

ALEXANDRE

The Paintings Of Tom Uttech: Surface, Depth, and Communion

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1

When I was a graduate student in American literature at Stanford University some years ago, one of my professors, a distinguished literary critic, said in class, "Any graduate student can hunt symbols, but it takes a first-rate intelligence to deal with the surfaces of literature." This statement has remained in my mind, and it has been useful to me in teaching and indeed in my own creative writing. And when I became a painter I discovered that the statement might well be relevant to art as well as literature.

The paintings of Tom Uttech are those of a man who has observed the natural world with a quality of vision that is at once personal and comprehensive. It is difficult to say what or who might have influenced his work. It seems entirely original, the signature of a unique spirit and intelligence. His attention is concentrated on a particular landscape, the woodlands of northern Wisconsin and Ontario. It is a landscape of trees and waters, skies and changing light. And it is the home of abundant wildlife. All of these elements inform Uttech's paintings in variants of color, stillness, and motion. The effect is an arresting equation of reality and imagination, of man in communion with nature.

2

I think of standing in a gallery and looking at a cross section of Uttech's paintings. They are a grouping of landscapes, and they are not like other landscapes that I have seen. They invite a closer inspection than I had anticipated. They are windows through which I see distance, space, juxtaposition, perspective, and complexity,

elements that coalesce into a remarkable whole. A given painting, for example, seems a concentration of nature itself. It teems with life, a sky full of birds, a foreground crowded with animals, and these linked by tall, mostly bare trees. The birds and animals are couched in motion, and they appear as clusters rather than individuals, with one notable exception. There is the still figure of a bear standing upright and tall, facing me, the viewer, directly. It is an inscrutable, haunting figure that inhabits a number of Uttech's paintings, and it is to me an enigma. The bear sees me as surely as I see it. Its gaze is disinterested but unrelenting. There seems a mutual awareness, but we are essentially unknowable to each other. I have had this impression before.

3

Several years ago I visited the Altamira caves in northern Spain. There were rock paintings of animals thousands of years old. They were as old as art itself, I thought, and I imagined the prehistoric artist who set them there. What did he think of what he was doing? What was his relation to the animals he painted? These same questions came to mind when I observed the work of Tom Uttech. The Altamira artist did not reflect the natural world as a whole, though it was the only world he knew, and it must be supposed that he knew it intimately. His attention was concentrated upon the animals. It is likely because, I believe, they were sacred to him. They represented an existence profoundly different from his own. They were emissaries of the unknown. They were supernatural beings possessed of mysterious and powerful spirit. He imagined them. He could not know of their mystical being in the world beyond his own. But he could image them on the surfaces of the cave walls and on the surface of his mind.

There is obviously an acute difference between a painting representing nature and nature itself. The paintings of Tom Uttech illustrate that difference in an original and accomplished way. He strikes a critical balance between the figurative and the abstract. In order to appreciate fully the essential originality of Uttech's work, one must consider the actual landscape that informs it.

The woods and lakes of the upper Midwest are a kind of signature of North America. It is as if, in this region, the dominant and diverse features of the earth constitute a type of geological common denominator. They remind us of the wilderness that once defined so much of our country. To walk into the woods on a cool, silent morning, or in the late afternoon when the light deepens and flares on the sky, is to know the ancient and sacred aspect of the earth, and there is the conviction that this is the world as it once was, and as it ought to be.

The quality of light in Uttech's work is crucial. There are settings in which the light of the moon or of a sunset, for example, creates an ethereal, enchanted impression. And there are here and there floating, luminous ribbons that suggest the Northern Lights. In some of the paintings the sun sheds gradations of light on the picture plane according to the artist's perspective on the landscape.

*O Great One, accept my prayer.
Hear my honor song. My voice wavers.
You are in all ways greater than my words.
You appear each day on the dark rim;
You rise in vapor and you set in fire.
You touch a brilliance to the hills,
And they smolder. You clarify the plain,
And you make crystalline the wind.*

These lines are from a Native American prayer to the sun. The Ojibway people occupy the land that Uttech paints. They are earth keepers whose tenure on the North American continent dates from the Ice Age. The artist has learned from them, and he shares their sense of the sacred. They are subliminal in his work, just below the surface of his brush strokes. They are there.

Uttech recounts an incident that borders on the mystical. One day he came upon a particularly beautiful spot deep in the woods. He had walked a long way, and sat down to rest close to a fallen tree. In a little while he saw something move at the far end of a tree trunk. A lynx mounted the tree and slowly walked the entire length of it. Uttech held his breath. The creature came within a few feet of him, then without urgency stepped to the ground and disappeared. Incredibly, it had given no sign of being aware of Uttech's presence despite its nature, its sphere of instinct, and its superior senses. Perhaps its attitude was that of the bear's—remote, imperturbable—or that of the animals of Altamira, proceeding from a dimension beyond the wall. In any case, this was a moment of communion. And communion with nature is implicit in the considerable range of Uttech's work. For this we are in his debt.

N. Scott Momaday is a poet, novelist, artist, teacher, storyteller and member of the Kiowa tribe. His many works, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *House Made of Dawn*, celebrate and preserve Native American culture. He is the recipient of numerous awards and honors, including most recently the Frost Medal for distinguished lifetime achievement in poetry. He lives and works in New Mexico.