HYPERALLERGIC

Lisa Sanditz’s Seismic Sublime

By John Yau
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Place has always been central to Lisa Sanditz’s paintings and drawings. In the winter of 2006–7, she went to China specifically to paint the rapid growth of single-industry cities, which sustained themselves by producing and exporting items such as Christmas ornaments to Western consumers. A longtime resident of the Hudson Valley, she was aware that this part of New York State, once populated by single-industry cities, such as Tannersville and Gloversville, had become post-industrial outposts for those seeking to live within hailing distance of the expensive bustle of New York City’s five boroughs. The production of inexpensive consumer goods had left America for Asia, with its cheap labor and willingness to invest in new factories.

In her current exhibition, Missing Mountain, at Alexandre Gallery — her first in New York in more than a decade — Sanditz continues to pursue her understanding of the relationship between human intervention and the landscape, paying particular attention to fitting together different pictorial languages. This postmodern approach to landscape sets her apart from her modernist forebears, from Marsden Hartley to Alex Katz, as well as implicitly acknowledges the destructive effects of climate change and greedy, unthinking human intervention. And yet, despite this awareness, Sanditz never devolves into proselytizing. Despite the gravitas of her subject matter (the degraded landscape), her pursuit is inspired by her painterly desire to celebrate beauty and what acrylic paint, and its expansive range of artificial colors, can do. Observation, memory, and imagination are inseparable components of her thinking and doing.

The 11 paintings and single work on paper that are on the fourth floor, complemented by color studies and quickly made depictions of flowers on the third floor, impart the full range of this singular artist. “Missing Mountain” refers to a major event on July 15–16 of this year, when smoke from the wildfires in Canada changed the color of New York’s sky, affected the atmosphere with dangerous pollutants, and blocked views of mountains in the distance. Since this was the second time in recent years that Canadian wildfires affected the atmosphere, it could not be considered an isolated incident, but rather a harbinger of things to come without the full effects being known. Here, again in keeping with her quest for beauty without disregarding the unsettling changes, Sanditz made three paintings, each measuring 30 × 40 inches (76.2 × 101.6 cm), in which “Missing Mountain” is part of the title. Together, they constitute three distinct visions of a particular setting undergoing disruptive change.

In “Missing Mountain (Stewart’s Sherbet Sun)” (all works 2026), Sanditz uses a thinned-out acrylic to depict a blue-eyed adolescent boy casually dressed in a pale yellow T-shirt, brushy brown and blue-gray shorts, and a baseball cap. He is seated like a giant in the painting’s middle ground, between the landscape beneath him and the sky and rolling hills behind him.

At first, the superimposition of the boy on the landscape might seem arbitrary, except for the fact that he is holding a paper cone of Stewart's melting reddish-orange sherbet. Its placement and color compel us to see it as a melting sun, two drips running down, one from the bottom of the cone and the other down the cone's left side over his hand and leg.

What do we make of a melting sun, which contradicts everything we know about it? Sanditz's visual paradox animates the entire painting, causing this viewer to stop and contemplate the scene further. This unsettling gap between seeing and thinking can be found in all her paintings. We go from looking to gazing inward, distressed by what we have seen. Historically, observational landscape painting transported viewers to the site, its wondrousness. They were focused on resemblance, stability, predictable change, and renewal. J.M.W. Turner changed everything when he painted destructive storms and roiling waves, instances of nature's overwhelming power. Extending from that awareness, Sanditz recognizes the role that humans now play in altering and amplifying nature's potency. The boy is sitting calmly, seemingly unaware of the disastrous course humans have taken. How can we protect his innocence?

In "Wild Violets," we see a puzzling landscape that makes inexplicable sense. The landscape can be divided into three vertical areas that take up most of the painting, crowned by a narrow green field and a dense row of trees cropped by the painting's top edge. Outlined by a meandering thick brown line, the large, pastel-green middle area is full of flat, gray abstract shapes containing a thick violet line inflected by smaller olive green, gray, and deep violet shapes. The painting's title suggests the different violets are wildflowers. On the left, in an area filled with different-colored dots, we see the filled-in outlines of upside-down people drawn in different scales. Above them are two pink tree trunks that resemble bare legs. On the right side, a brown tree trunk marked by vertical lines rises out of the brown earth, cropped at the top and casting a deep blue shadow from its base. What are we to make of this baffling view? While the people show no signs of violence, and in fact look peaceful, their presence is distressing. The colored dots the bodies are embedded in do not yield a clue as to why they are there.

Sanditz is sensitive to the seismic changes that have taken place in the last 20 years. Like Turner, her interest in the beautiful colors of the poisoned sky has led her to be open to the effects mankind has made part of its environment, to be both an observer and witness. In "Ghost Tree (Dark)," we see three white-outlined shapes containing the black bare tree trunk and branches set against a moody dark row of trees whose rounded tops are edged with purple halation. This poetic landscape is both beautiful and troubling. That joining transports us to a place very different from what Turner, or artists such as Neil Welliver and Jane Freilicher, bring us. Her paintings ask: What can we do to change our destiny? What effect can we have on the place we inhabit?

Lisa Sanditz: Missing Mountain continues at Alexandre Gallery (25 East 73rd Street, 3rd floor, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through November 14. The exhibition was organized by the gallery. The author of this article held a conversation with the artist at the gallery on September 24.