

ARK SKIES

Cloudscapes in a different hue

ROBERT L. PINCUS ART CRITIC

When it comes to the history of art, there is no steady march of progress. College courses may, at moments, offer that illusion, as the images move from the Baroque to the Mannerist and eventually on to the Moderns.

One age introduces glories that earlier times never envisioned. Yet these glories are thoroughly dependent on older art, whether we're talking about the 16th century or this one. Artists have always looked forward and backward at the same time.

Contemporary painters are no different. Take one look at Anthony Mitri's exhibition of landscape paintings at Quint Contemporary Art, with its atmospheric evocations of sky and land, and you'll find vivid, anecdotal proof.

The past lives and breathes in his pictures. He has one foot in our time and the other in the 19th century. He possesses a passion for clouds that takes us back to brooding German Romantics like Caspar David Friedrich and kindred spirits among American painters, from Thomas Cole to George Inness. (He prefers to cite a literary Romantic as a model: English Romantic poet William Wordsworth.)

Mitri, who lives in San Diego and whose last solo show was in 1996, has the technique to transport us into those skies and clouds. Land matters hardly at all in his landscapes, which are based on sketches made in Normandy, near Trouville. (Monet painted there and so did his early teacher, Eugene Boudin.) But you sense that his experience of being there is crucial to these pictures.

The horizon is radically low in his compositions in oil and wax on wood. Clouds replace landscape as the artist's true terrain, becoming a vast plain in "Cloud: Normandie Series #11," and a towering bank, as dense as a tropical forest, in "Cloud: Normandie Series #7."

Mitri's 19th-century predecessors wouldn't have taken easily to his palette: green joined to black; a muddy green keeping company with a similar brown. Even an archetypal brooding Romantic like Friedrich, who favored dark colors, still thought an artist's palette should stick close to nature's hues. Mitri's art is of the 20th century, in this sense. He wants color to be an equivalent of a state of his psyche, which makes him a sort of expressionist. His combinations click.

Light clearly fascinates him, too, even if he doesn't depict it in any dramatic way. Clear sky appears in slivers and thin curves, as if struggling with the dominant clouds to make itself known. He clearly relishes the interplay between the two.

He also works small, in most of these paintings -- miniaturizing nature. His aim, it seems, is to get us to look closely at grand forms in nature, to put our noses in the clouds.

Not every canvas is a compelling argument for us to gaze skyward with the artist. A picture like "Black Series #1" resembles a muted version of a typical late-19th-century landscape: pleasant, but not absorbing. But it's important to note it was made two years ago, and the more recent paintings, from the artist's "Cloud" series, are more convincingly crafted and more intensely meditative than earlier works.

The narrowness of Mitri's focus is worrisome. You wouldn't want to see him extend this series into a long career of highly similar paintings. But as a group, they have an aura of discovery and delight that suggests his intense relationship with nature will yield welcome surprises, in the next century.

ART REVIEW

"Anthony Mitri," paintings

Through Saturday. Quint Contemporary Art, 7661 Girard Ave., La Jolla. Free; (858) 454-3409.

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