

LOST AND FOUND

Richard Young's Rites of Passage

Boise artist Richard Young is, one could say, a man on a mission. The last five years have been a period of momentous change, necessitating a move toward to a new stage of his life, during which he has harnessed his art as an instrument of introspection and discovery. The impetus for embarking on this project was the passing of his wife, artist Cheryl Shurtleff, which was a turning point in and of itself, followed by the end of his academic career at Boise State University. In brief, the time was ripe for a recovery.

In 2016 Young retired from his university professorship and went on a two-month artist residency in arctic Iceland at a place called Skägaströnd. With its slowed-down sense of time, stillness, and solitude it is an inspirational site, suited for reflection and exploration, literally a breath of fresh air after a time of stress and emotional pain. The local light and atmospherics also helped to create a temper that was conducive to contemplation.

Making art in such surroundings was a cathartic experience which, in hindsight, was something of a rite of passage. In a series of small-scale landscape paintings collectively titled *Mapping the Unknown* Young focused on the idea of loss and regeneration, a conjoined premise that resonated with him in this environment. Inspired by the local geology with its volcanic vistas, jagged peaks, islands of ice and rock, and icebergs floating in deep waters (both on and under the surface) he uncovered other antithetical dualities such as above and below, action and reaction, within and without, the hidden and the conspicuous, which now informed his art.

In a subsequent group of works titled *Bridging the Gap*, imagined landscapes with contorted rivers heading nowhere and waterfalls that hang like bath towels. Perhaps Young's meandering ribbons of water and waterfall drapery hinted at a certain apprehension over where he and his art should go from here, a metaphor for the artist's search for a place to reside aesthetically and philosophically in light of the recent past.

Following *Bridging the Gap*, Young embarked on a new body of work which in some respects can be seen as the offspring of the prior two projects. Titled *Passages*, this series of mixed-media paintings using his signature water-based oils and photography mark a move into broader territory subject-wise, revealing a realist sensibility replacing Young's more romantic inclinations, i.e., urban settings substituting for the arcadian Arctic. Moreover, there is an intensity here of a sort that grabs you with its emotional overtones. A moodiness bordering on despair in these suggest a delving into more explicit interior landscapes, what this time could be called a "mapping the known."

Working small-scale again (it is a format Young has generally preferred for some time) these post-residency pieces combine water-based oils, photography, and found objects and images that carry substantial personal baggage in their themes of mourning and loss. A case in point is the moving sepia-toned close up of his mother on her deathbed titled "To Jean". In general, *Passages* reflects the duality of lost and found, manifest not only in the imagery but literally in the materials themselves. Young happened to score a collection of wood printer's blocks transferred on which were sepias of anonymous yearbook photos, lined up along the margins of some of the pieces like ghostly visages salvaged from the past. In a sense it can be seen as a retrieval of lost souls.

This give and take between the past and the present is echoed in accompanying dark images of abandoned buildings and billboards. An example that ties these various components together is Young's powerful triptych "Family Vacation." (The title can be seen as a double entendre referring to either the circumstances under which the original photographs were taken, or read as having been vacated.) The center panel is of the artist's bedridden mother, flanked on either side by examples of structural decline and loss. To the right is an abandoned Food Mart lurking in nighttime shadows in the center of which a doorway filled with light shines perhaps as a beacon of hope and regeneration. On the left, however, remnants of a billboard with only bits of lettering surviving, completes the picture of futility and defeat.

The billboard images lend a decadent ambience to the suburban settings, providing a counterweight to the faint yearbook figures Young sometimes incorporates. These man-made behemoths have a high-rise, commanding presence that dwarfs those on the ground. The long-legged "Ettas" stalks our world like something out of science fiction, while the towering "Configuration" evokes Shelley's poem "Ozymandias" ("Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair"), the ruins of an ancient conceit.

The impact of these mixed-media works is heightened by the knowledge that the subjects actually exist, captured on film and enhanced in paint. As a group, the billboards form a concatenation of mute monuments, united by their inability to communicate in any meaningful way except metaphorically. Young instills a real sense of drama to these structures; menacing despite their immobility and vacancy. It is now, with this out of his system, that he shifts gears and concludes *Passages* with a group of paintings in which a less grave melancholia resides.

Young is essentially a landscape artist. Although his portfolio includes figurative works and eccentric still lifes, for the most part the concept of landscape is, in its various incarnations, a central component of his oeuvre. And a major inspiration in this regard is the romantic movement in both its visual and literary art forms. The vistas by the 19th century Hudson River School, most notably Thomas Cole, and the paintings of German artist Caspar David Friedrich are important influences on his work. In a painting entitled “Skägastrond” in the *Mapping the Unknown* series Young depicts a dolmen, one of those massive prehistoric stones marking Neolithic graves that Friedrich discovered and included in some of his landscapes. Even the billboards have a dark, Edgar Allan Poe kind of romanticism to them. This aesthetic inclination on Young’s part comes to the fore in the newer works in *Passages*.

There is a genre in painting and photography you could call roadside romanticism. It is inspired by the stretches of empty grasslands we drive through in the mid- and far-west, with lonely abandoned buildings, rusting farm implements, time-worn signs peppered with gunfire. They stand as reminders of nature’s overpowering of man-made structures and machinery, products of the industrial revolution. A poignant example is Young’s mixed-media painting “Leaning This Way” in which a beaten-down barn sways to the side, its precarious posture communicating fragility in the face of the elements, emphasized by the slate sky filled with swirling clouds. (Youngs’ dark, ominous skies remind this New Yorker of those black weather fronts that appear over the city announcing an imminent deluge on a hot, humid summer day.) The building presents as a figurative structure standing in isolation on the edge of an empty field, an image that recalls the explicit loneliness of Andrew Wyeth’s “Christina’s World”. But it is also a warning

message of pending desolation, that nature can turn on us at any time for our environmental sins.

In a second consideration of the looming climate crisis, Young makes use of another motif of this genre, that of the out-of-time roadside gas station with its forms and symbols that can conjure up our own memories. In “Cornered,” a solitary, weathered Gulf Oil sign stands at an intersection under rows of power lines symbolizing an antiquated petrol industry and infrastructure that we remain strapped to. Here, too, dark clouds gather to portend an impending (metaphorical) storm, the consequences of which are our inheritance. All of us, viewers and artist alike, are the ones who are cornered. Curiously, Young surrounds the central image with a framework of striking, rectilinear forms, in this case a Mondrian-esque mosaic. The contrast is a visually stimulating, almost kaleidoscopic effect.

In these paintings we find the themes of loss and passage of time still informing Young’s art. Throughout the *Passages* series Young’s ability to create indelible images imbued with a strong emotional component sets this art apart. His marriage of photography and water-based oils is well-suited for his purposes. The photo-sensitive medium in combination with the thinned paint allows the artist to achieve a subtle luminosity with translucent atmospherics that touch on the sublime.

These later mixed-media paintings left one wondering if *Passages* was coming to a close and there was a new direction in the offing, perhaps one in which more color and light prevail in a new iconography. Richard Young is a very prolific artist and restless soul who cannot stand still artistically. He is a master of the unexpected, surprising us and, one suspects, himself.

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