Landscape and Language: The Paintings of David Ligare
by Patricia Junker

THE LANGUAGE OF CALIFORNIA

My country is different from the rest of the world. It seems to be one of those pregnant places from which come wonders... I tell you now that my country -- a hundred miles long and about fifty wide -- is unique in the world.

John Steinbeck, Pacific Grove, California, 1932[1]

California is, of course, an extraordinary place. Certainly other regions of the country have at times had their hold on the collective American imagination. The green hills and alluvial fields of the Hudson River Valley, for instance, as painted by mid-19th-century landscape artists in their wide, serene panoramas represented an archetypal realm of nature and were the setting for distinctive New World pastorales. And the mountains of the Sierras, as painted by Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Hill in the last quarter of the 19th century, became synonymous with the grandness of scale that is the American West; they epitomize a nation's exultation at its own magnificence. But coastal California has necessarily inspired its own enduring pictorial language to describe its distinctive beauty and sublime austerity and to convey the spirit and significance of this special place.[2]

Nothing, it would seem, in nature and the environment is inconsequential here. The physical attributes of coastal California have always engaged visionaries who have fashioned often elaborate allegories from its distinctive landscape. As the late-19th-century San Francisco critic J. Nilsen Laurvik put it, "The bold contours of the hills bulging large against the blue vault, the sweeping arms of the bay, the big trees and great streams, the vast expanse of the Pacific, upon which the Californian gazed from birth, give him a bigness of vision that visualizes things and events in their entirety."[3]

For some, like Laurvik's contemporary, painter William Keith, the broad view of California extended to the palpable spirit of the divine, evidenced in those wondrous moments when nature reveals her particular beneficence -- in a quiet glade among the silver eucalyptus trees at dusk, for example, or on the broad Pacific shoreline at sunset. Keith was overwhelmed by the revelations offered by the Northern California landscape: "The only thing a poor bewildered artist can do," he declared with humility, "is to seize upon a tree, some light of God in the sky, brood upon it, work it into his soul, and some day -- suddenly, before he knows it, he has fixed his thought -- God's thought he hopes it may be -- upon the canvas."[4] As Keith demonstrated in his paintings, even when an artist records objectively natural phenomena carefully observed along Northern California's coast -- like a low fog characteristically hugging the base of Marin County's Mount Tamalpais, lying in its creases -- the effect is otherworldly and suggests the visions of a mystic.

For others, the inescapable Pacific shoreline and golden western light are defining attributes of California - attributes that are as well potent symbols, a measure of human progress, physically and metaphorically. When, in To a God Unknown, John Steinbeck portrayed the Californian as a type of mystic, the last American to see the sun set each day, he made clear the power of the Pacific shoreline to stir the imagination. Arthur Mathews, painting in San Francisco and on the Monterey peninsula at the turn of the century, believed, like Steinbeck, that in that one moment the Californian is afforded a great revelation: "In the mirror of the imagination," he wrote in his Philopolis magazine in 1908, "not only the world of today, but the entire movement of human life, moves before the eye as the things of living men move on the street."[5] In Mathews's painting, his California took form as a contemplative young woman in golden robes, seated at land's end, looking toward the horizon and ruminating on the vast universe of human experience -- on history, poetry, or philosophy, represented here by the open book from which her sisterly companion reads. Of these great works of humankind, California, as Mathews saw it, is the beneficiary, and she quite naturally held the promise of the human intellect. "All the history of the Arts and their accomplishments lie either before or behind us," Mathews declared. "These works and inspirations are ours -- to take and leave alone."[6] California is free to reap the rewards of history precisely because nature has provided for her a nurturing environment where great ideas were bound to grow. "Calitopia" was the term coined by Mathews's friend Frederick Teggart, writing in Philopolis in 1907, to convey his sense of the glorious land of bounty and potential that has remained a part of the ethos of California.[7]
Mathews’s vision of California as the embodiment of a classical ideal extended beyond his art into social and political realms. His *Philopolis* magazine, launched in collaboration with his wife, Lucia, and others following the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, addressed city planning, public education, and government, offering historical models of a community that Mathews felt conformed to the highest standard of beauty in both an aesthetic and an ethical sense. California, "most favored child of Nature, heiress of the full treasury of man's experience," as Frederick Teggart described it in *Philopolis*, also represented a unique responsibility. Here the populace was not simply free to ruminate on its many benefactions; it was, in fact, duty bound to act in ways that accorded with the region's physical beauty, natural bounty and privileged position at the end of a long westward march of European civilization. "Health and zest of living are not all," essayist Alexander McAdie reminded San Franciscans in 1912. "To the very joy of being shall there not be added appreciation of the beauty of truth and the loveliness of service?" He made this charge to the city's youth -- to swear the ancient Athenian Ephebic Oath to follow a high moral code, to serve community, and to "transmit this City not less but better and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us." For Mathews, Teggart, McAdie, and others of their generation, California suggested as no other place the promise of Utopia -- a place that could be both aesthetically inspiring and a testament to the potential of individuals and society. This, too, has remained a part of the essential spirit of California, prompting one contemporary writer to observe, "The power of the local landscape to elicit the kind of awe and respect that have fueled the preservationist movement is a basic signifier of life here on the continent's edge."

At Big Sur, in the 1920s, poet Robinson Jeffers felt the enormity of the idea of "Continent's End," regarding it not as a benig place for quiet contemplation, but as a strangely foreboding place, a place of testing. He wrote his famous lines:

*I gazing at the boundaries of granite and spray, the established sea-marks, felt behind me
Mountain and plain, the immense breadth of the continent, before me the mass and
doubled stretch of water*

For him, the Pacific shoreline represented the eternal conflict of elemental forces, land and sea, and in that meeting was a wealth of associations -- associations with a country's past and future and, by extension, with human aspiration, adaptability, vulnerability, and failure. It was here that the poet conjured up images of modern types of the ancients living among unspoilt nature. And it was here, too, that he reconsidered and retold the timeless epic tales of moral conflict that are the tragic myths of *Medea* and *Orestes*.

The language of California has assumed many inflections. Landscape painter William Keith and writer John Muir chose poetry and romance to suggest the spirit of the divinity in a distinct realm of nature. The painting fraternity known as the Society of Six, on the other hand, used an exultant voice, celebrating in their art the pure pleasure of living and painting in the glorious coastal landscape from Marin County to Monterey. "Joyism" was the term one critic invented to describe their particular mode of expression. In the 1930s, the language of the California landscape artist became human-centered, often dark, and characteristically political, despairing of the social and psychological turmoil brought on by the Great Depression. Poet and painter Maynard Dixon spoke for a generation when he said, "The depression woke me up to the fact that I had a part in this as an artist" and embarked on a series of highly charged paintings depicting the homelessness of the unemployed who gathered along San Francisco's waterfront, the leagues of homeless men on California's roadways, and the events of the San Francisco General Strike of 1934.[4] At this same time, others adopted a pictorial language that was analytical, highly formal, and abstract, creating images of California that celebrated the act of artistic invention -- the linear rhythms found in the modern city, as sketched by Lyonel Feininger, for instance, and in the dynamic patterns of land and sea, as drawn by Hans Hofmann. Yet, it is a significant truth that through this century, the heroic voice -- that which invokes the language and ideals of the past and is perhaps best represented by Jeffers and Steinbeck and the art and utopian writings of Arthur Mathews -- has proven an enduring and powerful expression of this place.

**THE NARRATIVE ART OF DAVID LIGARE**

For nearly all his adult life, David Ligare has lived and painted in one magical part of California -- in Monterey County, in the fabled realms of Jeffers's Big Sur and Steinbeck's "Pastures of Heaven." Here are landscapes of unsurpassed beauty and sublimity -- landscapes that are still animated by the spirits of the heroic and tragic figures that these two master storytellers created in these locales. It seems, therefore, inevitable that this painter, and any painter at home here, would receive strong impulses from the rich narrative tradition that emanates from this region.

Essential elements of the Pacific Coast landscape have always been a part of Ligare's pictorial language, from his earliest brilliantly light-filled views of Monterey and Big Sur painted in the mid 1960s in watercolor in the open air, to his monumental transcriptions in graphite of his own cryptic drawings in wet sand, created in the 1970s. Even his first simple studies of drapery -- still lifes, basically -- made at Big Sur in the mid 1970s are grounded in place, set against a backdrop...
of the vast Pacific. The persistence of the shoreline in these and subsequent paintings suggests both the intensity of the landscape experience at Big Sur and the potency of the idea of the continent's edge. In this context, the allegorical paintings that follow from such highly formal studies as these represent not a radical conceptual shift at all, but rather the artist's evolving sense of "how to speak from where he was in the world."[15]

The heights of Big Sur and Ligare's current home in "The Pastures of Heaven" above Salinas seem to have afforded the painter a broad view of the world that encompasses contemporary life. His allegories make reference not just to a place but to the needs of our own time. Arthur Mathews's friend Alexander McAdie believed that those who lived among Northern California's hills were not at all removed from reality but were, in fact, endowed by nature with a unique, revealing perspective on their fellow humans. He wrote in 1912 in words that might describe Ligare's insight: "Seen from a higher vantage ground, fling they [fellow citizens] not back the genial warmth of their humanity, the sunlight of their truer selves?"[16] Arcadia, after all, may have represented the quiet, rustic life, but it also afforded ample opportunity to contemplate one's humanity and mortality, a theme that runs strong in Ligare's paintings. Ligare's life and art are shaped by a strong sense of moral purpose. He divides his time between painting and working as an advocate for the homeless. He measures human interchange by the standard of Ovid's Baucis and Philemon, the subject of a 1984 painting, a summary statement of Ligare's art and ideal. This poor couple, dedicated to each other and generous to all, selflessly offered hospitality to beggars who were, in reality, Jupiter and Mercury; for their kindness, they were rewarded with the blessing of dying together in a loving embrace, transformed into two intertwined trees.

Ligare appropriates the Monterey County landscape as the setting for his modern retelling of classical epics and idylls as a matter of convenience, to be sure. The very look of the place -- its high and dark hills, the cultivated fields, the brilliant, undiffused Pacific Coast light, characteristically even and form-revealing -- is Mediterranean, suggesting an Arcadian view by Poussin. It is a noble landscape easily enlisted to evoke ancient Greece or the Roman campagna. It lends another level of authenticity to Ligare's highly informed classicism. But Ligare's landscapes typically remain, however subtly, distinctly California. The integration of his subjects with the particular landscape of the region in fact serves to amplify their meaning and brings his allegories into a familiar and modern realm. *In Praise of Italy*, for example, was painted in Ligare's studio and inspired by the cliffs known as The Pinnacles and the cultivated fields of the Salinas valley - - a fitting point of departure for pictorialization of the celebration of agriculture in Virgil's *The Georgics*, the literary source for this painting. A more poignant representation of place is Ligare's classical *Landscape with a Man Drinking from a Spring*, of 1987, derived, in fact, from Steinbeck's *The Red Pony*. Here are Steinbeck's unforgettable symbols of life and death on the Titlin family's Salinas ranch: the natural spring, which, in Steinbeck's setting; continually poured its cool gift into a messy wooden tub; and the California cypress tree beneath which Carl Tiflin slaughtered his pigs, here a reminder of mortality in Ligare's Arcadia.

What began in Ligare's art as a celebration of nature and the out of doors evolved into an examination of life through landscape. Nature in Ligare's landscape paintings reveals universal truths about humanity in a language that is clear, time honored, and accessible. But Ligare's absorption in landscape suggests an involvement with nature that is as well deeply private. He hints at the mystical side of this rational man -- a side revealed most poignantly in his nature-based still lifes. Ligare has moved easily between grandiloquent allegorical landscapes and intimate still lifes, and, indeed, the two aspects of his work seem more similar than different. With few exceptions -- most notably the inward-looking *Still Life with Skull and Polaroid*, of 1983 -- Ligare's still lifes are animated by their association with landscape. Many are set at the continent's edge, bathed by a brilliant, even harsh, western light, and one is forced to consider the meaning of these arrangements between the backdrop of the mysterious ocean and the bracketing shadow. The compositional format of these still lifes suggests a mystic's shrine or altar and the objects within, talismans. *Still Life with Rock and Wing*, of 1988, is a touching example. To be sure, it derives from Ligare's fascination with the Icarus theme and was conceived as a tribute to his late father. But by its association with the continent's edge it seems also to honor the heroic aspect of a distinctly California nature. It calls to mind Jeffer's unforgettable "Rock and Hawk, a poem which the artist long ago committed to memory and can still recite with passion.

> Here is a symbol in which
> Many high tragic thoughts
> Watch their own eyes.

> This gray rock, standing tall
> On the headland, where
> the seawind
> Lets no tree grow,
> Earthquake-proved, and
> signatured.
> By ages of storms; on its peak

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A falcon has perched.

I think, here is your emblem
To hang in the future sky;
Not the cross, not the hive,

But this; bright power,
dark peace;
Fierce consciousness joined
with final
Disinterestedness;

Life with calm death;
the falcons
Realist eyes and act
Married to the massive

Mysticism of stone,
Which failure cannot
cast down
Nor success make proud.

--ROBINSON JEFFERS

Ligare does not simply paint California. To say so would be to deny the breadth of his experience and to miss the full range of ideas in his art. He is a student of Polykleitos and Poussin. His landscapes and still lifes are studies in geometric organization and integration and of light, the vehicle for unifying the disparate components and revealing essential meaning. His elements are beautifully rendered and true to nature. His paintings are, of course, first and foremost an expression of the artist's fundamental concern with structure, surface, and content. It seems fair to say, however, that Ligare speaks as a Californian. He uses a heroic voice that has a long tradition in California art. His pictorial connections to California may seem elusive, but only because they elevate the local landscape to a higher level of discourse -- to considerations of man's place in the world. Ligare's work has the power to transcend region, and that, in the end, is what makes his paintings such a profound tribute to his unique time and place.

FOOTNOTES


2. By the turn of the 20th century, artists and critics commonly referred to pictorial expressions of California in terms of a distinct language. A detailed review of the evolution of the pictorial language of California in the decades from 1890 to 1930 is offered by Nancy Boas and Marc Simpson in their pioneering study, "Pastoral Visions at Continent's End: Painting of the Bay Area 1890-1930," in Facing Eden: 100 Years of Landscape Art in the Bay Area, exh. cat. (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press for The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1995). I am especially grateful to these authors for sharing their insights with me and for introducing me to the defining critical works from this period. My understanding of the characteristic modes of expression in these years of experimentation, as artists looked to find the defining language of California, is derived in large measure from the paintings that Boas and Simpson included in their portion of the groundbreaking exhibition, Facing Eden, held at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco in 1995.


8. Ibid.


10. Ibid., 20.


15. Robert Hass, Rock and Hawk, xxxi.

Editor's note: readers may also enjoy:

Endorphin Productions is a video news magazine based on the Monterey Peninsula in California. In a video, artist David Ligare speaks about his exhibit, "Viewpoint: The Pastures of Heaven," held at the Steinbeck Center in Salinas, California. In this 2-part video Ligare explains how his works are inspired by Steinbeck's books. [part 1: 3 minutes, 26 seconds; part 2: 3 minutes, 22 seconds]

For further biographical information on selected artists cited above please see America's Distinguished Artists, a national registry of historic artists.

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