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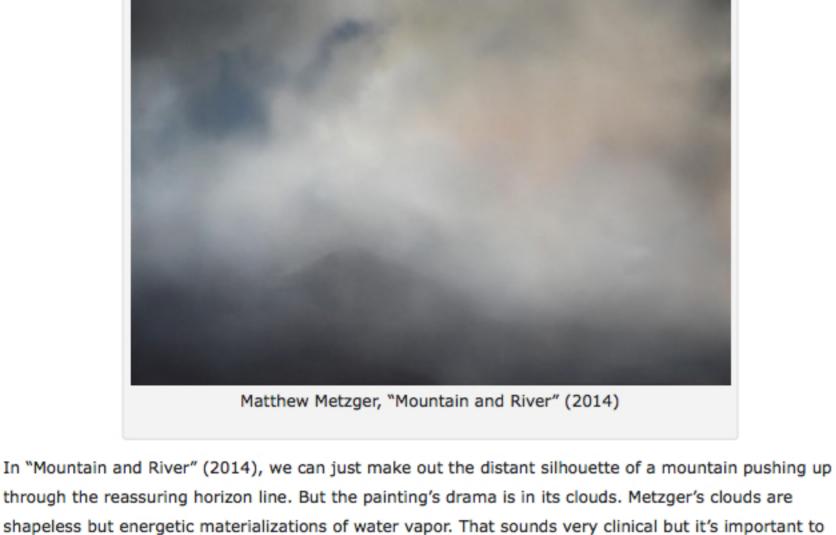
## Overwhelming Landscape: Jonathan Queen & Matthew Metzger at Miller Gallery, January 7-February 6, 2016

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In the artist's statement accompanying Matthew Metzger's showing of ten new paintings at Miller Gallery, Metzger articulately lays out some of his goals: "In an overwhelming landscape, harsh, indifferent, opposite to arguably our most endearing human traits, we recognize our humanness." In a nutshell, Metzger is here describing our relationship to the sublime, an aesthetic category that has been with us since the 18th century (which rediscovered it from the classics) and truly came into its own with Romanticism. We can find our true selves in a landscape that affords us no comfort, and possibly even no place. Nature, as experienced in the sublime mode, is a world out of proportion to human measure. It is traditionally distinguished from beauty. (A garden arouses our sense of the beautiful; the Grand Canyon arouses our sense of the sublime.) The sublime appeals to the part of us that is drawn to storms and mountains. It is a vision of nature on the verge of formlessness, and is likely to inspire in us awe and perhaps even terror. In return, the sublime unbinds our spirit from its material reality and allows it to expand, potentially without limit.

is the nature that is "opposite to arguably our most endearing human traits." A painting that engages with the sublime sets itself off from the tradition, say, of the Hudson River landscapes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which pictures rugged scenes where human beings are still connected to the natural world around them. Somewhere out there in all those forested foothills of the Catskills, we can catch a glint of light reflected off a window, or see a rowboat on the glassy lake, or detect the reassuring presence of a plume of smoke in the distance, implying a hearth somewhere. Metzger's work traffics with the sublime and puts us more in the realm of Bierstadt and Thomas Moran than Church and Kensett.

To engage with the sublime is to find oneself attracted to the otherness of nature; as Metzger puts it, this



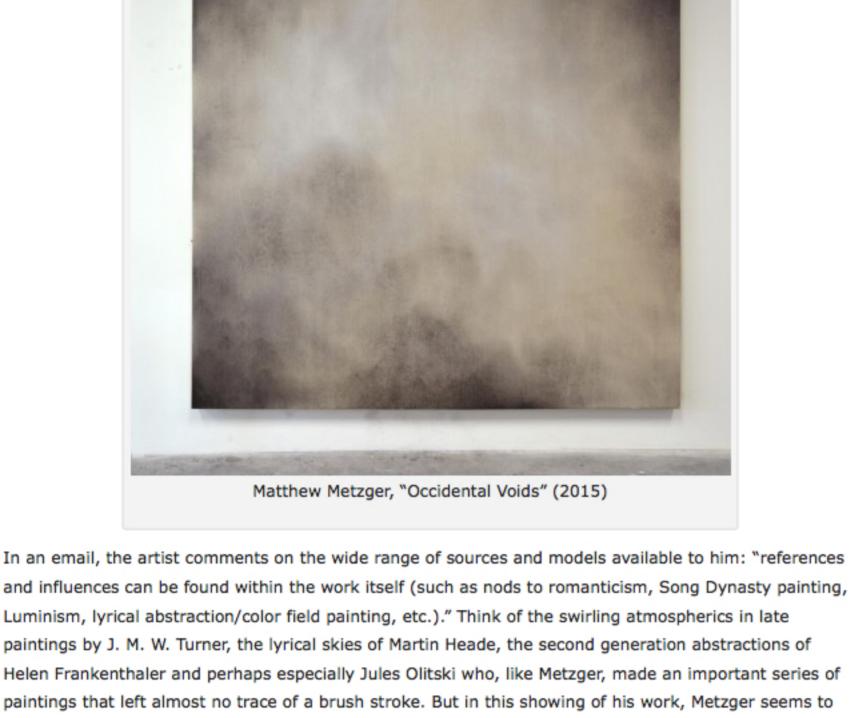
remember that his clouds are not those of Constable, say, or Thomas Cole: they don't look like anything. There is something resolutely non-metaphorical about them. Metzger doesn't need and doesn't utilize the pleasures of line and draftsmanship. His clouds function as veils, occupying space on his canvases to keep us from seeing what might be behind them. When the clouds change color, as they do in "Mountain and River," it is hard to tell whether they are breaking up, suggesting just a bit of blue-grey sky peeking through, or whether the darker portion is just another, grey-blue (and wetter) layer. It is reasonable to think that the purpose of the clouds is to remind us of one of modern painting's great formal issues: when we look at a canvas, are we seeing an illusionistic representation of a deep space which, in this case, the clouds have obscured, or are we looking at a flat painted surface, where the notion of something behind another thing is a mere illusion, however convenient or habitual? Metzger's work calls attention to the physicality of art in other ways as well. About half of the works hanging at Miller are painted with colors he made himself out of ground slate, marble, iron, and lapis lazuli. When asked why, Metzger explains that it is not about nostalgia or even control, but to help focus on the tension "between illusion (ie using paint to create something that is not) and materiality (ie the

paint is actually a combination of a beautiful stone and silky oil)." European landscape tradition imagines that we are situated on a fixed place looking out towards the stabilizing and reassuring presence of a horizon line somewhere. Metzger's "Atmosphere XI" (2015) takes us one step further. It feels as if we are looking directly up, rather than out, at veils of mist and cloud, without line and without gravity. (There is so much moisture represented in this show that just looking at

it must be good for your complexion.) As with "Mountain and River," it is not clear whether we are

looking at the sky clearing, or clouding up. As I read this work, it is a daring reminder of how much we

usually depend on a horizon line, whether present or even just implied, to ground a painting, however abstract, and orient the viewer. We are still earthbound—I get the feeling that my feet are still on the ground—but in a dizzying and liberatory way. A picture like this speaks directly to the "paradoxes" Metzger writes about in his Artist's Statement, where he says that his work represents "forms dissolved in haze, atmosphere, and light, yet substantiated."

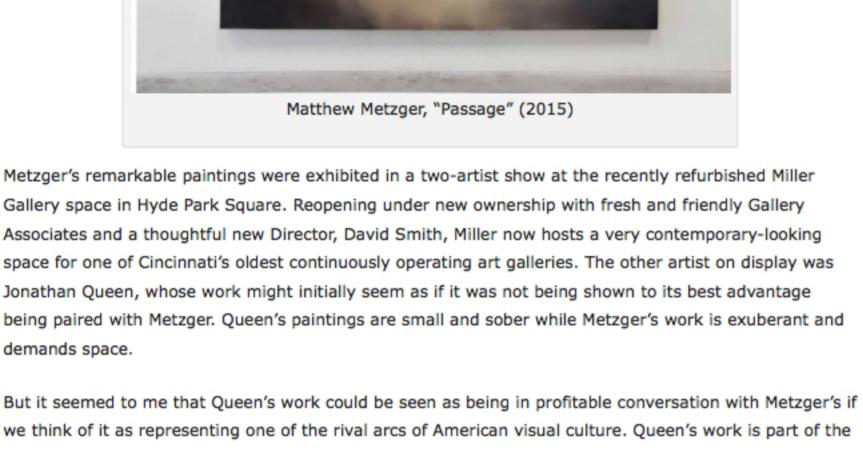


have been particularly interested in seeing the ways that his vision is in conversation with the great

works of ancient Chinese paintings. "Occidental Voids" (2015)—the least scroll-like of his Chineseinflected works on show—is an excellent place to take the measure of these issues. As the painting's title suggests, the painting sets out to contemplate the Asian sublime with western eyes. Though it might be about torrents of rain obscuring the shapes of the land, it might also be the morning sun burning off a fog. Once again, the painting is dominated by veils of pale color that seem both to conceal something hidden in the topography and yet to be the true subject of the painting. The masses of color at the center read both as a curtain and as a centerpiece: they are all we need to be paying attention to. There are suggestions of a hilly landscape towards the bottom of the painting, but they are among the least readable landscape features—the most like blots—of any of the pictures in the show. There is a bleached quality to the center of the painting; by the time we have gotten to Metzger's 2015 pictures, his 2014 works seem positively gaudy by comparison. As the title of one of these later works suggests his color range runs from "Slate to Ochre." Part of the appeal of Asian painting to western eyes has been the ways it indicates pictorial depth. When the painters trained in the European tradition saw Chinese landscapes, they had a revelation: the devices by which western artists exerted themselves to suggest the recession of space and the connections between foreground and background were unnecessary, uneconomical, and a distraction. The Asian pictorial tradition happily suggests that some things are behind others, and that there can be an astounding amount of space to traverse. How else would all those boats filled with exiled poets make their melancholy, contemplative ways to new homes far from the corruption of worldly courts? But they do not accomplish this by employing western schemes of perspective—yet things still somehow make their way from the back towards the front. As a colleague of mine observes, Chinese art is interested in

essences, not likenesses, as is Metzger. "Su Shi's Passage" (2015)-named after a Song Dynasty exiled

courtier, poet, and calligrapher-features a waterfall, or perhaps a river, which suggests how something in the distance makes itself known to something closer to us. What is our position as a viewer? According to the "occidental" ways of figuring space, we would think of the voyeuristic eye of the painter, looking out his window at some civic space—the interior of a church or a public square somewhere—recording what is seen with the geometric optical conventions that we call "perspective." Perspective gives us a sense that the artist is both removed and yet still connected to other citizens. It anchors the painter's eye. But not in Metzger's work. There are trees that are going to have to be dealt with, but not from where our point of view is located. They are more or less stacked on top of each other far below us. It is as if we were in a drone, alertly hovering for a moment over a complex space and changing we cannot tell too much about, ready to plunge down into it all—or just to soar away.



American tradition of the hyperbolically realistic and powerfully-restrained late nineteenth century still

matter, and even about the consumer of such objects. This is the tradition of the American artist who

lifes of John Peto and William Harnett. This tradition represents the stream of American art that believes

that an artist's first duty is to look hard at what's real. It is both adorative and skeptical about its subject

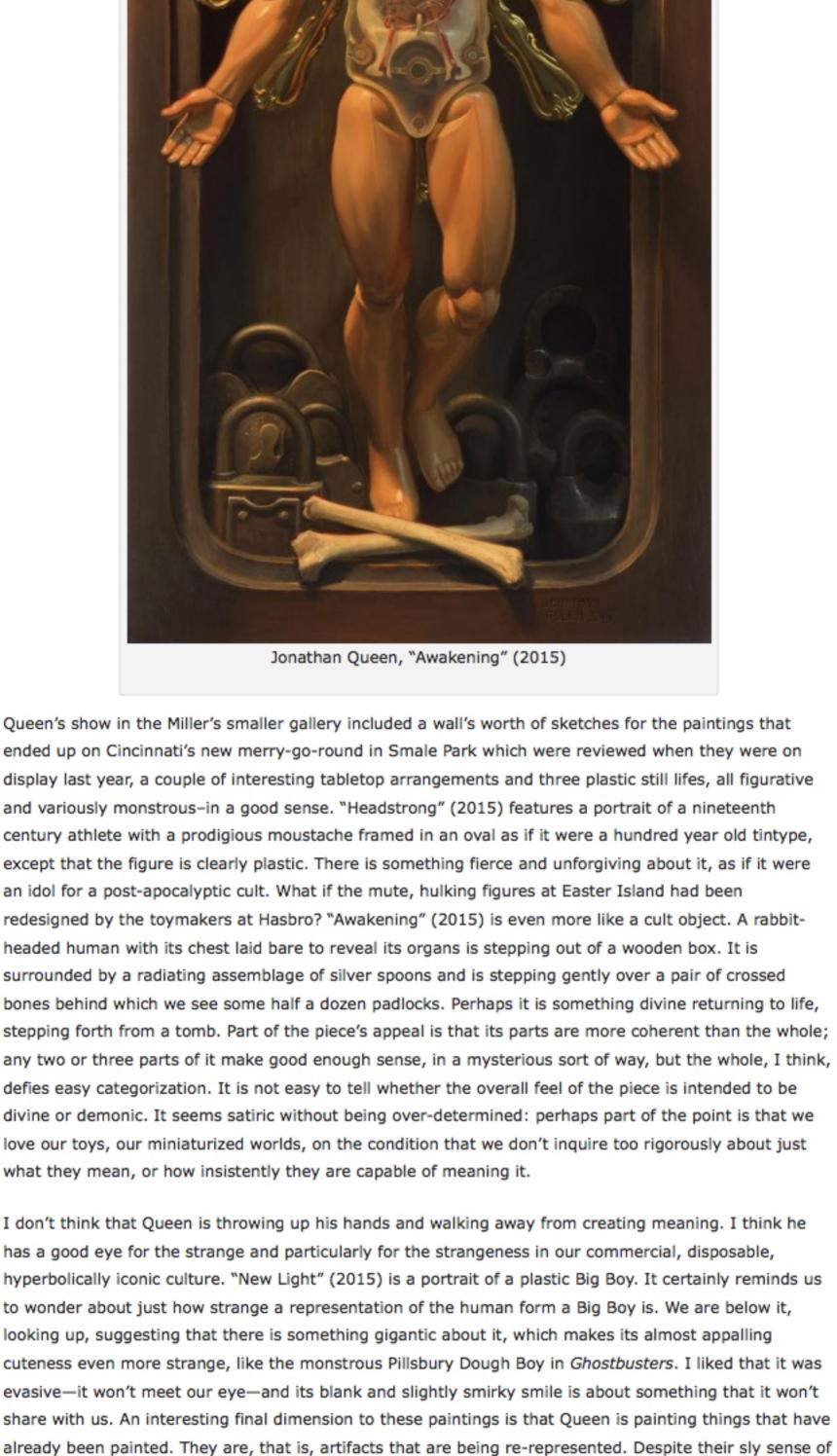
feels obliged to start with what is seen, even if what is being seen is commercial, mundane, and literally

plastic. But to an eye like Queen's, if you look hard enough at something in front of you, you might just

see through the tawdriness of its materials and reach an understanding of what it's capable of doing and

why you might want to be careful when in its presence. In Queen's best work, the mundane unfolds to

reveal the uncanny.



humor, Queen's paintings seemed in part a warning to pay more attention to the artwork we might find

ourselves surrounded by in our daily lives. As idol-makers have known for millennia, there are powers in

inanimate figures waiting to be set free. Unless they're no longer waiting.

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-Jonathan Kamholtz

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