

Art review

Landscapes go in all directions as far as the eye can see

BY JEFF DANIEL
Post-Dispatch Art Critic

Through no fault of its own, landscape has been somewhat relegated to a dusty corner of the contemporary art world. Some see it as outdated and exhausted — “Didn’t it have its last hurrah with Hopper and Sheeler?” — while others associate the genre with the kitsch and convention of starving artist sales and public television “how to” shows. (This week: a serene lake scene in 30 minutes or less.)

Perhaps landscape just isn’t sexy enough to make it in today’s art scene. Perhaps the sun has finally set on landscape’s fascination with land, sea, sky and architecture.

Perhaps all of that is nothing but a load of nonsense — as might argue Phil Slein, curator of the landscape exhibit now on display at the Des Lee Gallery in the cavernous new first-floor space at 1627 Washington Avenue (site of the building Washington University has rehabbed to serve as a kind of arts incubator for the loft district).

Slein took a look around the local landscape and eventually selected 40 pieces by 27 different artists to fit into this show. By stretching the genre’s definition, he manages to create an exhibit in which landscape becomes whatever curator, artist — or viewer — wants it to be.

One moment that may be Ahzad Bogosian’s richly painted chronicle of nature’s dreamy horizon lines; the next, Laura Beard Aeling’s squiggles and strokes of color that transform into interior and exterior scenes only after a long gaze. (One well worth it — her abstractions keep getting stronger and more confident with each showing.)

As you walk through the gallery, landscape moves back and forth from the countryside to industrial urban areas, from scenes of suburbia to snapshots of outer space. Where Frank Stack picks a warm Hartsburg, Mo., farm as his subject, Xingxue Zuo (moving away from his trademark black-and-white prints and into oil painting) opts for an anonymous setting of cold steel and brick. Where Michael Farrel zooms in close on the eerie stillness of suburban design, Wayne Adams looks far away, literally showing us the “Surface of the Moon.” All landscapes, yet all moving in opposite directions.

Sometimes that movement can lead the artist pretty far astray — which is a positive here. (A few of the more conventional works in the

Landscape

Where: Des Lee Gallery, 1627 Washington Avenue
When: Though July 31
More info: 314-621-8735

show do appear old and musty in comparison.) Leading the way are painters Andy Millner, whose “Big Foliage” is more about movement and form than anything plant related, and Brian Smith, one of the more dynamic interpreters of landscape in the area. Like Aeling, Millner and Smith tease us into guessing just what kind of physical world they are attempting to represent, into wondering just what subjects inhabit their compositions. Their works are more about emotional response than they are about the way a horizon line dissolves or how sunlight reflects off water. What you see is what you feel.

A few of the artists here prefer to keep their distortions and subversions of our natural sense of order just a bit more on the subtle side. Margaret Keller’s “Hedge and Ether” (“Garden Series #7”) comes across as a sleepwalk stroll through ancient ruins, the shapes and colors of the scene flowing into one another, all of it presented through a gauzy haze. Dan Gauldoni achieves a similar effect in his “Mundo Perdido Series #22,” a panoramic slice of surreal landscape that looks as if it were created hundreds of years ago.

One of the strongest pieces in the show comes from Paul Shank. Titled “Taormina,” the small mixed-media on paper work depicts an architectural landscape setting — which doesn’t sound like any big deal. But Shank takes a visual perspective and palette that might best be described as Arthur Dove dabbling in German Expressionism. Darkly shaded and rich in color, “Taormina” is a wonderfully constructed mass of angles and planes that both tricks and treats the eye.

While most of the work Slein has chosen for this show involves painting — including his own colorful and energetic watercolors that greet visitors as they first arrive (hey, I’m all for curator fringe benefits) — sculptors Randy Gilmore and Christina Shmigel also appear. Gilmore’s bare plywood and hinge piece comes across as a bit too minimally cold, but Shmigel’s takes on rural water towers and structures are fascinating. Her “Place and Settlement #3,” constructed of brass, copper, and steel, gives a Giacometti gangliness to an icon of rural landscapes. The mix is strange, yet perfect.

Slein provides plenty to take in here — including work from such local stalwarts as Ken Worley, Jeff Aeling, Tim Liddy, and Bill Kohn; from very young painters such as Jenna Bauer to lauded veterans such as Ernestine Betsberg. If landscape has been in a dusty corner, then someone forgot to send word down our way.