



David Lund, *Toward the Wood II*, 1982. Oil on canvas, 34 x 44".
Courtesy Borgenicht Gallery.

FORM AND ESSENCE IN THE ART OF DAVID LUND

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David Lund's paintings draw on the experience of nature
but are images and worlds of their own.

David Lund, *Atlantic II*, 1983. Oil on
canvas, 50 x 62". Courtesy
Borgenicht Gallery.



Artists come in all styles and techniques, from the purely representational to the abstract, but one of the most interesting American painters, David Lund, whose exhibition at the Borgenicht Gallery runs from December 3-22, combines aspects of figuration and abstraction in a unique way. Lund's present work evolves from earlier paintings which were directly "abstract" in that they did not spring from specific sources in nature. The recent paintings and pastels derive from the physical environment of coastal Maine. But Lund is not a landscape painter in the usual sense. Rather, his works use forms that originate in nature, presenting rocks, trees, ocean, and sky as archetypal essences whose complex arrangements of shape and color evoke an order beyond the temporal. The paintings thus draw on the experience of nature but are images and worlds of their own.

The primary qualities of nature draw Lund to his source. In the coastal landscape he has discovered formations that have a high degree of correspondence in their form and character with the central concerns of his painting. As seen through his work, place is at once intimate and epic, in the latter dimension a kind of Delphi, where shapes and processes of nature are revealed in especially intense form and connect the here and now with a realm of altered meaning and dimension. At the source, strata of earth and rock exposed along the shore, in visible cross section, reveal the tremendous energy of the forms themselves. The crystalline light of the coast intensifies color and enlarges the chromatic scale. Shores and forest suggest thematic material in an almost unlimited variety. The natural environment functions as a catalyst for images that unfold in the artist's mind and work. For Lund, these images represent fidelity to place in its essential condition.

On first seeing a Lund work the viewer encounters an array of forms, textures, and colors which are instantly recognizable as an event in nature. Contemplating the dynamic shapes within the picture, one becomes aware that suffusing these forms is an almost magical source of light that comes from within the individual work. This light at once verifies the forms of the scene in their concreteness and leads the viewer into the discovery of another world unfolding within the work.

Each piece presents a way of seeing the rock, the sea, the sky, the world; each painting renders an individual quality, temperament, and mood. Yet a vision unifies these individual creations, as the artist's transforming eye and hand seek to merge sensibility and statement, reality and myth, in a single visual structure. The essence of this vision is twofold: in it the immediate and tangible world coexists with an order beyond time. Fully realized, the works unite palpable and visionary realms in an order that celebrates the immediacy of objects and moments and at the same time draws the viewer into a transcendent experience. This art may best be termed metaphysical.

Lund involves the viewer directly in the space and the event occurring in each work, making of him or her not an onlooker but a participant. In a number of works, the landscape begins almost at the spectator's feet; the resulting space appears to surround and then lead the viewer into the midst of the work and from there to the work's evocative core. Lund states that in order to paint these places he must have first explored them many times, feeling how a bank of ledges or an aisle of trees will define his scale within the natural architecture. He finds in the natural world an environment in which the human scale and presence can be defined. Although his works include no figures, the human presence is implicit and pervasive. Lund speaks of his landscape as an "inhabited space."

In the paintings, the viewer encounters this landscape through its powerful forms. Upon entering a painting, one discovers a space which moves and shifts with the observer, unfolding in a connected and varied sequence like that of architecture. Within its space the component sections of a work

will assume multiple and alternative readings in mass, solidity, and depth. Lund seeks, by many different kinds of references within the same event, to make the work encompass both sides of experience, the 'real' and the 'abstract', so that the presence of one within the other is inescapable.

Though original sources in nature may derive from a particular locality, they are always changed. Often the specific images and forms are invented from the start. From his direct or imagined encounter, the artist retrieves (the idea is of derivation from a primal depth or lost original). Lund states: "I am committed to retrieving the essential stuff of experience, if not the fact of every leaf and tree, their very presence. Above all, presence. That is what I feel, and what I think permeates my best work."

Some of the work embodies a dark energy, concentrated in subjects that are given the greatest scale, density, richness, an intensity of image. This energy is similar to the primal source within the psyche: it is the dark or luminous force that artists know they contact—the art in art. The dark energy has its counterpart in a need to celebrate light. In this Lund feels two desires: that everything be involved with light and air, and that through this he mold the sinews and bones of nature.

Lund is a painter whose allegiances are rooted in the revolution that began with Cézanne. To Lund, the substance of that revolution was less a break with tradition than a drive to enlarge the frontiers of painting and sculpture, not in terms of what is claimed through process and ideology but what is created in the very image. Lund is drawn to artists such as de Kooning and Guston whose imaginative focus brought about significant changes in both imagery and structure. He is equally an admirer of Balthus whose work does not reconcile easily with the orthodoxies of Modernism, and whose art lies outside the boundaries of any predictable mainstream. Lund does not subscribe to a linear or deterministic view of contemporary art. He has shared, along with painters like Guston, an immense love for the art of the past, particularly for metaphysical art which is "loaded" and which reverberates on every level of meaning. Throughout the evolution of his work, and in his own contemporary terms, Lund has been committed to shaping an idiom capable of yielding a similar depth of meaning.

Lund's earlier and more "abstract" paintings possessed a

David Lund, Red Sea, 1982. Oil on canvas, 38 x 46". Courtesy Borgenicht Gallery.



clear kind of landscape space, but the forms in those paintings were nameless. In 1963, Lund completed a large majestic abstract oil, *Atlantic I*, which significantly foreshadowed the present development of his sensibility and statement. In this work, open scaffolds of form were suspended in space, in tension to gravity. The forms fused into a central image that was projected with a sense of imperative. In its absolute and confrontational character, *Atlantic I* differed from the works that preceded it and led Lund into an involvement with forms of a particularly animate nature. Over a period of time, these began to allude to forms in the landscape and to suggest a human scale.

Lund made a conscious decision not to turn his back on things that were increasingly compelling to him. Where earlier he had sensed the world concealed in "abstract" images, he again looked over his shoulder to find the ghosts of those other "abstract" presences and meanings within concrete images. What commands his attention and dominates his thinking is the mysterious object-image. Lund insists that what we have come to call the "real" and the "abstract" in the context of meaning were once intimately connected, as in the Renaissance and Chinese painting. It is the point at which they are contiguous that they are revealed unexpectedly in each other. Lund came to feel that the forms he experienced and painted were invested with meanings far beyond the literal, and he redefined painting in terms of the imperatives of feeling and sensed possibility.

Lund's work thus exists in a special context. It departs significantly from both painting that is traditional in nature and painting that appears experimental in premise. If his work seems on the surface traditional, it quickly reveals a structure quite different from that of traditional painting or conventional landscape. Lund establishes a simultaneous space in which everything is seen at once, a space both frontal and deep, in which the forms are charged with an energy and presence that confront the viewer and challenge his notions of reality. Objects exist as concrete images located in a terrain of possibility (as Lund puts it, "a place called painting"). Lund is moving toward the limits of his sensibility, not outside but within the world, to seek what verifies and enlarges the scope of what can be painted. The paintings mix the worlds of figuration and abstraction so that their boundaries are destroyed and reformed. The issue, finally, is not abstraction or representation but essence.

The realization of this essence begins with drawing. Drawings function not as complete depictions but as organizations of space and place that have implications for the development of color. Drawing begins the process of transformation between source and art. Before he draws, Lund has developed an intense familiarity with his sources. The drawings sharpen his responses and focus on elements in the sources that are especially evocative. In relying on preliminary drawings, Lund improvises freely, often creating many variations from an initial motif. He will return to earlier drawings whose images and ideas continue as ongoing possibilities that may be brought to fruition months or even years later.

For Lund, drawing is the door to color; he looks for color that his forms create. Color fulfills what drawing implies both as space and as substance, within a conception of form as three-dimensional. Once color enters, it takes the dominant role: it is the mantle of light, the stuff of earth and sky, the very intensity of form. It acts as focus, a point of greatest clarity for the painting. In pastels and oils Lund explores a range of themes which yield diverse possibilities. In doing this he follows the shifting relations between source and free invention. On looking at these works, it is clear that there is neither a fixed focal point for the eye nor a static perspective. Lund's mode of organization includes many viewpoints, a multiplicity of volumes and perspectives.

Lund works in pastels as well as oils not only out of affection for the medium but because it allows simultaneous exploration of drawing and painting. In line, mark, intervals, the method is one of drawing. However, the development of the image by means of color is that of painting, so pastel is a bridge between the two media. Partly because their execution and resolution are more immediate, pastels have become the front line of exploration in Lund's work. Since 1979 he has used pastel ever more consciously to investigate and explore the range of

thematic material and the possibilities of the medium. The explorations of the pastels, themselves fully realized works, become expanded and fulfilled in the paintings.

The making of a pastel or painting is a process of evocation in some ways analogous to music, in which the brushstrokes, units of form and color, act as intervals in a musical continuity and conjure the sense of how one sees. To the painterly painter, paint and color are protoplasm, and through the act of painting the artist reaches out to touch and enshrine the essence of the natural form. The natural elements themselves have equivalents in paint; they are transformed yet retain their essential qualities. In *Red Sea*, silt, sand, and seaweed reappear metamorphosed in the colors and unfolding shapes of the painting.

The interplay of sensibility and statement that such transformations exemplify is manifest in the individual works. In *Red Sea*, a sense of open, limitless, infinite space confronts the shifting, unsettling, brown ledge. Pitch and perspective inform the unique angle of the sea; the encompassing role of the sea which moves into sky gives a sense of both measure and non-limit, of the desire to expand into deep space and a wish for full measure within space. There is a sense of achieved unity, an awareness of its components and complexity. Images in this and other paintings also function as metaphysical analogues, containing the meaning of both their specific forms and their extended implications. In this and other sea paintings, for example, water is the beyond, measureless space; water flows around the forms on a shore mirroring the infinite as it surrounds the immediate.

Form and color in *Toward The Wood II* illustrate the fusion of immediate and visionary orders as the concrete and decisive forms that begin in the foreground, almost underfoot, move into the dreamlike enchantment of the deep wood. In that visionary space at the back is a deep blue that goes nowhere but into itself, into which the viewer is drawn; it is a mysterious and reflective space lying within and beyond the familiar order. Lund's capture of essence and the elemental quality of forms is particularly intense in *Arbor*, in which we note the scale of trees and rocks, the sense of architectonic space, and the powerful, superhuman primary essences.

Atlantic II, Lund's most recent oil and a major painting, adds to the complexity of most of the work a particularly dramatic and turbulent arrangement of forms in contention. The slope and angle of descent that is a primary aspect of the painting crystallizes their forms, which fold toward and against each other in a series of dynamic movements. The viewer senses many kinds of order, many different elements in dramatic tension. The painting is charged with a sense of primal force; mutability and change dominate. Intimations of serenity appear only in the reiterations of blue in the top diagonal band of the painting. Plasticity, color, and the relations of forms express a darker energy, no less genuine than statements in the more meditative works and at least as complex in structure and composition.

Lund continues to aim for synthesis even as his work is becoming more urgent and intense in its colors and breadth of chromatic range and in its entire pitch. As in *Atlantic II*, there is in a number of recent works a high level of dramatic tension, and the forms resolve into entities that are increasingly emphatic. Objects and forms often vie: they seek resolution but refuse to compromise between opposing elements and they embrace extremes. The recent works often combine intimate and large dimensions and the nearest and furthestmost definitions of space. As in *Red Sea*, specific interplay among the diverse rocks counterpoints the extended and fathomless sea. Rock and ocean confront each other in a dramatic clash. Lund's paintings and pastels possess order and definition evolved in complex ways. At the same time, the work is neither static nor temperate. David Lund is moving to expand the substance of his subject and his painterly sensibility to render ever more fully the images that his imagination transforms. His ongoing work manifests the fullness of his powers; it is informed as well by an imperative that already suggests an artistic journey into new territory, toward new dimensions and growth.

This article is based on a series of conversations with David Lund, some of which were recorded on tape, between May and October, 1983.