

Transcendent Landscapes: Abstracting Nature



A **SPACE** *for* **DIALOGUE** 105

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART, DARTMOUTH

Artists have always looked to the natural world for inspiration. Landscape painting serves a practical purpose in simply representing the world around us, but it has historically also revealed the spiritual connection humans have to their environments. The use of light in European Romantic paintings or fantastic scenery in East Asian landscapes, for example, imparts a religious quality to these scenes. The prominence of nature as a motif reveals the importance it holds in many artists' lives.

With the emerging popularity of abstract art in the twentieth century, landscapes took on a new face. Artists looked to the world around them, interpreting the colors, forms, and values they observed in nature. The emotional energy of an experience with the organic world weaves itself into an abstract work as an

artist commits paint to canvas. This transition allowed painters to explore their own reactions to and experiences in their environments and to translate those feelings onto canvas without concerning themselves with representation. We may not know what the artist thought about when painting—are green brush strokes meant to evoke trees, or are they just green marks? Often, however, titles or geographic locations indicate nature's impact on these works.

Transcendent Landscapes: Abstracting Nature explores the connections between organic themes and the metaphysical in abstract art. In works that demonstrate artists' resonance with their environments in various ways, we find a range of emotional or divine experiences that push beyond the landscape. Collapsing mental "inscapes," subject matter coming from the mind, into "landscapes," artists demonstrate the way that these worlds—nature and spirit—become one and the same.

These pieces explore nature's intersection with the metaphysical through different scales and methods. Some works, such as Sara Sosnowy's *Track 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117* and Joan Mitchell's *Sunflower III*, focus on one particular flower. Both artists take their subjects out of their natural context—Sosnowy, for example, renders a floral subject that contrasts the mechanical style and industrial-seeming title of her work and the systematic way she created it. She seeks to create something beautiful through meticulously collaged concentric circles and moves viewers beyond the landscape to find their own meaning in her work. Mitchell, by contrast, chooses a specific flower to evoke emotional turmoil. A beloved subject of hers, the sunflower, invites viewers to locate themes like isolation, decay, or vitality. Depicting one, singular flower, she uses loose marks to compose the joyous plant. Dark, earthy tones in its drooping stem and disconnected petals show the flower's entire life cycle, not just its bright, blooming period.

The centerpiece of this exhibition is Rebecca Purdum's *Ripton 76*, a massive meditation on color and light. The green space of the painting overwhelms the viewer with something akin to the feeling of peering into a wide growth of trees. Named for Ripton, Vermont, the rural town in which the artist lives and works, the painting



represents a local natural experience relatively close to this museum. Purdum's process of moving the paint around the canvas creates yet another form of spirituality, since she finds art to be deeply linked to the metaphysical. She says: "I have relied on the belief that art and spirit are one in the same and have always wanted my work to lead to something greater than myself."¹ Simultaneously still and dynamic, quiet yet full of noise, the space Purdum has built allows the viewer to become immersed in their own inner spirit.

Colleen Randall's *Splendid Matter* similarly provides a contemplative space for viewers. Relying on rich layers of paint with wide variations in color, Randall, like Purdum, constructs an all-over composition that "lead[s] the viewer from a sensory to a contemplative experience."² The dramatic light and colors of Telluride, Colorado, in particular, influenced *Splendid Matter*, since the artist reworked this originally quiet piece after a two-week stay out west. She synthesizes her own emotional resonance with nature into this work, building the paint up over time to create a deep, textured surface that offers a world of reflection for its audience. Indeed, although Randall finds profound inspiration in her environment, she writes that her paintings "do not attempt to represent nature. Instead, they seek to capture the weather of the soul or spirit."³

Maggie Watson's *Ngalyipi Jinta Punta Jukurrpa (Snake Vine Mushroom Dreaming)* mixes environment and the divine in a different way. Watson reflects on a sacred family creation narrative by referencing the Dreaming, in which ancestral beings created the world, marking sacred sites as they moved through the land. This work depicts women re-creating that path, picking mushrooms. Hence, it represents through abstract form the spirituality of a group of people and their ancestors. But in conversation with the other abstractions in this exhibition, it pushes viewers to think about the environment and the significance it holds for different groups. For Watson, nature is inextricably linked with the spiritual.

These works represent an intersection between art, the divine, and nature. They involve layers: the artists' contemplative interactions with the world around them, their spiritual



processes in translating ideas to canvas, and the experiences they create for the viewer as a result. Something magical can happen in the space between artists' observation of their environment and the viewers' experience in front of the resulting work.

It is important to note that the artists in *Transcendent Landscapes* are all women. While gender identity was not intentionally taken into account when curating this exhibition, nor is it inherent to the messaging of these works, these artists' shared reverence for nature has informed the ways each has carved a successful career in a field dominated by men.

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1. Rebecca Purdum, "A Few Words." Retrieved Dec. 8, 2021, from <https://rebeccapurdumpaintings.com/a-few-words>.

2. Colleen Randall, "The Abstract Sublime: Vision and Process," slide lecture, Hood Museum of Art East Wheelock Student Dinner, Feb. 28, 2020.

3. Colleen Randall, *In the Midst of Something Splendid: Recent Paintings by Colleen Randall*. Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth, 2020.

CHECKLIST

Joan Mitchell, American, 1925–1992. *Sunflower III*, 1972, color etching and aquatint. Acquired in Honor of Margaret Dyer Chamberlain, Acting Director of the Hood Museum of Art, 1999–2000; PR.2001.16

Maggie Watson Napangardi, Warlpiri/Australian, about 1920–2004. *Ngalyipi Jinta Punta Jukurrpa (Snake Vine Mushroom Dreaming)*, 1996, acrylic on canvas. Gift of Will Owen and Harvey Wagner; 2011.60.76

Rebecca Purdum, American, born 1959. *Ripton 76 (Yellow)*, 2007, oil on canvas. Purchased through the Virginia and Preston T. Kelsey 1958 Fund; 2010.6

Colleen Randall, American, born 1952. *Splendid Matter*, 2018, oil on canvas. Gift of the artist; 2021.18

Sara Sosnowy, American, born 1957. *Track 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117*, 1997, oil, dry pigment, and canvas on canvas. Gift of Sally and Wynn Kramarsky; 2006.28.7

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The exhibition *Transcendent Landscapes: Abstracting Nature*, part of the museum's student-curated *A Space for Dialogue* series, is on view at the Hood Museum of Art March 5–April 23, 2022.

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Cover image: Rebecca Purdum, *Ripton 76 (Yellow)*, 2007 (detail).
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Inside left: Joan Mitchell, *Sunflower III*, 1972. © Joan Mitchell Foundation, New York, NY

Inside right: Maggie Watson Napangardi, *Ngalyipi Jinta Punta Jukurrpa (Snake Vine Mushroom Dreaming)*, 1996. © 2021 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VISCOPY, Australia

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