The Landscape from the Studio: New Work by João Salema

Speaking of nineteenth century painting in her book *The Vexations of Art*, art historian Svetlana Alpers observes that not only is landscape the real problem for studio painting, but that the painting of landscape puts the very notion of the studio under pressure. She is referring to the tension between painting in the studio and painting outdoors in the landscape. But she is also speaking of a time when the tensions that existed in painting between the representation of space and the space of representation—a tension that extended until the late 1950s—were acutely felt. Today, with the pervasive heterogeneity of artistic idiom and practice, the idea of an interaction between studio and landscape raises a far wider range of generative possibilities.

For João Salema, the fascination with landscape began with a real place—Feital, in the north of Portugal—in the late 1990s, but over time, it has become something far less concrete, more evanescent. Perhaps Alpers’ formulation might be inverted in Salema’s more recent landscape works: arguably, here it is the artist’s activity in the studio—one might even say her life in the studio—that puts the notion of landscape under pressure, evacuating from it any connection with an empirical experience of outdoor spaces. Rather, working in the packed and bustling urban space of New York, she makes sure we read her landscapes as dreamy flights of the imagination, or—more aptly still—meditations.

On smooth, flat surfaces, whether translucent sheets of drafting film, or layered glazes of oil paint on canvas resulting in an intensely blue surface, the artist has made silky sepia brush-marks. These simultaneously maintain alive a sense of drawing, and clearly evoke landscapes. Yet they eschew the clear-cut distinction between form and ground that more literally drawn renditions of landscape entail. The lightness of touch points to Japanese or Chinese brush drawings, with their economy of means and their delicate, atmospheric washes. Like these, Salema’s landscapes appear to expand and contract—to breathe—in a space of contemplative peace and silence. This is in part achieved through a point of view that is high above the horizon line. Although it is big aerial views from—and of—rocks and mountain and tree tops that are conjured in these fluid abstractions, we are in effect immersed in the formless elements of vapour, air, water.

Nurtured by the experience of repetitive and almost mesmerised doodling in pen on small sketchpads, as well as by incantatory auditory experiences in the studio (listening to Bach or to Shakespearean soliloquies on YouTube), these works do not simply address the faculty of sight (that imperious sense that for centuries was so obsessively the focus of Western landscape painting). Rather, they establish a quiet, immersive, almost yogic space, where all the senses are at once attentive and suspended. Serving, for the artist, as a mnemonic device that links the finished works back to the process of their making, the allusion to a recognisable Shakespearean soliloquy—Macbeth’s despairing and nihilistic ‘tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow,’ upon hearing of the death of Lady Macbeth—operates differently upon the viewer. For it not only underlines the bewitching effect of repetition (of words, of sounds, of forms), but also, paradoxically, erases the very temporality—the linear movement of time—to which it alludes. In opposition to the time where there are tomorrows pitted against the yesterdays that have ‘lighted fools the way to dusty death,’ is the immersive time of meditation to which the artist’s activity in the studio is suggestively compared.

Invoking the hours spent in the studio to such a soundtrack, the title of this show also holds in place the sense of process—of unfolding through time—that underpins Salema’s work. The video piece *Moving Still Life* attests to such immersion in process. A group of objects is casually arrayed on a table in an artist’s studio—the kind of miscellaneous objects of use and inspiration that many artists
would recognise from their own studio space. If, as a genre, still life is the construction that shows (and depends upon) portable possessions, it is also, arguably, the most philosophical of genres, the one where painting most thoughtfully contemplates itself. And from Cubism on, still life has served as the paradigm for painting itself: in the arrangement of a still life, objects are placed upon a horizontal surface just as forms are arranged upon the vertical surface of the painting on its easel or wall, the one a kind of blueprint of the other.

A video of a still life, potentially a contradiction in terms, Salema’s Moving Still life takes on board this paradigmatic role by additionally performing the studio as a space of making and unmaking. A pointing rod, traditionally also used as a means of measuring relative size and the illusion of distance in painting, is here manipulated by a hand that remains outside of the frame. First, the rod attempts to rearrange the objects, and then, as if in frustration, pushes them about more adamantly. The random positioning of the objects on the table – a casual placement that speaks of the multitasking and multiple focuses of attention that studio practice entails – is gradually submitted to the will of an unnamed agency, and the studio still life is progressively dismantled and undone, “deconstructed” in the most literal sense of that overused term.

It is certainly not through happenstance that the two postcards included in this higgledy-piggledy assemblage of objects are painterly landscapes by John Constable, Stoke by Nayland of 1810, and Dedham from Langham, of 1813. The originals are both at the Tate Gallery in London. These small oil sketches are inspiring and extremely early instances not of studio practice, but of pleinairism: of painting on location outdoors, made possible by the industrialisation of oil paints in portable tubes. As material objects, the postcards look worn and, indeed, are survivors of a fire in Salema’s home. As representational spaces, they are surfaces where loose, scumbled, painterly brush-marks capture the changing skies and evoke the landscape rather than illustrating it. Constable’s mark detaches itself from a purely descriptive function, while at the same time, his gaze and his bodily presence is palpably embedded in the real world.

In moving the still life – in suggesting how a still life might move her – Salema is also telling us something about her love of landscape painting, or rather, of the kind of landscape painting she loves. But more than this, she is showing us a great deal about her studio practice. The measured process of undoing is a kind of making in reverse, like the clearing and cleaning of a work surface before beginning to use it, like the meticulous preparation of her own blue painting surfaces. But it also serves as a succinct and precise image of just what Salema needs to put into motion in order for studio and landscape to come together: clearing the decks, toppling known objects and even her beloved predecessors, and immersing herself in the heady, focussed, yet abstracted continuity of process.

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Ruth Rosengarten was born in Israel, and lived for extensive periods in Johannesburg, London and Lisbon, before settling in a village in Cambridgeshire, in the United Kingdom, where she now lives and works. Trained in Fine Arts in Johannesburg, and with a Ph.D. in art history from the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, she now divides her time between drawing, photography and writing. Walking her dog also constitutes an important activity in her daily life. She has published and exhibited variously, and has curated several exhibitions.