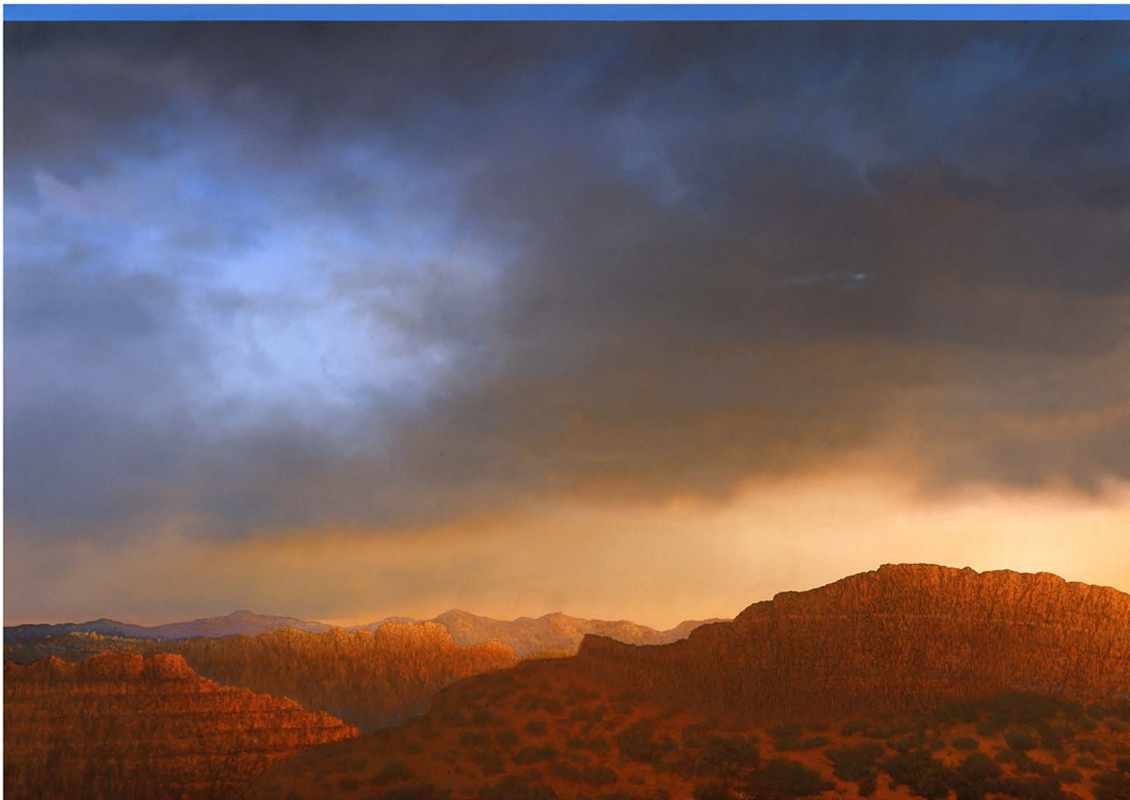


Tula Telfair

There was food for thought as well as much to seduce the eye in “Located at the Edge of a Momentary Convergence: New Landscape Paintings,” a late spring exhibition of fifteen works by Tula Telfair at Forum Gallery in Los Angeles. Her epic-scale vistas, untouched by signs of human presence, clearly allude to the sublime aspect of the Romantic landscape tradition. *A Material Thing in Which All Material Things Are Located* (all works 2008) is 72-by-92½ inches, a sweeping panorama of feverish red hills under grey clouds and a cornflower blue sky, with a swath of lemony light at the horizon. The intensity of color and the wilderness terrain suggest the visions of Frederic Church. Yet Church’s topography, whether he is depicting the Hudson River, the Arctic or a South American volcano, remains rooted in specific places. Telfair’s images are invented, painted in her New York City studio. They come, she explains, “purely from memory, not from observing a site, or utilizing photographic aids.” She signals this conceptual impulse not only by her philosophical and rather fanciful titles but also by adding narrow bands of flat color to one or more sides of her paintings, undercutting the illusion of spatial recession by reminding us we are looking at two-dimensional surfaces covered in paint. “I am interested in the subjectivity of perception and the power of memory,” she explains.

Telfair, who spent her childhood in West Central Africa and is a full



Tula Telfair, *A Material Thing in Which All Material Things Are Located*, 2008
COURTESY FORUM GALLERY, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

professor of art at Wesleyan University, understands contemporary artspeak. More importantly, she thinks through her ideas visually. Every representational painting is the record of a specific subject, more or less faithful to something pre-existing in the phenomenal world but also conjured out of the artist's imagination. Landscapes such as Telfair's are meditations on the genre itself. Many of her paintings are square, a format that seems counterintuitive for the wide-open spaces she prefers but works as a way to make us rethink the landscape dynamic. In the 60-inch-square *Using a Selected Vocabulary*, the hills are pushed to the bottom of the image; the central focus is on a vast, cloud-streaked sky, which glows with orange fire. Like Church's sunsets, it seems lit from within, an example of nature at her most theatrical. But Telfair's vaguely Martian-looking terrain and smoldering air push the painting beyond the reality-based sublime of the Hudson River School, toward a cerebral sci-fi version of Romantic landscape. Narrow strips of purple, brick and lavender on three sides make the central color pop and remind us of Josef Albers's *Homage to the Square* experiments. The sky is the most ethereal and abstract component of any landscape composition, and Telfair continues to explore luminosity in other square-format paintings. Many feature the low, scrub-covered hills that seem to be her riff on the American west, especially in *Considering the Particularities of the Relationships*, with its gilded, middle-distance bluffs.

Curiously, the way she tamps down hills into the bottom fifth of the image, the better to focus on the sky, replicates a formula used by pioneering plein-air landscapists such as Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes (1750–1819), who insisted on immediate observation of light effects. In Telfair's *Within the Reality of Ideas II* (cover) and *Understanding the Origin of Perception*, pyrotechnic sunsets blend into crisp blue skies in unlikely but visually plausible ways. The trick is to maintain the balance between simulacra of beloved landscape tropes and imaginative speculation. Sometimes, as in *The Goals Come Ever More Clearly Into View*, the image crosses the line into unreality, with an undulating, rivuleted plain under a foaming mauve sky. At times, the viewer may feel the lack of direct contact with the rich repertoire of natural forms, and Telfair takes the classical principle of generalized beauty very far. But these paintings work not only as a commentary on the history of landscape but also, more directly, as explorations of light, air and color. Forum Gallery, 3069 Beverly Boulevard, Los Angeles, California 90048. Telephone (323) 655-1550. On the web at www.forumgallery.com