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art review BY MARC AWODEY

Small and Beautiful

Joseph Salerno's quietude shouldn't be confused with having nothing to say. His "Intimate Views: Paintings of Vermont and Cape Cod," currently on view at Shelburne's Furchgott Sourdiffe Gallery, is an exhibition of haiku-esque paintings capturing elusive moments in time. But to a discerning eye — one that looks beyond the literal picture — Salerno's works are transient passages of "painterliness" rather than typical reinterpretations of nature. While there are sunny trees and even a few cows in his works, Salerno's most intriguing paintings are his most sparse.

The title of "Late Summer Hillside" describes the picture, though not the painting. The hillcrest in the 5.5-by-11-inch oil is a little left of center. Pale-blue negative space between the clouds and ridgeline undulates to the right to impart airy movement. Salerno's paint application sets off his placid, pedestrian subject matter with minute slaps and scratches with understated texture. If details from his little paintings were magnified 20 times, Salerno the realist would be unmasked as an artist who paints with the abstract energy of a Willem de Kooning. Salerno appears to be committed as much to the paint as the landscape, if not more so.

His small scale is deceptive that way. The 4-by-9-inch "Ridgeline 4.9.06" and the 4.5-by-14-inch "Ridgeline 6.9.06 (Gray Sky)" restate the subject of "Late Summer Hillside" with only minor formal variations. The panoramic canvasses play with the level of the sky. Four centuries ago, Dutch landscape painters figured out that a low horizon makes small spaces loom larger. Salerno takes advantage of that trick: Expanding skies become a taller stage for his paint handling. In "Ridgeline 6.9.06 (Gray Sky)," sheets of distant rain are pulled downward with flat brushes, and the ridge is fuzzed out under Salerno's agile strokes.

Several of Salerno's Cape Cod works, unlike his Vermont scenes, have very high slivers of sky. Allotting such a meager space to the heavens presents a more insular view of the land.

The long, thin "Salt Marsh, Provincetown" frames two horizontal panels together into a single 3.5-by-21-inch whole. The broad marsh of scruffy umber grass sprinkled on a bowl of salty sand is as simplified as Salerno's most inventive Vermont landscapes. It's an almost minimalist reduction of form. Steep angles along the bottom corners of the unified image pull the focal point sharply down into the lower left section of the piece.

"Morning Dunes, Race Point Beach" obliquely tips its hat to Asian landscape sensibilities. The 4-by-13-inch Cape Cod vista presents mist settled between small, craggy dunes, and Salerno's paint is applied more thinly than in the Vermont pieces.

A firmament where blue shades to rose and then to gray encloses the top of "White Boat Provincetown Beach," a 4-by-8-inch version of a typical Provincetown theme. Its atypical aspect is Salerno's interpretation of the boat as little more than a collection of lines and soft-edged rectangles resting on a ground of damp, vague reflections. His boat is almost dead-center in the canvas, and his crisp yet minimal palette is equally direct.

To dismiss Salerno's paintings as standard-fare landscapes would be as unjust as calling silent film just a bunch of old black-and-white movies. In his artist's statement, Salerno notes, "There is a specificity about each new place that takes time to emerge. In the same way, my paintings are not meant to be looked at quickly but to be experienced slowly . . ."

That unhurried pace may be anachronistic in contemporary art, but it's nonetheless a highly satisfying mode of human perception. That is especially true when the paintings are strong enough to be worth the viewer's time, and Salerno's are.⑦

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