

Land escapes - The outdoor paintings of husband and wife artists Peter Schroth and Josette Urso record their travels and serve as a bridge to landscapists of the past.

By Lennie Bennett, Times Staff Writer
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TARPON SPRINGS - You think: How fortunate these two people are to have found each other.

Artists Peter Schroth and Josette Urso, husband and wife, share space in the exhibition "One View/Two Visions" at the Leepa-Rattner Museum of Art that continues through March 6. In their home base of New York, they work in separate studios on their more composed works. At least once a year, though, they pack up and together roam the world painting en plein air, meaning out of doors, spontaneously. The work of each artist can stand on its own - and has, in one-person shows - but this joint venture becomes more than the sum of its parts, offering insights into the art of landscape painting, the couple's dual responses to it and the joy of a creative partnership.

Landscape is an old genre that has had its ups and downs in the history of western art, modulating between serious and merely decorative.

For most of the 20th century, landscapes were a visual commentary on nature and urbanism. Until a few decades ago, landscape painting (along with painting in general, but that's another story) was declared passe by much of the art world, replaced by a movement called Land Art, in which artists use natural materials in constructions that tend toward the monumental. A famous example is Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty, finished in 1970, a huge curve of rocks on the shore of the Great Salt Lake that for years was submerged by rising water. Christo and Jeanne-Claude's massive fabric installations such as The Gates in Central Park are spinoffs of that aesthetic.

Now that paint seems once more a noble material for artists, we're seeing more respect for its applications in genres such as landscapes and an interest from artists in reinvigorating landscape conventions.

Which brings me back to Urso and Schroth. As different as they are stylistically, both thematically seem to follow the Wordsworthian, in-communion-with-nature line. No editorializing here, just a sense that they are enjoying the heck out of working side by side, outside.

The exhibition is divided into five locales - Ireland (the largest group), Spain, Connecticut, Maine and Arizona - spanning about a decade, beginning with Spain in 1995. A brief video of the couple working in Ireland clues you in to some of plein air painting's challenges. Ireland is cold and windy, and the couple work behind a wall at one point so they and their materials won't be blown away. Oil, the preferred paint for both, dries slowly, and they usually - Urso, anyway - paint on pieces of wood, so transporting finished works without smearing them means a cumbersome carrying case.

You can see over the years how Urso and Schroth play off each other, tentatively at first. Along the way, Urso's quick, intuitive approach is moderated by Schroth's more formal one; he, in turn, begins to loosen up, become less literal. In their art, you can almost hear the words flying between them after a day's work.

For that's what this exhibition is, a dialogue with nature and each other. With Urso, you get essences rather than details. With Schroth you get some sense of documentation but in service to a personal response rather than representation. Both, in their best landscapes, convey an immediacy, an attempt to arrest the found, fleeting moment.

Two small Urso watercolors from 1996 open the exhibition. They are a surprise, anomalous interiors painted in rich, Moorish colors juxtaposed against black backgrounds and Matisse-like patterns. Schroth's nearby landscapes are stalwart renderings of cliffs and rocky promontories.

Paintings from a trip to Arizona several years later show their real stuff. Urso's cacti and mesquite-littered deserts are painted in vibrant oils. The plants stand at prickly attention or march up a hill in parade colors of orange and yellow or deep green-black, surrounded by sunrise or sunset tones of lavender, cream and pink. Schroth uses deeper colors; a rich purple or soft red suggests a swath of vegetation amid aridity. Near Duquesne, a watercolor, has the aged patina of a 16th century drawing, a lovely rendering of countryside seen from a bird's-eye view.

Both artists use perspective to advantage, sometimes putting us eye to eye with a closeup, other times giving us the long view of a sweeping vista. They also play with scale; some of the broadest views are in the smallest formats.

Most of Urso's Ireland paintings, completed from 2000 to 2002, measure about 5 by 7 inches, arranged in groupings that reflect the variations of the verdant green countryside, the browns and grays of the rugged coast and the deep blue of the Irish Sea, either as a turbulent force or quiet tide pools. Sometimes, as in Low Green Fields, her colors are modulated and blended, the brush strokes feathered on with misty finesse. We see the field at ground level as it opens up beyond. In Achille Summit, one of the most interesting works in the series, a broad hill is encrusted with thick lines of paint that crisscross like boundary delineations. All are done as ideas of the land with specific locators refined to abstractions.

Schroth's representational portraits of the Irish countryside provide more context and, unlike Urso, he sometimes populates his work with signs of human habitation (though never with people). Farm and Sea is a beautifully arranged set of horizontal color bands of land, sea and sky. The earth, a loamy blend of greens, yellows and browns, is bisected by a ribbon of blue, far less complexly painted. A skirmish of paler, crosshatched colors borrowed from the earth and sea make up the cloudy sky. Near the middle of the panel, low-lying buildings sit solidly, hemmed in by the brimming water beyond and a deep green shadow looming in the foreground. But the work does not move us emotionally; it's about scale and balance rather than evocation.

Both painters invest more emotion in works done in Maine from 2002 to 2003. Schroth abandons his detached distance in larger works such as *Blue Water, Sand I and II*. In *Water and Darkness* and *Red Rock*, he looks through the water's surface to mysterious depths or examines the rocks strewn across a beach. He gives us little reference to scale in these paintings; we could be looking at pebbles or boulders. They're tightly composed but with much more expressive form. Urso's attention to minutiae approaches obsessive in her little Maine paintings. *Dense Interior* is a jumble of forest made up of interlocking circles and grids. It's frenetic and alive, as if a time-lapse photo was done recording in one frame the subtle movement of the plants over a month. *Star Sea* is almost representational and has a dose of the mystical; the starfish punctuating the cerulean water twinkle like stars in the sky.

Urso's most pastoral work is inspired by Connecticut, where she is almost giddy with the sweet loveliness of conventional gardens and tamer forests. Sunlight dapples pastel washings of paint meant to signify flowers or feathery ferns; Schroth's take on this arcadia is darker, leafier.

References to past landscape painters abound in their work. You see in both flashes of Turner's and Whistler's abstract bursts of light and the impressionist whispers of clouds and flutters of grass, even hints of cubism, or at least Cezanne's studied geometry. But they are of their time. Urso's unframed, postcard-sized paintings on blocks of wood are arranged like wall tiles, a little ironic comment on the nondecorative nature of them. Interspersed with Schroth's generally larger, framed works, the installation becomes somewhat conceptual: Urso's staccato dashes slowed by Schroth's adagios. They're essentially self-referential, a personal, visual travel journal, a diary to which we are given access.

- Lennie Bennett can be reached at 727 893-8293 or lennie@sptimes.com

REVIEW

"One View/Two Visions: Plein Air Paintings by Josette Urso and Peter Schroth" is at the Leepa-Rattner Museum of Art, 600 Klosterman Road, Tarpon Springs campus of St. Petersburg College, through March 6. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday. Extended hours to 9 p.m. on Thursday. Admission is \$5 adults, \$4 seniors, free children and students. Free on Sunday. (727) 712-5762.

Peter Schroth, *Garden Path*, oil on paper, 13 1/2 x 9 1/2 inches, 1999.

Peter Schroth, *Farm and Sea*, oil on paper mounted to panel, 11 x 11 inches, 2002.

Josette Urso, *Dense Interior*, oil on panel, 10 x 14 inches, 2004.