

The Sea Stacks of Scott Bennett

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While there are pictures that are abstract from conception onward, a lot of abstractions have been *abstracted from* some other process of art-making. The abstractionists themselves, generally, are not interested in purity. This is particularly true in the case of Scott Bennett. As a younger abstractionist, he was advised by no less than Clement Greenberg to enlarge some landscape studies he had painted into more fully developed canvases. (One must beware what Rackstraw Downes once called “the pitiful myopia of standard art history.”)

Bennett subsequently developed an able, convincing technique of landscape painting, and he could have settled for his lot as a nature painter of respectable rank such as that can be attained nowadays. But that was never his goal. Rather, he was engaged in an interrogation, via intuition, of the mechanisms by which pictures work. That is the essence of the modernist project, and when he turned back to abstraction those mechanisms continued to operate. Figurative *functioning* persisted even depiction dropped off.

This is apparent in a series that he calls the Sea Stack paintings. They include forms recognizable as some kind of stony island in front of an ocean, horizon line running behind the mass in the foreground, and sky extending to three edges of the rectangle. Semblance to any coast ends there. Sea, stack, and sky are wholly invented, wild in coloration and rendered in a spirit of experiment.

The Sea Stacks capitalize on the fact that the landscape archetype in the human psyche is so firmly ingrained that you can put the analogous forms down in nearly any way you like so long as they have some aesthetic urgency to back them up. That enables the clouds shaped like sofa cushions in *Sea Stack Song* and the cranberry-dotted waters of *Smoke Ring*. It may sound comic to describe them like that, and they do have an element of humor. But they are anxious as well, and a little anxiety-provoking on account of their profound strangeness. They are uncomfortable in a way that his tree pictures never were. The discomfort is not for its own sake but a mechanism to get into an original and vital mode of working.

Mountain Song has a sky full of fluid dispersions, while the round chunk of paint in *Sea Stack in an Emerald Sea* looks like it was peeled dry out of the bottom of a container and mashed into wet paint already on the canvas. This wide vocabulary derives from a technical knowledge of acrylic paint that is hard for the untrained to appreciate, just as it is hard to appreciate music fully if you don't know about keys and time signatures. The abstractionist gives up, along with imagery, the obvious virtuosity of mimesis. But in the Sea Stacks, Bennett's skill appears in the odd but inarguable choices around color combinations and form-making. Through his powers, the scenes come alive like beasts.