

One View/Two Visions: Josette Urso and Peter Schroth

Leepa-Rattner Museum of Art, Tarpon Springs, FL

January 16 - March 6, 2005

Catalog essay by Melissa Kuntz

The paintings of Peter Schroth and Josette Urso share similarities in process and subject matter; comparisons abound. But it is the subtle differences in sensibilities and the artist's unique responses to the landscape that results in a fascinating, intimate dialogue unfolding between the works presented in this mini-retrospective.

For nearly ten years, both artists have been intensely exploring the practice of painting en plein air. The works by Schroth and Urso both have a freshness and authenticity that can only be produced "in the moment" as the artists experience a site and respond in paint with an unrehearsed immediacy. The artists often share subject matter—Connecticut, Ireland, Maine, Arizona or Spain—as they embark together on chance travel opportunities—sometimes through residencies—to often-unfamiliar places and attempt to understand the location through paint. Schroth and Urso complete each of their paintings—most often small scale—in a single sitting, with a range of results from the literal to the abstract.

The influences of artists who have worked in a similar vein can often be seen in Schroth's and Urso's paintings. In Urso's small oil-on-panel paintings, for example *Sea Star*, 2003, the artist makes reference to the perceptual color and quick, arbitrary brushstroke of many Impressionist painters. The earthy greens and ochres of John Constable's palette appear frequently in both artists' paintings. Nature, seen and abstracted, is a familiar trope, and the influence of William Turner's landscapes can be seen in work such as Schroth's *Soft Interior* from 2002. Contemporary artists working with similar subject matter, often painting en plein air—Robert Berlind, Rackstraw Downes—have clearly influenced Schroth and Urso. The lush, sensuous paint handling of artists in love with their medium brings to mind landscapes by Fairfield Porter. Yet, neither Schroth nor Urso's paintings slide into the realm of the all-too-familiar; both artists have eked out a space for themselves using subject matter and a medium in which originality is hard-won.

Schroth's paintings, more descriptive than Urso's, examine the landscape from two distinct vantage points: as a sublime vista or a miniscule detail. When the paintings are seen in sequence, these constantly shifting viewpoints provide a quasi-scientific portrait of nature. Although of different locations, Schroth's paintings, seen together, become a generalized study of the elements of nature—foliage, rocks, water, sky. Paintings

like *Farm to Sea* (20TK) and *Patagonia Hills* (1999) are renderings of a grand, wide-angle view of the land. Works such as *Green Water I* (2003) and *Random Growth II* (2003) move in closely to the subject so that a small patch of leaves or a segment of a pond becomes the subject. What makes these paintings interesting is the scale—both the details and the panoramas are, indiscriminately, on panels or paper ranging from 5 to 28 inches on the widest side. Ironically, details are often painted on a larger scale than the vistas. Furthermore, the paint handling and brushstroke is similar in both types of paintings. This interchangeability between the grand and the intimate reads almost like a conceptual project in which the idea of the landscape as subject matter overrides any concerns with traditional scale or medium usage; a large grey paint stroke can stand in for a pebble or a mountain, depending on its context.

A modest 12-by-11-inch painting, titled *Overcast* from 2002, is of a grey stone in water; it lacks any indicators of scale. A reading of the object in the painting oscillates between the minute and the grandiose. Is this a careful study of a minuscule pebble in a shallow puddle, or is it a rendering of a mammoth boulder situated along a rocky coast? The insouciant title gives us no clue. Viewed alongside more traditional landscapes, like *Farms From Hill 2* and *Farms From Hill 3*, both a Lilliputian size of 5 by 6 1/2 inches and 6 1/2 by 5 inches respectively, one

begins to question the distance represented in these scenes. In *Farm From Hills 3*, rendered more abstractly than some of Schroth's other paintings, it is not entirely clear whether this is an aerial view of acres of land, or if we are seeing only a small portion of the landscape from a more intimate angle. The constantly shifting viewpoints in these paintings cause us to question some of our expectations, especially of scale and subject matter, with which we approach the genre of landscape painting.

Schroth's first trip outdoors to paint was not until 1995, although he had been working with the subject of landscape for at least five years prior. He had been primarily a studio painter, making works that were highly engineered constructions that directly referenced the history of landscape painting. Schroth's original intention in painting outdoors was to revitalize his approach to the subject; the practice of plein air painting quickly evolved into his primary endeavor. The variety and unpredictability of the outcome, as noted by Schroth, is the impetus for his continued exploration of painting on site.

Urso, limiting most of her painting practice to making on-site works, continues to spend time on in her studio crafting circular collages out of source material she has been collecting for over 20 years. In all the ways that Urso's paintings are

organic, these collages are organized, meticulous and precise. In terms of painting, since the late 1990s, Urso has spent a few weeks each summer painting at a farm located in the Penobscot Bay region of Maine, consequently becoming more connected to the locale. Urso notes that her first residency at the Ballinglen Arts Foundation, in a remote area along the coast of Ireland, changed her life as a painter. Urso notes that she was drawn to the otherworldly qualities of the place. The drama of the weather and the spirit and mood present in such a grand and scenic land inspired her unique approach to landscape painting.

Urso, less of a perceptual painter than Schroth, abstracts what she sees, so that the overall composition becomes a record of the "heartbeat and buzz" of a place. These intuitive expressions provide enough information within them to indicate the subject: rocks, water, and trees. Yet, due to Urso's paint handling and her suggestive use of color and pattern, the paintings are much more like painterly miniature abstractions than records of a particular scene. Despite this, Urso, almost magically, seems to capture enough specifics of the painted scene that they become, not so much literal records, but invocative and intuitive suggestions of the locale.

The immediacy and the variety of Urso's brushmark indicate a painter who is responding, almost manically, to a plethora of sensory information. Dabs of paint, with casual starfish-shaped

lines on top, accompanied by random dabs and dashes of blue and tan become like a coastline in *Star Sea*, 2003. In *Achilles Summit*, 2002, muted yellows, browns and greens cover the entire panel, but for a triangle of 'sky' in the upper right-hand corner. Over the muted tones, tendrils and trails of unsystematic turquoise marks read like a maze of underground tunnels, erratically placed on top of a mountain-like form.

Urso's often pushes the color so that the paintings move from the observed to the imagined. In *View Across the Rain*, a 5 by 7 inch oil-on-panel painting, acidic-green abstracted brush marks imply land and an intense cobalt seems to stand in for the sea. Similarly in *Near Falls*, unnaturally violet water indicates to the viewer that for Urso, color is simply inspired by, not directly copied from, nature.

Urso's interesting use of pattern in the paintings is also motivated by the feeling and energy of a place. In *Starfish and Mussels* from 2003, wavy white lines, two-thirds of the way up the canvas, flatten out that segment of the composition and are repeated into the bluish 'water' above. The movement of the mark becomes a stand-in for the ebb and flow of the tides. In *Fall Pines* and *Tower* (2003 and 2002 respectively, **not in this exhibition**), trees become repeated criss-crossed lines in an all-over composition, and the 'tower' is nothing more than haphazard blue/green rectangles in a random pattern. The ability

to her subject as nothing more than color, line and pattern, while still providing visual clues that indicate the specifics of the scene makes these paintings uncannily 'real.' Seeing many of Urso's paintings together only underscores this reading.

Although Schroth and Urso share medium, scale and process, the results of each artist's practice are inimitable. Each artist endeavors to push the limits of the genre of landscape painting. Seen together, their works, perhaps, ask the viewer to react to the subjects as the artist has—with no preconceptions and in a very visceral and immediate manner. The small-scale of most of the works allows us to interact with the paintings intimately and quickly. The viewer cannot help but be drawn in by the lush paint handling, an index of the artist's energy as they worked. The beauty of the landscape, seen, experienced, imagined and understood through paint is, finally, what makes the work of Schroth and Urso so captivating.

—Melissa Kuntz