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ART AS LANDSCAPE/LANDSCAPE AS ART

Peter Warshall

Until the 1970s landscapes were more often associated with painting than ecology. Oddly, this idea-landscape as art-continued after most twentieth century painters had long abandoned painting hills and fields. Picasso once joked that he needn't paint landscapes, nature did a better job. Even more oddly, thirty years ago a few ecologists began adopting the concepts of the modernist art period to help them describe landscapes and seascapes and big-sized environments.

Landscape ecology and modern art were born from similar desires: to accurately describe the richness and beauty we all perceive; to paint or model the configuration, the array of lines and patches of colors and textures, the surprising events, and the overall evenness or fragmentation of the canvas or watershed as a whole. There are, for instance, "hard edge" paintings like those of Frank Stella and Piet Mondrian, and hard edge landscapes such as an array of large boulders scattered in a meadow or a ski resort condominium complex butting up on an old-growth forest; and "soft edge" paintings, like Mark Rothko's, and soft edge landscapes like the mosaicked transitions among freshwater, estuary, and saltwater marshes. Both disciplines love contemplating the contrasts between edges and patches.

Parallels go much further. Henri Matisse (in his cutout phase), Gustav Klimt, and Paul Klee experimented tirelessly with configurations of patches of color: different sizes, the shape of each patch, the orientation of "floating" patches with the canvas's straight edges and with other patches inside the artwork's boundaries. Landscape ecologists similarly ponder patches such as beaver ponds in a watershed or forest groves dotted among evenly textured farmlands. The "right" configuration can bring harmony to either canvas or landscape. To conservation biologists, for instance, the size and shape of a patch of forest may mean the difference between protection of a rare warbler's home or nest parasitism by cowbirds. Informed intuition serves both painters and naturalists well.

The boundaries of the canvas have always bothered painters. One solution was the heavy gold frame. But modern artists rebelled against this over-defining box. They encouraged museums and galleries to paint their walls white and to use baby-spot lighting. Then they played with the canvas's boundary by painting its edge as white as the wall. White-on-white can meld the canvas into the greater art world architecture. Ecologists rarely find heavily framed environments (except for the cherished discovery of isolated islands and caves, where learning about life is so much easier without all those foreign intrusions). For a long time, the desire for simplicity has led ecologists to build a mental equivalent of heavy frames. They lay out a rectangular metric grid, study everything inside it, and ignore or downplay all "outside" influences. Contemporary landscape ecology, however, has in part rebelled. An "edge" for one creature may not mean much to another.

Impressionists pioneered another insight. If you surround one color with different ones, the internal color changes brightness or hue. The eye registers the internal color differently depending on the context. Such subtle and elegant perceptions also apply to patches of landscape. Surround one mountain by a valley of desert and a similar mountain by roaring rivers, and each mountain is slightly altered. The microclimates of the river and desert "color" the landscape with grit or mist, dust-born nutrients, or wind-blown humidity, a soft or a hard edge. Modern art has taught ecologists to pay close attention to the surround.

Step back from a canvas or fly over the landscape in a low-altitude airplane and still other qualities become vivid: repeating patterns, evenness of textures (be it white paint or forest or urban sprawl), and surprise elements (a splash of red or a monadnock jutting from a glacial plain). Ultimately, painters and ecologists must decide what is foreground and what is background. Op-art painters and Salvador Dali played with the figure/ground dilemma in order to trick the human eye. Landscape ecologists more often trick their own minds. They watch a hedgerow when they should be watching the surrounding field or their eyes are on the field when the action is within the hedgerow. In what season is which the foreground?

But the lessons run deeper. Recent critics have a tendency to dismiss harmony, to reduce it to an arbitrary cultural prejudice. Redwood groves, fields of sunflowers, or a mirrored lake-all this is beautiful, but only in the eye of each beholder. The melding of art and landscape languages has within it the seeds of a new sensibility of harmony. Having deconstructed the purely human view of harmonious landscape, humans now have the joy of turning to landscape from richly different points of view: the beaver's, the moose's, the sapsucker's, et al. This biocentric sense of landscape harmony owes gratitude, in part, to the modern and conceptualist painters. Tired of pastoral scenes of the cow, the beech tree, and the setting sun, they offer us delight in connectivity, in the composition of elements in space and their configurations, and intuitive senses of color and touch.

Peter Warshall's work centers on conservation an conservation-based development. He works on all socio-economic levels and with highly diverse people and ecosystems of the planet. He has worked in Ethiopia for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, in ten other African nations under contracts with U.S. AID and other organizations, with the Tohono O'odham and Apache people of Arizona, as a consultant to corporations such as Senco, Chlorox, Trans Hygga, and SAS Airlines, and with municipal governments such as the city of Malibu. His training and experience include natural history, natural resource management (especially watersheds, wastewater, and wildlife), conservation biology, biodiversity assessments, environmental impact analysis, and conflict resolution and consensus building between divergent economic and cultural special interest groups. Peter runs his own small consulting firm, was an adjunct research scientist with the Office of Arid Lands Studies (University of Arizona), lectures, writes, and is currently the Editor of the Whole Earth Magazine.

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