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# Newington-Cropsey Cultural Studies Center

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## *A Review of "Tula Telfair: Reverie"*

*On View at The Forum Gallery, New York, NY*

by **Emmanuel Whyte**

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*Reverie* marks Tula Telfair's sixth solo exhibition at the Forum Gallery in New York. Telfair is an American landscape painter known for transporting viewers into her photo vivid imagination, memories and contemplative spaces. On view are fourteen oil paintings (2018-2019); Eight larger compositions in color and six monochromatic abstract landscapes that resemble "photographic images from a distance and like fields of paint and process up close," revealing the "terrain of the painting," writes Telfair.

Here, we can see a true master at work. One who is technically accomplished, conceptually rigorous and surprisingly empathetic. "I am always overwhelmed by how small we are when confronting events we experience in nature—including what it means to be a person," explains Telfair.

*Reverie* beckons us closer, to be in awe of the depth and acuity of Telfair's realities and moved by their emotionally evocative nature. While her paintings are fantastical spaces, they are nonetheless grounded in real places and experiences. This body of work is mostly inspired by her upbringing in and continued travel to West Africa. "People relate to landscape very deeply, and so they feel its familiarity," Telfair explains; but for her, the construction of these paintings are quite personal given her solitary practice. To provide an idea of a plausible space for others to project their imagination onto is one way Telfair connects with her viewers.

The six monochromes, for example, were painted entirely from memory. At first glance, one may dare call these studies given their loose brushwork and quasi-plein air semblance. These earlier works, however, are fully realized visions that were pivotal to the success of the larger compositions, as they integrated her intuitive image-making process with her technical acumen. Layers of expressive mark-making create an air of physicality and tactility, revealing animated terrains and a realness that stirs the senses. The addition of color allows us to make further sense of these faintly familiar terrains.



Tula Telfair, *The Quest to Recall Discoveries*, 2019

In *The Quest to Recall Discoveries* (2019) our vantage point is elevated aerially to overlook an ever-receding mountain-landscape, interrupted by a contrastingly stark blue body of water in the distance. Telfair's use of strong diagonals, light and a subdued, slightly unnatural color-palette quite literally gives her paintings a "heightened sense of drama" invoking Nature's grandeur and feelings ranging from fear to amazement. From Telfair's perspective, she is "trying to see what the physical space felt like when I walked through it." For us, while we may be welcomed in to her mind and memories, how we ultimately navigate these landscapes are up to us.

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Tula Telfair, *Order Masquerading as Randomness*, 2019

In *Order Masquerading as Randomness* (2019), a central sensuous S-shaped river welcomes us in, curving its way through a thick green vegetation and into a distant light blue haze of a horizon. There is a stillness, quietude and overall ease in navigating her dreamscapes. In some instances, we are invited in to “pause and never have to consider the physical skills and efforts necessary to make the next move forward in the landscape,” explains Telfair, while others “present a more challenging landscape—one that would be harder to access.” This is evidenced in works such as *Preserving the Secret’s of Time* (2019), in the crags that remain distant, or *With Friction the Relationship Becomes Complicated* (2019), in the densely vegetated foreground that leads to an endless icy blue desert.

*Its Meaning Has Shifted* (2019) offers us a noticeably different engagement. Of the larger compositions, this resonates most with the smaller monochromatic paintings. Not only in regards to the palette, but for its overtly abstract expressionistic flair. Here, the mountains loom, attempting to navigate them leaves us a bit disoriented, reminiscent of East Asian landscape paintings’ atmospheric gradients and figure-ground reversals. The silence is far louder here, calling our attention to the picture plane—to make sense of it, while being unapologetically reminded that we are reflecting on and marveling at a beautiful, yet illusionary space.

No matter your point of entry or the length of your stay, a journey is to be had and a quiet space is to be discovered.



Tula Telfair, *Its Meaning Has Shifted*, 2019

Tula Telfair has been teaching as a Professor of Art at Wesleyan University since 1989 and is represented by the Forum Gallery. A 2016 publication *Tula Telfair: Invented Landscapes* is also available featuring essays from Henry Adams and Michael S. Roth for a more in depth look at Telfair's life and practice. The Reverie exhibition is on view from February 07 – March 30, 2019 at **the Forum Gallery** , New York, NY.

*All quotes were extracted from email correspondence between Tula Telfair and the author.*

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