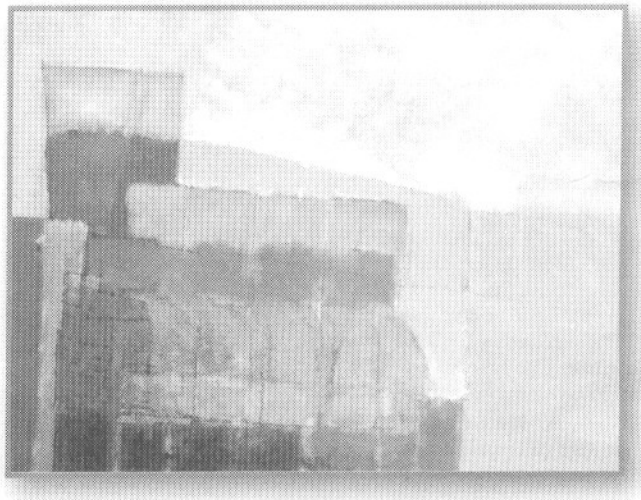
Contemporary Landscapes

BY SARAH MEAD



Above: Peter Alberice "Piazza-del-Campo-II"

Left: Kathleen Burke "Westmoreland County December"

In the post-renaissance period the landscape painting genre has morphed into a broad field of concentrations. Four artists, presently showing at Bella Vista Art Gallery, speak to the broad new field of landscape art in the 21st century.

Painters who moved their studio out into the landscape itself and became known as plein-air painters formed one of the first major branches of post-renaissance landscape painting. Bethanne Cople and Sarah Linda Poly are two modern plein-air painters.

Bethanne Cople has traveled extensively, to the west coast to capture the wind, and fury of the rugged California Coast, and to the islands and bays of the East coast to breath in and share the calm summer sanctuary of the Assateague Island ponies. She has taken her easel into blizzards in the Wasatch Mountains in Utah, and onto steep cliffs in Monhegan Island, Maine. Her paintings capture not only what she sees with her eyes, but also the heaviness of the humidity in the air, and the lightness of the breeze as it whistles through the trees.

In Bethanne's scenery the water is often an impressionistic reflection of the verdant land and sultry skies above. The water calms and centers her scenes echoing the harmonious themes of the classic renaissance landscape artists.

Sarah Linda Poly centers her images on the salmon colored clouds of sunset and the rich blue and gray skies that hang over her pulsing green landscapes of hills, valleys, and farmland. The rolling hills of the east coast gently support the splendid skies above them in scenes that draw you across the room.

In one of Sarah's pieces, 'Mountain Glory', you can feel the distance in the sky as it skims just above the horizon and picks up the haze off the Appalachian Mountains to give the air a thickness that only great distances can give it. In another piece, 'Clouds and Long Shadows', you can almost feel your soul being lifted like the clouds sweeping up across the sky and casting rich dark green shadows on golden fields.

Kathleen Burke's encaustic landscapes marry the ancient technique of Beeswax based paint with the second major branch of landscape painters, the impressionists. Her pieces are both representational and abstract. She points out "The wax can be scraped smooth and burnished to the sheen of highly polished marble, pulled roughly in broken layers to resemble fresco, or built up quickly into the thickest sculptural impasto." It is the surprisingly fresh result of an ancient technique combined with a post-renaissance genre like impressionism that makes here pieces such noteworthy and truly modern pieces.

Sarah Linda Poly "Clouds and Long Shadows"

Sometimes Kathleen's paintings are deceptively serene but she notes that they are rooted in psychological and existential questions that she sees in the "complex relationships between individuals and between humanity and nature".

One of Kathleen's large horizontal pieces, which is titled "Wait", depicts a winter field with heavy winter skies. Everything is dormant and quiet, waiting for spring and warmer days to come. Her delightful pixie-like spring colored piece titled "Light and Shadows" depicts the warm sun poking through the trees and tossing shadows across the forest floor.

Up close Kathleen's pieces are layers and texture, but when you step away the detail in the landscape emerges. While the plein-air painters are very loose and quick, the encaustic paintings require a slow patient buildup of layers to achieve their results.

Urban Landscape painting solidified into a separate genre first in the Netherlands, then Venice became a center for urban landscape painting in the mid 18th century. Architectural landscapes are a sub-set of urban landscape that centers itself on man-made edifices.

Peter Alberice's architectural landscapes rests their foundation on the great Swiss architect Mario Botta's statement that architecture begins not with a stone being placed on a stone but a stone being placed in the land. Peter suffuses his images with the rich colors of the earth that caught his eye in Italy. His palate is rich in yellow, ochre and smoky olive-green colors of the Tuscany landscape, as well as the light creamy hues of ancient, degenerating buildings that reveal their many layers of multi-colored plaster.

Though Peter begins the journey that leads to each of his images in the vertical and horizontal spaces of modern architecture he layers onto each structure a milieu of ancient

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agrarian earth-tones that softens and smoothes the structures into almost organic constructs. Many of his paintings originate from plan, section or elevation sketches, but as layers of paint are built up onto the original sketches they become abstract and organic. Ultimately Peter creates paintings that wed the rich natural earth, upon which they rest, with the man-made buildings, which originally inspire his paintings.

The wide range and allure of contemporary landscape painting including plen-air painting using traditional oils, impressionistic landscapes using encaustic, to abstract architectural landscapes are on display at Bella Vista Art Gallery in Biltmore Village.