

THE LANDSCAPES OF LYNN BOGCESS

An essay to accompany the catalogue for the exhibition
“New Works by Lynn Boggess” which opened on September 3, 2003
In the James David Brooks Memorial Gallery, Wallman Hall
Fairmont State University

by Marian Hollinger

In this exhibition, Boggess presents a selection of his landscape paintings, the subjects of which reflect the diverse nature of West Virginia and its flora. Using chiefly vertical formats, Boggess draws the viewer into the deeply receding spaces of his images. The pictures, devoid of human or animal habitation, focus on Nature, free of the influence of human activity. Boggess compels the viewer to contemplate each scene in turn, and finally the cycle of scenes: the lapse of hours; the alternating character of the rocks, of the trees and of the land; the turn of season. The paintings themselves become the spaces they portray.

In many large and small ways, Boggess’ paintings reflect the entire tradition of landscape painting. When asked what major influences or past movements might have left their imprint, Boggess says that whatever images he might be studying at the time provide the nexus for his own work. Indeed, the viewers will find suggestions of the Romantics, the Luminists, the Impressionists, and the Expressionists. Yet, the artist does not set out to make his works conform to a preconceived style; rather, he melds the tradition and his own experience into a way of seeing and a style in landscape painting which is uniquely his own.

Stylistically reminiscent of European and American landscape painting, Boggess’ work transcends the pitfall of betraying his predecessors and forges, in its place, an art of resolution and contemplation. Nature has been acknowledged in his work and accepted for what it has to offer in the way of healing and beauty. That last concept—beauty—is a loaded word still in an age of art which often gives us truth with all of its flaws and warts, or with the sophistication of irony, but which is all-too-often uncomfortable with the idea that beauty is definable, desirable, or even necessary. Boggess’ work cuts through such specious queries to a plainer truth: that beauty simply is ~ an unavoidable, irrefutable *fact* of the natural world. In their unheeding presentation of this fact, Boggess’ paintings offer solace and respite, even to the most casual of viewers, just as do the original locations in Nature which were his subjects.

In the best *plein-air* tradition, Boggess has constructed several portable shelters for his outdoor painting. He has, for some time, eschewed the use of brush in favour of the trowel. The cement trowel, even more than the first use of the artist’s palette knife, which gave the Post-Impressionists of the late nineteenth-century a vehicle for piling on pigment, presents a challenge to the painter because, with an undisciplined flick of the wrist, the artist could cut into or rip the surface of his canvas, destroying several days’ work.

Boggess has said that the technique presented a very tricky problem, until he was able to master the exact angle of the wrist-to-trowel-to-canvas necessary to create a single leaf, a tree branch, or a patch of water. He uses primary colours, mixing them on his palette as he paints. This is Boggess' way of controlling the colour, rather than using premixed tubes of pigment, as some artists do. In numerous respects, his colorist technique is a reflection of the master painters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as his *plein-air* work is a reflection of the Impressionists' direct approach to Nature and, like the Impressionists, he paints what he sees. Taking to the open in, quite literally, all kinds of weather, Boggess paints his subject as he stands in its midst. If the snow seems to fly across the picture plane, it is because Boggess stood there, working against time and the elements. When viewers say to him, "I feel as if I am really *in* the picture," it is surely because Boggess was there, *right there*, when he painted it.

The large scale of many of his paintings, 80" x 68", may help to explain, in part, the sense the viewer has of entering the scene. The picture seems, in ways other painters have not been able to achieve, to give the viewer a real door into Nature. In Boggess' work, his focus is upon the elements of nature, concentrated within the small section he has chosen to show. Although there is the certain understanding that the actual landscape is much more extensive than we can see in a single picture, there is no heroic expanse, no inhabited scene to tell us what occupation is carried out within it, nor is there a sense of sentimentality or nostalgia in the picture's presentation. Unlike Romantic landscapes which show the magnificence of Nature pitted against the smallness of human endeavour, or the ravages of humanity upon that natural world, Boggess' works focus our attention exclusively upon the trees, the light filtering through them, or the reflections of the sky and its light upon the water. These are pictures for refreshment of our eyes, of our psyche. They are small stopping places along the way.

For him, and for his viewers, Nature in its pure state has the capacity to heal, and that is where Boggess brings his attention and, with it, ours. The artist often chooses not to paint precisely what he sees within the scene; rather, he eliminates all of the human detritus. He leaves out the barbed wire and the old tires washed on the streams' banks. Boggess gives us meditative bits of landscape without assuming any tone of preaching to his viewing public, and without heightening or saddening it, either. For him, Nature is an embodiment of beauty, of what we now have and must protect.

The landscapes of Lynn Boggess give us a year-round walk in the woods. They provide us with a series of meditations on beauty; they give us an opportunity to consider the importance of Nature to our own experience. They also contain, in small and subtle ways, much of the history of their art. Because Boggess has chosen to paint Nature directly, and because he sees it as beautiful and endangered, he pulls us into his is fierce political vision. Because that vision is so disciplined that the artist presents it for us, *without commentary*, we may choose for ourselves which memory to recall, which path to take.