

# ALEXANDRE

Art Papers

By Nicholas Frank

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Humans have imposed their visions upon nature for as long as the two have coexisted, from the ancients seeing gods in constellations to modern children spotting animal forms in clouds. In the semi-fantastical landscape paintings of “Magnetic North” (Milwaukee Art Museum, July 10—October 3, 2004) TOM UTTECH embedded his personal visions of the myths, mysteries and lacunae of nature along with its realities.

In Wisconsin, landscape painting runs the gamut from high art to kitsch “collector’s edition” posters. Through canny inversions of natural phenomena into fantastical and sometimes funny private worlds, Uttech has placed himself squarely in the former category, though at first glance his canvases aren’t far from the latter. The requisite trees, mossy undergrowth, curving streams and forest creatures are all there, arranged just so. But these paintings reveal themselves as something entirely outside the cabin-wall norm, at first grabbing the eye with sunset swirls of glowing pink, blazing orange and the azure of cold northern skies. Colors run to the fantastical, almost nuclear-sunset in intensity, and aurora borealis effects ripple through the night skies with neon illumination while supernatural fog creeps below. Nestled in woodland tangles, forest creatures emerge gradually. A group of wolves stares out at the viewer, owls glide past low and silent. Uttech works animal forms into clouds, stones and the whorls and knots of tree stumps, as in *Mamssag Neisashi* (1995), where a moss-covered rock echoes a standing elk nearby. Depicted in oil, these common trail-illusions become symbols of the easy slip between nature and the human imagination.

In terms of craft, Uttech is maddening. Paint handling among the sixty canvases is so inconsistent as to defy explanation, from eye-scratching dry 1980s paintings to glistening wet late-1990s pictures. Smaller canvases tended toward deft and confident handling, though upon close inspection at least one (*Nin Pagidendagos* [1998]) fell into scumbly uncertainty. Darker-pigmented landscapes tended to be dry and smudgy, but not consistently so. *Watjashkowigam* (1998) was a near-perfect union of a moody moon-glowing marsh with its equivalent in oil paint, a smooth deep surface that captured the eye’s inability to glean detail in very low light.

The curation was also maddeningly inconsistent. Paintings were hung in blender-mixed chronology, with rooms covering any number of dates. The works may have been hung in loosely thematic groupings, but themes weren’t adhered to with consistency. For example, the “water rushing over rocks” –themed room contained two paintings that did not depict water rushing over rocks. Uttech’s heretofore neglected body of nature photography from the 1970s was reprinted digitally and interspersed throughout the exhibition, serving as continual, unnecessary reminders that these paintings aren’t wholly out of the artist’s imagination. The photographs would have done well in a separate room, or a separate exhibition.

However, the success and failure of individual Uttech canvases depend on neither curating nor Dutch master-quality painting techniques. A close observer of nature, Uttech knows its forms, depths and uncanny mysteries well enough to craft pictures of enduring mood and vision.

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Thankfully, everything came together in several large 2000s-era paintings, for instance *Nind Awatchige* of 2003, which combined competent and fanciful paint handling with Uttech's most intriguing imagery, that of ridiculously species-overpopulated scenes. Tens of thousands of birds of all varieties pocked crepuscular and dawn skies glowing with northern late-summer oranges, reds, pinks and ceruleans. Impossible in reality, these scenes depict a world of imagination before, after or entirely without human occupation. Uttech's vanishing points are often far, far back in the distance, just beyond the horizon, presumably where he wants the eye to end up.

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