

# ALEXANDRE

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the online magazine of art and ideas

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Friday, October 31st, 2014

## Land Meeting Sky: John Walker at Alexandre Gallery

by John Goodrich

*John Walker: Recent Paintings at Alexandre Gallery*

October 2 to November 15, 2014

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Few painters have expanded the original impulses of Abstract Expressionism in more directions than John Walker. During the course of his half-century of painting, he has incorporated into his canvases written poetry verses, concise renderings of skulls and allusions to both aboriginal art and the old masters. He has pushed painting's material limits, employing shaped canvases and large-scale collage techniques, and mixing all manner of ingredients into his paint: gels, chalk dust, and more recently, mud. But his biggest departure from "classic Ab-Ex" may be his reliance on the perceived world. Although moodily abstracted, his images from the last decades have been consistently inspired by observations of the real. His urgent strokes and brooding color, moreover, reveal a certain discipline of form; their forces build in ways that create discrete, tangible presences in his paintings – a feat of internal composition that hints as much of European modernism as the New York School. If the artist is an Abstract Expressionist, he's an unusually worldly one.

For more than a decade, Walker has investigated a particular slice of the observed: the view from his studio in Seal Point, Maine. From the foot of a cove it overlooks a dramatic panorama, with fingers of land cutting across the vast meeting of water and sky. The tides, which alternately cover and expose wide mud flats, add to the shifting effects of light, time and weather. This disequilibrium seems to suit Walker, who says he chooses to work in the least scenic spot, one strewn with washed-in garbage. Even so, his recent paintings at Alexandre Gallery suggest the artist has reached, career-wise, a kind of personal equilibrium. The palette for his large canvases has become lighter, and their compositions more lucid. Gone are some of the more extravagant forays, including the skulls and written texts – the mud remains – as if the broad spaces and limpid light were sufficient fuel for his painting. The work at Alexandre falls mostly into two categories: six- or seven-foot tall canvases, and paintings on discarded bingo cards just over seven inches high. All are vertical in format and boast a high horizon above a spreading plane of water/earth.

Most of the large canvases are divided into contrasting planes of parallel, sometimes zigzagging, lines. Often they include one or two realistic tokens of the actual scene: an island covered with trees, the small circle of a sun or moon. These paintings manage to convey nature's immensity even as they mangle its topography. In "The Sea No. II" (2014), for instance, a large, white shield-like shape, articulated by vertical green stripes, hangs before horizontally striped deep blues. The energy of the forms is clear, even if their perspectival relationships aren't; it represents a point of land intruding weightily upon the water's spreading surface. At the top, a red sun tips into an unlikely indentation in the horizon. A sprouting of greens interrupts the blue halfway up the canvas. The lower half of the shield-form has the rough texture of mixed-in earth, grounding it metaphorically. But the metaphor isn't really necessary: one senses land against shimmering expanse, the remoteness of sun and sky, and the isolation of a tree-covered island. One absorbs the usual paradox of painting, of material representations of the immaterial. But one experiences something else, as well – a representation made especially vital through abstract means.

Other large canvases introduce different elements. A snowfall of white or beige patches descends through three canvases; in another, tentacle-like arms stream across blue of water. At times the artist's generalizing or repetition of forms suggests a "problem-solving" approach – the studious application of a workset of ideas. But this hardly diminishes their overall power, and the small paintings on bingo cards – over a dozen of which line one wall – are a delight. All of these tiny works size up broad scenes with startling immediacy. Walker's marks dash about and dot their surfaces in a frenzy, in a wider array of colors – emerald blue-greens, grass-greens, blazing oranges and subtler reds in some, ochres and browns in others – as well as freer and more profuse detail. A thickly brushed, rather obtuse white form dominates most of the images, angling tensely across the ground's receding horizontals. In some, a cluster of greens becomes, palpably, a tree rooted at a specific distance; in others, a sprinkling of dots could be tiny figures on an immense plain. A minority of the marks are recognizable as objects, but all read as presences in the almost mystically deep and bright spaces. Though painted on humblest of supports, the colors and forms capture the primal experience of land meeting sky, and the artist seems to experience it anew each time.

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