

ALEXANDRE GALLERY

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Tom Uttech's paintings of the North American wilderness offer surreal riffs on the Hudson River School. Their quality of light palette, attention to detail and sometimes grand scale remind one of works by Bierstadt and Church, who found the sublime in nature and evoked it in their landscapes. Uttech, however, includes wild cards to remind us that, like all works of art, his paintings are constructs. For example, forest animals might look intensely out at us, reciprocating our stare. Paw prints or emblematic eagles with their wings spread might be depicted on the frame, offering ambiguous marginalized commentaries on the larger scene within.

Uttech's paintings speak of the intensity of his love for Quetico Provincial Park, a cast government-protected site in Ontario, where a unique ecosystem was formed on the glacial Precambrian shield. Produced in the studio, his works are based on his memory and powers on invention. Their titles consist of one or more words he randomly draws from an Ojibwe dictionary (the Ojibwe are the Indians of Minnesota and Wisconsin, where he has mostly lived).

Nind Awatchige (112 by 122 inches, 2003) is one of two large, haunting paintings in which a great variety of birds are seen inexplicably flying from right to left, past wolves howling in the middle ground. Uttech manages to suggest late-afternoon light with remarkable accuracy. Yet the birds, locked in flight and spread across the entire surface of the painting, create a particular sort of tension. Clearly an artifice, they disrupt the peaceful vista by distracting us from nature into a fictional space. In this way, they function like the "tears" appearing in the smeared paint surfaces in Richter's late abstractions.

In the smaller *Nin Mamakadenima* (43 by 49 inches, 2002-03), a dense trail of mist or smoke winds its way between trees and rocks, and into the background of this forest scene. It's early morning. The curling movement of the smoke is echoed in the arabesques formed by the curving trunks and branches of two trees, which are also reflected in a pond in the foreground. A wide frame covered with gray gestural washes picks up the cedar tones of the debris lying in the water. Dense with information, this painting—like the others—achieves a photographic intensity when perceived from a few feet away. Uttech's paintings are about a realm that retains its mystery as long as humans refrain from interfering with it—a timely message for our ecologically challenged era.