were a static finished product, and others—John Marin for one—understand it as the nexus of many commingling forces. Turner, who spent much of his

youth in Iowa farm country, paints in a way that communicates a bodily response to the rhythms of a place, as if the visual experience was accompanied by a visceral physical reaction. This is conveyed principally by the shape and direction of the brushstrokes, physical evidence of the moving hand and the mind that instructs it.

In *Bedrock and River: Approach to the Falls* (p. 9), for example, the lower half of the canvas is taken up with diagonally moving, multicolor strokes in vibrant shades of pink, red, blue, and purple —refracted light bouncing off the surface of the bedrock—that cascade toward the viewer’s space, suggesting the unseen falls that lie beyond. This momentum carries into the shorter, upward moving strokes denoting a stand of quivering trees beyond, and even reaches into the sky, which is tied by color to the foreground rock. There is no separating one component of nature from another. Very different from the matchstick strokes of the rushing stream are the curvilinear arabesques that set trees dancing and ground heaving in *Pitchpines on Bedrock: Millbrook Mountain Trail* (p. 13). In direct contrast to the frenzied activity of the paint application in *Millbrook Mountain Trail* are the methodical building-block strokes used to construct the monuments of a tidy New England cemetery in *Gravestone Flag, Hardwick, Vermont* (p. 11). Here each stroke is clearly articulated and related to other strokes to form intricate smaller compositions within the larger whole. It is the forceful, clearly defined brushstrokes, more than qualities of shape or aspects of composition, that give these paintings a pulsing life.

The rectilinear brushwork in *Gravestone Flag* accords with the six implied rectangles that make up the final shaped canvas. The shaped paintings begin with an ordinary canvas on which Turner paints linear divisions that outline multiple areas of focus. Later, he cuts out the painted canvas and stretches it over plywood. The over-all shape is determined as he works; there is nothing arbitrary or gimmicky in his use of it. Rather, the shape results from his visual scanning process. For Turner, the shaped canvas functions differently than it does for Elizabeth Murray or Frank Stella, although he feels their work gave permission for this kind of departure. “The reason I started doing the shaped canvases is that as I would measure my way through the motif I would come up with a non-rectangle. Distant things relative to nearby things are frequently much larger than a conventional exposition of space allows. I’m figuring out the shape while I’m figuring out everything else. I’m attracted to complexities; here I have eight corners to deal with instead of the traditional four.”

The irregular perimeter of these paintings lends a dynamic quality that the ordinary rectangle, whose function is to contain the gaze, can never have. The arresting presence of the shaped canvas, with its perimeter staggered or aslant against the wall surface, negates the assumption that landscape is a view through the picture plane toward an illusionary or hypothetical distance, and accords with a contemporary tendency to stress the object-ness of the canvas itself. Within each individual section our glance is directed toward a specific area. For example, in *Phillies Bridge Farm* (p. 17), the eye is drawn toward a downward slope to the left, a distant farmhouse to the upper right, and a gravel road that is directly in front, straddling two abutting sections. Yet despite the internal shifting and the multiple perspectives, all the parts weave into a pictorial and compositional whole. The staggered edges and jutting angles of the shaped canvases demand a different kind of looking process, one that suggests the viewer’s shifting glance or position and implies an expansion to left and right beyond the canvas boundaries, approaching an actual landscape experience rather than being a view abruptly cut off by

an arbitrary edge. The counterpoint between centrifugal and centripetal forces, the pull toward the edge and the drive for internal coherence, the uneasy reconciliation between the outer shape and the contained painting, result in a tension (a quality Turner welcomes) that keeps the eye continually searching for a resolution.

Turner says that his aim is “to exit the painting with everything in relationship to everything else.” To this end he uses color as the dominant unifying force, making it weave across and dissolve his canvases’ internal divisions. Paint applied with a flat brush, drawn sideways, produces brushstrokes that are like stitches forming the basic fabric of the painting. His palette tends toward strong, fully saturated, high-keyed color, with complementaries playing off each other to generate greater vibrancy; requisite landscape greens are countered by a range of reds, pinks, and violets, and wherever blue appears, orange is not far away. “I want to use something connected to the color I see out there, but not descriptive,” Turner says. “I’m looking for equivalents, fumbling around in my paint box, not according to a preordained system. I pay a lot of attention to values; I look for opportunities to heighten color activities by placing complementaries near each other. I try to get a painting so that the sum of all the colors makes a light of its own, a supra-color.”

The light generated by Turner’s colors vibrates and gives off a highly charged energy, yet the radiance that emanates from these canvases makes me think of the artist’s 19th century opposite, George Inness, who wished to imbue his serene landscapes with the sense of a vital force, to make them the bearer of his Swedenborgian convictions. To convey “nature’s living motion rather than outer fact” was Inness’s stated purpose. As strictly as Turner adheres to the facts of vision, the pulsating color of his canvases suggests on-going motion, an earth made up of constantly changing elements and conflicting forces. While Inness sought the timeless in the transitory moment, Turner’s landscapes embody a sense of imminent change, through a shifting light and strong imprint of season and time of day. Turner also hints at another kind of time, giving clues to an ongoing process of transformation, the age-old geological activity that thrust up mountains, produced rocky outcroppings, and eroded river beds, an earth “forming and reforming.” For both artists landscape is a vehicle, a way of connecting with generalized universal forces, whether derived from Swedenborg or modern physics.

Turner was not always a painter of landscape; in fact, he was not always a painter. He attended the University of Colorado as a music composition major, dropped out and worked briefly on a fire crew in Idaho, studied at the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop, took up sculpture, moved to northern Virginia, and then to New York. There, in 1964, he became one of the founding students of the New York Studio School, which began in a rented loft where students concentrated on drawing and painting from the model. His teachers were Charles Cajori and Esteban Vicente for painting, George Spaventa for sculpture, and Mercedes Matter for drawing. The latter was a decisive influence and he still remembers her prescience when she remarked that the still life set-up from which he was painting was suggestive of a landscape, pointing toward the direction he would eventually follow.

A native Iowan, Turner still carries with him the recollection of his early relation to the farmland surrounding Iowa City, where his father taught in the music department at the University. In a short memoir he describes how, as a boy, he was drawn to the outdoors, escaping the tensions of the household. “But out the back door, the open

countryside began. There, beyond the wood screen door that slapped shut behind me on a summer afternoon, lay my getaway... beyond the hickory shaded downslope of our back pasture... [to] an outdoors spreading circumambiently for great distances across the prairie. An awareness of this boundless world was always present ...as I made off like a runaway.” He recaptures something of that rhapsodic feeling in his canvases today, when he can still say: “I’m completely enchanted by what I find on this planet, excited to be out there.”

In the years following the Studio School, Turner painted figures in interiors, and still lifes, which he describes as “very controlled, very descriptive.” At one point during this period he pulled out from under his bed a rolled up and damaged canvas he calls Studio School Still Life (Fig. 1), a painting he had put aside while revising it because something about its transitional state intrigued him; he had decided to leave it “in an open condition instead of tight.” Looking at it again he realized that he could paint descriptively and still keep changeability of perception, a lesson he was learning from Cézanne, and that was inherent in the conflicting directional pulls of his own painting. A comparison of the 1965 Studio School Still Life with the 1973 Interior with Philodendron (Fig. 2), which was painted in a polished academic style, and then with Ritz (Fig. 3), a still life from 1978, suggests what Turner was reaching for in painting: open-endedness, the non-finito, what Henry James thought John Singer Sargent ought to have more of—“unsolved problems,” or at least the tension between the solved and the unsolved.

This new-kindled sense of painting’s potential to deal with perception extended in time was not actually applied to landscape until the late 1970s when he went out to the Delaware Water Gap where some of his artist friends, including Gretna Campbell and Lois Dodd, were working at Artists for Environment, a program started by painter Joel Corcos Levy in conjunction with the National Park Service. It was autumn when Turner visited and, with the leaves turning and partially off the trees, he saw the landscape open up with a transparency and a raking light he hadn’t previously experienced in the lush verdure of summer with its insistent greens. “Some mornings at the Delaware Water Gap I would just stand by the Big Flat Brook and witness light flooding into space, too overwhelmed to paint,” he recalls.

Now when faced with green, Turner says he needs a foil like the cliffs, bedrock outcrops, and boulders of the Shawangunk Mountains near his home in New Palz, or the buff-colored rocks that edge the shore of the nearby “skylakes” and are mirrored in the lake in the painting *Skylake Shore, October* (p. 18). His preference is for bare trees and clearly visible structural components like gravestones or farm buildings. *Huguenot Graveyard* (p.21), for example, starts at the lower edge with patches of cool green ground, but beyond the leafless trees, as light streams in, are streaks of ochre, pink, and orange, capped by the intense blue of the sky, in a reversal of the more common practice of placing warm color near at hand with cooler tones representing the further away. In a similar reversal, blue-gray boulders sit heavily in the foreground of *The Garlic Farm on 299* (p. 22) while beyond the bare tree limbs the distant farm buildings glow in cadmium orange.

The Turner family spends summers in Vermont where green can be overwhelming, but, by opting for a distant vantage point in *Fifty mile view From Granite Ledge on Barr Hill* (p. 10), he manages to find a lot of primary color in the rightly named Green Mountain State. Traversing the canvas, the eye moves from a wedge of blue at the

lower left to low lying mountains on the horizon in a sweeping panorama, from which light emanates via a frenzy of elongated strokes, lines really, of pink, orange, yellow, and blue, with scarcely a touch of green. The painting conveys a sense of the sun's energy being given off in the form of heat or refracted light, something that extends into a sky studded with clouds that echo the warm colored light almost like an after image.

Turner has accomplished a timely reinvigoration of landscape painting, bemoaned by some as having run its course—as if our art could ignore that which envelopes and sustains us, as if we existed solely in the man-made environment that is reflected in most of today's art. Essentially these are works in praise of light and its life-giving force; but they are also about perception, as the artist takes into account the various ways the process of seeing and recording have been explored over the last century and a quarter. And in adapting the shaped canvas to his own needs, he has brought a new dynamic into landscape painting, reinvigorating it in ways suited to a contemporary sensibility. Confronting these works no one can think this age-old subject has been exhausted, nor that easel painting has run its course. Norman Turner has achieved an exciting new synthesis, one which manages to break out of the traditional canvas confines, not to satisfy an arbitrary need to invent but out of a need to register a wide arc of visual stimuli, to replicate both the dynamic of seeing and the dynamic of an ever-changing visual field. His paintings tantalize the mind through the tensions between the elusive image and the articulated painting process, at the same time as they delight the eye through sensuous color and verve of paint application. And then there are the broader implications of what these paintings tell us as they give form to Turner's conviction that "the way a man is and the space he inhabits can't be parted." How often do we find up-to-the minute relevance communicated in a contemporary language that also revivifies an age-old tradition?

1. See Norman Turner, "On the Structure of Looking," www.normanturner.net.
2. Quotations from the artist, unless otherwise indicated, are from notes taken during studio visits, October 21, 2005, and January 14, 2006.

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