

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE OF DAVID LUND

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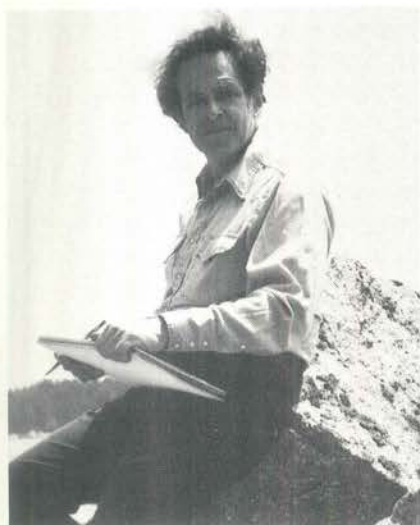


Photo Sally Amster

AN UNDERSTANDING of the artist's mind and nature is often the primary concern of the non-artists who inhabit the art world. Whether writers, dealers, art historians, or collectors, those genuinely interested in the impulse to creation seek to unravel the artistic process in the hope of seeing what the artist sees, knowing what the artist knows, so that they may have a better understanding of life itself.

As a person of limited artistic talents, I am no exception. I never cease to wonder at and envy not only the end result but the processes which allow the artist to look at life in a way that has been denied me.

Therefore, when a painter as articulate as David Lund comes along, the urge to pry from him the secret of his vision is overwhelming. Sometimes lyrical, sometimes massively brooding, his hauntingly beautiful paintings seem less about the exterior of things than their inner substances. Despite the sparkling surfaces that attest to the artist's virtuoso handling of color, an other-worldly or mystical quality pervades.

Unlike other Americans who have worked in the romantic tradition, such as Albert Pinkham Ryder, Ralph Blakelock, and Marsden Hartley, Lund shuns the twilight moods, the dark tragedy, and the discordant violence of nature. Still, whether flamboyantly joyous or quietly serene, the colors and forms in his paintings make a statement about the fundamental or primal elements in nature. And his concern with the significance of nature's forms and their relationships to each other and to him have caused him to describe his work as psychological.

What kind of vision is it, then, that motivates an artist to paint such landscapes? To explain, Lund stresses first the difference between certain other types of landscape painting and his own:

"Whenever I think of a certain kind of landscape painting that I associate with the '30s and '40s (though it is not especially of that time, and is still being done today)—the kind in which rolling fields, bountiful hillsides, and forests look rich and flowering for a moment—I find they give off a sense of terrible emptiness and desolation, of being beyond human contact. I cannot imagine ever painting that way. It's as if the artist had been left off a Greyhound bus in the middle of nowhere.

"My landscapes, on the other hand, I see as extensions of space into form, of light into mass, creating an experience in which I can float out into space. This experience unfolds very much the same way a reflective mental process unfolds. The physical space of the painting becomes analogous with the experience of internal reflection, and the landscape becomes something into which my eye, my mind, and my spirit can extend and be measured. The great Chinese landscape painters also felt this. They saw landscape painting as being a paradigm of the way the mind unfolds and the way a man's life and spirituality develop."

The desire to create space in which forms can exist has long been a preoccupation. Lund's career followed the classic route taken by so many back in the '40s and '50s. Born and educated in New York, he came of age with the New York School of Abstract Expression. His friends were Abstract Expressionists, his greatest influences at the time were Willem de-

Overleaf: *Penobscot*, 1976, oil, 44 x 66. An important work and one of the largest sizes Lund works with, this painting changed drastically from its original conception. The austere extremes of mass and color developed as the painting progressed. The forms Lund created, both autonomous yet arranged in clusters, kept pushing the distant space farther and farther away from the viewer.





Kooning and Arshile Gorky, and he showed in the lively Tenth Street galleries with others in the brave new art world.

Lund wasn't quite like them, however. He was not an Abstract Expressionist. Lund painted abstract landscapes that defied the dogma of modern art which dictates that one must rigidly adhere to the integrity of the flat surface of the two-dimensional canvas and reject all attempts to create a feeling of depth. Even though the ideas that gave him his first impulse toward contemporary painting sprang from Cézanne, early analytical Cubism, and Mondrian, he could not paint a flat space.

"When I tried to paint in a consolidated and flattened way, in sort of a synthetic Cubism, I found myself right up against a stone wall. Things began to open up for me when I pushed the space in and felt that the boundaries of the canvas no longer had such a confining role in determining the shape of the painting that was going on inside. In other words, the architecture of the painting was no longer limited by either the idea of a flat space or a space that was bound by four edges. In this way I found myself gradually developing a kind of painting that was a psychological landscape."

According to Lund, "Psychological landscapes include forms that accumulate a sense of thought without my knowledge, that seem to sense themselves. Whether figurative or abstract, they evoke various kinds of statements about themselves in my mind. In other words, they are the transformation of my ideas and sensations through the medium of space. Some are rooted in nature, others not. If they are forms from nature—rocks, for example—I feel they can sense themselves gradually emerging from the sand or actually lying on the beach."

The concept of expressing such forms either abstractly or figuratively is not new to landscape painting. Albert Ryder, Marsden Hartley, and Arthur Dove also concentrated on the fusion of outer and inner space in both modes. Dove, for example, sometimes expressed the emotions evoked by experiences in completely abstract symbols and at other times found natural forms an adequate vehicle for his emotional content.

Although Lund's landscapes also vascillate somewhat between the more abstract (*In the Wood*) and the more figurative, over the years mass and space have become more rationally conceived in his work. As this shift occurred, a subtle switch took place. Before it, he painted abstract

Photos of art by Harry Hess.
Courtesy Grace Borgenicht Gallery, Inc.



Above: *High Spruce*, 1975, charcoal, 20 x 26. Lund uses charcoal as if it were paint, creating washes and color. Lund uses drawing to explore mass and intervals of tone as equivalents to the experience evoked by the subject.

Opposite page: *Grove*, 1976-78, oil, 48 x 41. This started as a morning light painting, and as it grew the colors deepened, yet the light was sustained. "The challenge," comments Lund, "is to make the color do what the forms do and still, even in the most solid forms, allow the color to breathe and endow each form with its own distinct presence."

Left: *Indian Point, from the Field*, 1975, charcoal, 26 x 20. Lund often joins forms—note the tree at left—that give a sense of the subject and act as the subject acts. Lund based this work on two views, developing the contrast between the mass and intricate patterns—such as the rocks and the grass—set against a field of light.





forms which struck a parallel to real forms in nature. Now he paints real forms that strike a parallel to experiences which are one step removed from the immediate and exist in a more personal and subjective context. The switch has caused his paintings to take on a greater depth and a more evocative quality, because, as he puts it, the objects in the landscape are no longer abstract but are very particular and intimate friends.

In any attempt to explain Lund's paintings and that accumulation of experiences that shaped his personal vision, it is not enough to say that his landscapes became less of an abstraction of emotional states and more a statement about natural forms. It is necessary to know how this happened, or, more precisely, how one specific place—Deer Isle, Maine—precipitated the change.

Deer Isle has long been a favorite summer community for artists. "And with good reason," says Lund, who bought a house there in 1962. "The landscape is so scenic, so panoramic, so incredibly beautiful. There are no interrupted vistas. Looking seaward, the area is studded with other islands. Inland, there are woods, hills, outcroppings of rocks. Your eye is always bouncing back and forth. It's not like looking out over an extended plane. You see forms in a mixed scale to one other. The perspectives are so multiple and various that the forms act on each other to rearrange themselves as you watch, almost as if the landscape were behaving as a painting."

And the light: Lund laughingly says he doesn't want to advertise the fact, but the light is extraordinary. "John Steinbeck noted this in *Travels with Charlie*. The light picks out the smallest and most minute fractions of color and projects everything in its greatest sharpness and intensity. A patch of lichen on a slab of blue-gray granite can appear in many separate colors, from jade greens right up through subtle pinks. In New York these colors would flatten out in the light, would homogenize. In Maine they lay out like a Persian rug, fraction by fraction.

"The light doesn't just hit the surface and illuminate the plane. It pene-

trates and carves the forms like sculpture, all the while intensifying and deepening the colors. It's like having your visual range of colors multiplied to an incredible degree. And what happens to color happens to form, because, if the color breaks up into so many different tones which fuse into massive forms, the forms also take on composite yet separate identities."

Deer Isle is a special place for Lund. In fact, one wonders what direction his work might have taken had he not settled there. Such speculation is profitless, however. The fact is that Deer Isle affected Lund's work in the most profound way and with unexpected results.

Right from the beginning of his summer retreats to the Maine community, he spent long hours exploring the Island. Not only were the grand vistas taken in and admired, but objects close at hand—rocks, moss, lichens, roots, etc.—were also observed.

Then something curious happened. After two years of combing the landscape, these small shapes began to emerge in a series of pastels. Previously his oils had concentrated only on broader, more massive forms. Yet, so fascinating were these more intimate shapes that for some years he neglected painting in favor of doing drawings and pastels. This was a brave act for an artist accustomed to regularly scheduled shows of his paintings; indeed, six years elapsed before his next painting exhibition.

As the imagery began to correspond more closely to the landscape, forms which had previously been ambiguous in his abstract paintings became more explicitly volumetric. That is, the forms didn't just imply volume; they had volume in a very pronounced way. This meant that, unlike the abstract compositions, which focused primarily on structure and space, he was now faced with a whole new set of concerns: volume, density, and air.

And the more he drew, the more he realized that by fusing smaller elements into large ones he could project them on a monumental scale. This allowed him to return to large oils: "Gradually I came to see that everything in the landscape was a projection of forms lying beneath the surface—sometimes just below it: Those undulant carpets of moss that roll along the forest floor and up the sides of granite ledges barely conceal the hard edge of stone that is just below that soft, emerald mat."

Equally important was the sense of scale he was able to deal with: "That's the peculiar thing about landscape. You can measure the smallest thing to the largest in a continuous scale of progression. In *In the Wood* there are clusters of forms in the immediate

foreground which would be just a few feet away from you. These bank into the distance and go higher along a terraced hillside filled with spruce trees. The sense of scale starts at your feet and goes right out. It is very intimate and very broad at the same time."

A different color range also emerged from the pastels. Early works had been closely keyed: blues, grays, sands. In an effort to expand the range, however, he experimented with ever higher intensities of rose, red, and pink. These researches also carried over into the paintings. By combining high intensity colors with an approach to color that might seem at loggerheads with that of the traditional landscapist, he injects his work with an emotionalism not otherwise obtainable. Take *The Promontory*, for example. Had he been true to nature and painted the cliffs blue or gray or whatever they really are, the highly charged quality of great rocks thrusting themselves out of the sea and against each other would vanish. Or if the atmosphere is serene, he might find sand colors and blues more to his liking. In other words, he applies color as a writer might invent an onomatopoeic word to heighten an emotion. Non-localized color also serves as a means to create other effects, such as cast shadows. Painting one side of a rock gold and the other blue might not be everyone's idea of the way to cast a shadow, but it suits Lund's work just fine.

Direct observation of the Deer Isle landscape convinced Lund of the validity for him of landscapes derived from sources in nature. The materials—colors and forms—are like the raw materials of painting, he says: "I collected stones for a time. They had a whole landscape in them. Light would fracture their colors, unfolding them in quarter-tones and whole octaves, like an infinite palette. It's always a shock when nature imitates painting or when the landscape and the painting encounter themselves in each other."

Direct observation, however, is not part of Lund's painting process. With the exception of small on-the-spot drawings, all work is done in the studio, and most of the large oils are started and finished back in New York, where Lund lives most of the year. Form and composition are set in the first day, but the weight of forms and the interaction of various sections of the painting are worked on until the whole painting is as full in every part as he wants it. Although he works very directly, the balance of the painting is very critical, and he spends weeks, or more likely months, trying to achieve this.

During this time he doesn't lose the

Opposite page: *In the Wood*, 1975, oil, 48 x 40. Courtesy the artist. In this painting Lund employs equivalents: red for green, rose for the depth and light of the wood. As in most works, Lund had a particular location—in other words, a motif endowed with characteristics of depth, intimacy, scale, and so on—in mind when the painting began. "Once the color space sense was established, however, a drastic transformation took place, the colors bursting forth on their own," Lund recalls.

feeling of immediacy of the motif because he uses stored-up impressions from his walks and from the drawings done on-the-spot as the basis of his compositions. "I have found memory to be true to the source in nature, sifting out what is of little use, retaining the most indelible and most fruitful of the forms of the landscape," he explains. "The space between the source and the recollection leaves room for invention and abstraction. They are as necessary to me as the raw stuff of nature, and they shift the focus from object to metaphor."

The transferral of emphasis from object into metaphor is what separates Lund from the current crop of artists whose goal is frequently a detailed, accurate representation of the landscape. Such realism has no appeal to Lund. "Nature embraces the meaning of things, not just the way they look. Nature for me is more involved in the modes and tones of experience at the source and in the mind's eye than faithfulness to appearance. Its life is ongoing, and its boundaries, along with those of art, are constantly changing. If I work from the experience of nature, it is because it leads me to the unforeseen and to painting itself, which is drawn from life and its own intense reality."

There is no question that it is painting, in the final analysis, which pri-

marily concerns Lund. He has made the landscape his because it offers more possibilities to express emotional responses to the real world than interiors or other types of rationally conceived painting.

The viewer is also offered more possibilities to understand the landscape through his compulsion to paint. Says Lund, "To understand the landscape, its surface must be penetrated; to be painted it must be transformed." What emerges from his painterly responses to air, water, earth, and sky is a deep imprint of nature, an imprint that lets us see more than would be possible in real life.

Lund's work is owned by many public collectors, such as the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Toronto Gallery of Art, and the Fort Worth Art Center, as well as many important private collectors. During his career he has been awarded two Fulbright grants, a Ford Foundation Purchase prize, a Childe Hassam Purchase prize given by the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and has been selected to exhibit in the residence of the American Ambassador in Athens as part of the "Art in Embassies" program and in the White House through the National Collection of Fine Arts. Currently he teaches painting and drawing at Columbia University. •