At Arm's Length

by Cherith Lundin

The title of Tim Lowly's exhibition speaks of both proximity and distance. An arm's length grants a particular perspective – to keep at arm's length is to sustain a degree of separation, yet an arm's length is also just within reach.

***River*, by far the largest piece in this exhibition, places us as viewer hovering over the middle of a river surrounded on both sides by sticks, stones, browned prairie grass, and an indication of previous human presence. At the foot of the painting we look straight down into the shallow, stagnant water. As our eye traces the river up around a bend, the space of the painting opens up and tilts back into the near distance as the river seemingly tapers off into a stream.**

The painting consists of four separate panels, whose seams remind of the coordinates of a map or the crosshairs of a scope. This reference to mapping, as well as the startling specificity with which blades of grass are painted, add an intensity to the mundane nature of the subject matter – an undistinguished and not particularly noteworthy slice of landscape. The horizon and any immediate sense of the river's origin or destination have been cropped from view, keeping our gaze confined within the limits of what immediately engulfs us. We are neither traveling along this river nor rooted on its banks: we seem to be floating above it. The size of the painting and the weightlessness of this view give our eyes freedom to roam and inhabit the various smaller compositions within the painting. Yet within the buoyancy of this point of view we are also aware of our lack of control – our inability to extend our gaze beyond the limits of the painting or to come close enough to touch the water. Only a small reflection on the surface of the water tells of the spacious blue sky above.

Lowly's approach to painting is spiritual and contemplative: in these landscapes space becomes a form of meditation. Through dramatic shifts in scale and perspective, through juxtapositions of speed and slowness, and through an awareness of the body's relationship to the painted image, the work speaks of the mystery of sight and desire. Through seeing we understand and enlarge the world, while at the same time, seeing has the effect of putting distance between the self and what we are looking at. Despite primarily depicting exterior landscapes, the paintings in this exhibition have a strong sense of interiority, privacy, and solitude. The paintings seem as much about looking, as they are about landscape and space – about contemplating the distance between.

Lowly has made his family and those close to him the subject of much of his painting over the years, focusing specifically on his daughter Temma, who is severely mentally and physically disabled. These profoundly unsentimental paintings question notions of the beautiful and the ugly, and what it means to be human, normal, or whole. In the landscapes on view here, the focus shifts somewhat – from the subject to the self, from an awareness *of* the other to our relationship *to* the other.

The landscapes by the 19th century German painter Caspar David Friedrich provide an interesting point of comparison to Lowly's paintings, as both artists pursue a meditative engagement with the world around them by blending realism with a sense of mystery. In Friedrich's paintings we find wild, open vistas often mediated through a single, standing figure. The identity of this figure is less important than its role in allowing the viewer to contemplate nature's sublime grandeur, the real focus of the painting. In Lowly's paintings, the figure, and even more so, the loved-one, carries inordinate weight. His paintings depict a landscape charged with personal history.

In the small black and white painting *Mom/Mountain* the artist's mother isbarely visible within the vastness of space. It is the tiny figure of Lowly's mother that gives the wooded landscape significance, just the spaciousness of the landscape describes the isolation of her figure. The painting's pair, *Dad/Bed*, furthers an emotional reading of the landscape, as we are brought dramatically close to the foot of Lowly's dying father's hospital bed. Darkness implodes the space as undulating sheets suggest a new terrain to be traveled. In *Leaving*, the eye looks backward in time rather than forward, as we gaze out through the barrier of the window of a bus. The lack of focus and absence of human presence force our awareness inward to describe the landscape of memory.

The paintings on view in this exhibition offer a meditation on love and longing, on absence, distance, and mortality. They speak of the beauty and limitations of the human body to touch and to see, to separate and connect us to the world and those around us. Taken together, *Untitled (Rainbow)* and *Untitled (Wiper)* speak eloquently of the tenuous hold of hope and longing. In the first painting, the spectacular phenomenon of a rainbow appearing in a gray landscape is subdued through lack of color. In the second, we look out through the windshield of a moving car onto a rainy, desolate road. The rhythmic motion of the wiper washes the rain (tears) away, completing the muted hopefulness of the rainbow's arc and bringing clarity. As in all of his work, Lowly insists that hope must spring from the present, from the stuff of earth around us.

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