

B A R B A R A E R N S T P R E Y



LIGHTSCAPES

Instant Apotheoses: *The Lightscapes of Barbara Ernst Prey*

Light is the soul and medium of art.--John Constable

Fortunate readers encounter books that even as they present "conclusions" have the encouraging ability to spur further thoughts leading to independent epiphanies. In a similarly paradoxical way, the unquestionably "finished", indubitably major paintings of Barbara Ernst Prey never exhaust the pictorial possibilities of the landscape. They prompt the active eye to learn more not only about light, but how it can be painted. An ideal point of entry is a comparison of *Reunion* and *Renion at Dusk*. These companion pieces, based on an almost identical view of an engagingly real house overlooking a Maine cove, bookend the breathtaking fullness of Prey's abilities. "I've been going by the house for three years knowing I'd paint it," recalls Prey. "I realized that these had to be larger paintings than I was accustomed to doing—in fact, they demanded a monumental scale. My only regret is that the sheet of paper is limited in size." Delivered in a clear-eyed, traditional style, the works are deceptively conservative in their subject matter and accessibility. It only seems that one could penetrate to the heart of them in an instant. In one, the morning light charges the cove with an intense lapis lazuli and warms the pure white clapboard façade. At dusk the scene dramatically alters, and we scarcely notice that the artist has taken two steps back (evident from the slightly expanded rendering of the laundry line at the back of the house). Instead of the ambient light of dawn (the medium) we have an inner glow (the soul) its drama heightened, humanized all the more by the careful placement of two darkened windows. The Tiepolo tones of gold and cerulean blue in the sky heighten the metaphysical quality of the experience.

On this scale, at this extraordinarily lofty technical level, the significance of the achievement gradually dawns. With thirty years' experience in a career filled with internationally significant honors, commissions and exhibitions, Prey as a virtuoso recognizes the need to dynamically challenge herself. "I'm

pushing several elements in my paintings, particularly scale, color, and the very ideas of the work. The images of the mind that I carry with me, some of them from earlier paintings, are calling for a new degree of articulation." The daring exploration of pantonality, from warm to cool, in *Spectrum* attests to her sheer fearlessness when it comes to color, a psychological if not technical barrier for many painters.

Watercolor landscapes are generically considered in terms of swiftly rendered, on-the-spot studies. By contrast, Prey's new works are immense, lovingly rendered, long meditations that test her limits in densely worked, all-over compositions alive from edge-to-edge with technical problems posed and powerfully solved. Ironically enough, they are dedicated to an instant—dawn or dusk, those highpoints of raking light—when nature's poetry is at its height. In fact these are eminently studio paintings, completed in silent sessions of surgically precise technique in the top-floor aerie of a gorgeous Victorian house where Prey lives. They follow in the 19th century tradition, more often associated with the oil medium, of Constable or the Hudson River School, according to which on-site drawings are transformed in the studio into large-scale composites. As the great colorist and teacher Hans Hofmann once declared, "I bring the landscape home with me."

Ambition of this kind must be backed by talent and technique, and artists, accustomed to judging one another in terms of the head (knowledge) and hand (technical skill), would find Prey awesomely qualified when it comes to both. Prey's deep reservoir of practical knowledge can be traced back to her childhood in Manhasset, a suburb of Manhattan, where she had the run of her mother's painting studio and was ardently supported in her early studio classes as a child prodigy. Just as many accomplished novelists cut their teeth on journalism, she had a stint as a professional illustrator, and was only 22 when her work was published in *The New Yorker*. That accounts for the formidable dexterity of her hand, what dancers might call *plastique*, that serves her so well. As for head and heart, she was blessed with a

profoundly well-rounded education in art history at Williams College, studying under Professor Lane Faison, an early admirer in print of her paintings, among other luminaries of academia. From Durer and Van Eyck to the specialized study of the southern Baroque, she mastered the art of looking and analysis, adding immeasurably to her strengths as a technician. "The art history has given me an informed way of looking," she says. Where does it show in her work? Most obviously in her sure sense of composition, but in the intricate handling of details through brushwork techniques and ideas borrowed from Old Masters, Chinese calligraphers (Prey trained for a year under a Beijing master), and such American heroes of watercolor as Winslow Homer and Edward Hopper. It is no surprise to find monographs devoted to their work on her living room coffee table.

All art at the highest level is in some way anachronistic, either because it belongs to the studio practice of another age or because it opens a window on the future, editing out the aesthetically vapid dross of the present, using an astonishingly direct medium to create an intensified, exclusive condensation of perception on the page that will shape the experience in nature. There is very little of the recognizable present in these timeless works. Laundry dries on a line, the light in a house might as well be from candles or gas jets rather than the cool flickering of an electronic screen. The final paintings for the exhibition were being completed just as news came from a Harvard physics laboratory that a beam of light was slowed to a halt in a chamber of super-cooled gas. The analogy is irresistible. Light captured in a medium -- if not unthinkable, then physically impossible yet, in just that way that we ask art or philosophy to lend reality to the completely fictive, it actually happened. Prey also arrests light, making a moment permanent in a medium that is rarefied, and given density, in a master's hands. The artist reveals the calculation that precedes the painting: " I use the buildings as the substances and structures, but it's more about the light. I know before I start how it will look before I touch the paper."

Prey's paintings demand to be read, slowly examined, savored for their intricacies. In one, *White Clapboard II*, a house unfolds via additions in a continuous band of white from edge to edge under a sky of blue and above a remarkably fluid rendering of a dry stone wall that courses like a stream across the sheet. One exquisite detail offers a rake leaning against a wall by a barn door, its shadow creating a geometric interlude. The feminine answer to this motif is a carousel of pure white sheets dancing in the breeze on the line clear across the painting, one of the visual autographs to which Prey's admirers can relate. Another rhymed couplet is offered by two white Adirondack chairs, subtly separated rather than paired in a tight cliché-- you have to look for the answer. The star turn is played by the twisted, tentacle-like branches of the tree and its doubled shadow, arrestingly rendered in a wild rhythm of sure strokes and fabulous draughtsmanship. It is reminiscent of a marvelously meditative opening to Robert Browning's "By the Fire-Side, in which the attention of a figure reading Greek prose in late autumn is captured by the bare twigs of the hazels outside his window. "Such a branch-work forth as soon extends/To a vista opening far and wide, And I pass out where it ends."

Yesterdays go suddenly in the unpretentious classicism of these works. As Pliny once said of Apelles, his genius was in part knowing when to put the brush down. Prey offers a sidelong view of the front door of a captain's house in Maine, subtly focusing on the conch brought back from a Pacific trip at the top of three weathered stairs. A luxuriantly towering rosebush on one side of the red door loosens up the geometric dominance of pure white bands of clapboard underscored by a subtlety purpled shadow. The compressed space of the foreground underscores its intimacy, a technical feat Prey learned from the Renaissance masters. The deft touch taking us out of the picture to our right, by the artist's admission the last stroke on the picture, is a swooping streak of white for the clothesline that drifts above the long grass before a dense wood. Closely observed, it has the milky transparency of one of those thin staffs of rock crystal that van Eyck placed in angel's hands through which the brocade of a madonna is subtly diffused. In an earlier version of the painting, she hangs a blue and

white quilt on the line. Here, however, it is the line itself, unadorned and gracefully arched, that leads us onward to a scene around the next bend in a country road where we are bound to remember this exhibition and its delights, with gratitude.

--Charles A. Riley II, Ph.D.
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