



-ArtScene Magazine, LA
April 2004

TULA TELFAIR

March 26 - May 8, 2004 at Forum Gallery, West Hollywood

by Orville O. Clarke, Jr. and Bill Lasarow

Called by one critic a combination of romanticism and minimalism, Tula Telfair's large-scale paintings are a powerful demonstration of the spirit and power of the landscape adapted to a new century. From Thomas Cole to Georgia O'Keeffe to James Turrell, the American land has seduced generations of artists who have struggled to capture its spirit and to reflect the spirit of their time in it.

Much like Albert Bierstadt, who used the Rocky and Sierra Nevada Mountains as his starting points, Telfair translates the vision of the American land into dream-like visions. Her vast panoramas are composed with very low horizons dominated by vast, cloud filled skies. It is the power of these grand cloud compositions that forces your eye back down to confront the attached ground.

The Power of Interacting Volumes is a deceptively simple scene: A vast corn field recedes to the end of the low horizon, where a stand of trees serves as the dividing line between earth and sky. In the foreground is a great triangular mound of green vegetation that flows into the middle ground triangle of green earth, from where we finally come to the horizon. Rising majestically above the rolling sea of vegetation are billowing clouds, layered one upon the other. The handling of the clouds is a masterful arrangement of subtle variations of light and dark, the top of which is dominated by two towering formations that reach up into the broken blue sky above.

The work's title reinforces this formalist description. The composition of this work is made up of a series of triangles, referencing the tradition of the Italian Renaissance, that build up a visual road map for the eye. Dozens of triangular clouds are discernable, each combined to reinforce the dominant focus of the canvas. The sky and land form a dynamic unit that each compete for your attention. It is in this compositional structure that the power and beauty of the work are revealed.

That Telfair wants to call our attention to the primacy of formal harmony is indicated by her titles, typical of which are *A Secure Order*, *To Make Space Distinct*, and *A Series of Exclusions that Become Significant Only in Opposition*. There is also an intellectual distancing in all of this: no places are named (and no wonder, these are invented locations), and spiritual rhetoric is eschewed.

Still, the viewer is left with a feeling of *deja vu*. It all seems so familiar and almost too perfect. These images represent a collective vision of Arcadia—a pastoral paradise that urban dwellers have sought since Roman times. It is a land of rejuvenation for the crushed soul of post-modern life.

Telfair is not pretending to have discovered the use of landscape to spark feelings of hope, faith, or a deep sense of longing, all of which are nonetheless apparent here. The painters of the West during the 19th-century portrayed the land as a Divine Resource to be civilized and exploited by America. They conveyed awe in the previously unknown land and its untapped potential. Telfair's position as detached observer, decades after the land has been mapped and developed, reminds us of the still relatively unseen hand of man in the world, and in so doing reconnects to the awe of nature.



A Secure Order, 2003
oil on canvas, 60 x 60 in



The Power of Interacting Volumes, 2003
oil on canvas, 60 x 60 in



The Relationship is Symmetrical, 2003,
oil on five canvases, 68 ¼ x 84 in