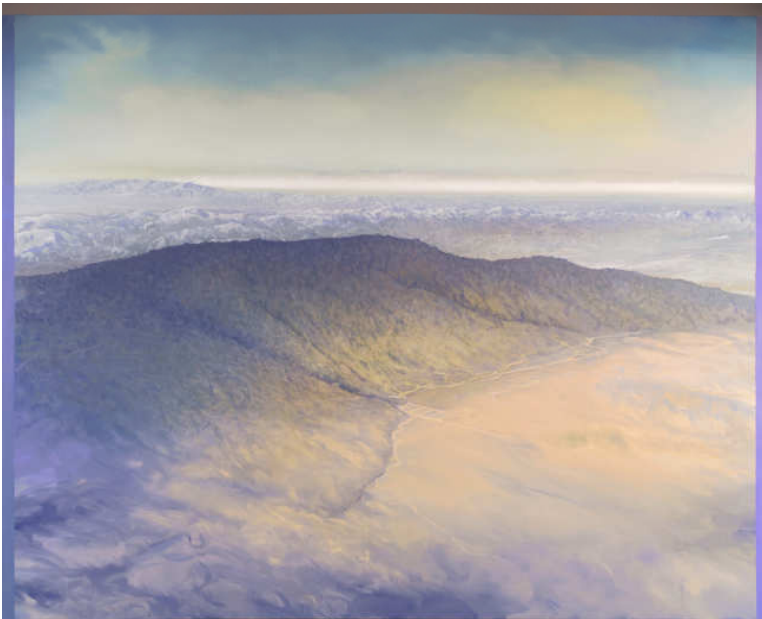


Krieble Gallery at Connecticut's Griswold Museum Features Landscapes of Tula Telfair

19th century artistic traditions evoked and transformed by painted 'theaters of the world'



Tula Telfair, *Non Invasive Methods of Examination Were Lacking, olc (2010)*

Imagine a medieval troupe with a pageant cart carrying the universe inside, waiting to be unpacked. Tula Telfair could be their set designer. The borders to each of her canvases are marked by alternating strips of solid color, save for the lower edges, creating a series of proscenium stages. This is scenery in several senses, then, waiting for performances as well as observers.

But the players never appear, only the audience. These paintings throw what is the forgotten obvious into high relief; we make them appear by looking. For many of them, our observation becomes the only recognizable human presence. There is something here of the 19th century passion for the panorama, encompassing the world in a single view.

But there is also a warning that echoes G.K. Chesterton's: "One sees great things from the valley; only small things from the peak." Our humanity is diminished at a distance. In the paintings "*Order is a Necessary Counterpoint to Sensuality*" and "*The Structure of Matter*" there are dots and scatterings of light that might well be read as trceries of settlement. A photograph from the air in William Eggleston's series, 'The Democratic Forest', shows the same bright dust scattered across fields of color.

But there is a thin line that divides streets alight from streets aflame. Will the end of the world look very much different from the beginning? That is a question for every one of the works collected here. While Telfair's landscapes are not particularly apocalyptic, they are still ominous without being threatening, unnerving without being ravaged.



Telfair Exhibit, Krieble Gallery, Griswold Museum



John Frederick Kensett, *Fort Dumping, o/c* (ca. 1871). Gift of the Hartford Steam Boiler Inspection and Insurance Co.
Photo: Griswold Museum

In 'Non-Invasive Methods of Examination Are Lacking' (above) a small grid of what might be service roads to some secret government project appear in one small plot of ground. It is as if Robert Smithson had been at work on a landlocked jetty. The outlines are ambiguous and incomplete, with all culture's experiments left unfinished. Here are excesses of sky with clouds that boil and press down against the mountain ranges, with never a strict horizontal at the intersection. The topography is always invasive, with jagged intrusions of land into the resisting air. Other boundaries like those in the piece entitled "*Between Sensual and Conceptual*" are lost in an indeterminate foggy light, misted by invisible hot springs, leaving only the artifice of the painted three-sided frame to mark an unconvincing limit to space. We are sure that the painting extends outside the narrow opening of canvas.

In dialogue with her own work, Telfair has compiled in an adjacent gallery an anthology of influence from the museum's holdings. A work by John Frederick Kensett is a concise summary of several defining attributes in Telfair's compositions, especially the prodding irregularity of line between earth and sky. But the references are clearly limited by what was available in the permanent collection. There is nothing certainly to match her scale, which more resembles Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empire* than it does the small study in oils by him that Telfair chose.



James Whistler, *Nocturne: Blue and Gold, Old Battersea Bridge* (1870)



Tula Telfair, *Pure Formal Manipulation, o/c* (2010)

And because there are no examples of his work in the Griswold collection, what goes unacknowledged are the ways in which Telfair reinvents the apparently artificial skylscapes of Maxfield Parrish, where what appears grotesque in tonality and contrast turns out to be an unexpected accuracy the first time one notices a summer sunset with the same spectrum. In the painting "*Essential Elements*," she also pays homage to James McNeil Whistler's "*Nocturnes*" with their meditations on color at the edge of darkness. And Telfair finds the means to to put the impressionist technique of a Pissarro sunset to realist ends. This incorporation of various painterly traditions is unselfconscious and exuberant. It accounts for the past without either mimicry or fawning.

The titles to the paintings often seem like small comedies, benign attempts to delude an observer into a fiction of understanding. This is particularly true with an example such as "*Pure Formal Manipulation*," which is accurate, while at the same time unrevealing. The forms are pure enough, although the manipulation is not entirely so. There are tricks being played here, but we are willing to be fooled by them. And this creates one final parallel to the central demand of theater: our willing suspension of disbelief in the presence of these fantasies. We are conspirators in the possibility of a world that would not exist without the artist—or without us.

By Stephen Kobasa, Contributing Writer