Carl Little – Melanie Essex: Varieties of Landscape Experience

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When Melanie Essex studied at the New York Studio School in the early 1990s (twice receiving a Milton Avery Scholarship), first year students were encouraged to spend first eight hour day painting from the model in the morning and drawing from the model all afternoon. Essex remembers being told by her teacher, Lennart Anderson, "Don't become a mere artist. Transition to fashion." Anderson had in both and Essex and the rest of us did not.

Fresh from this rigorous program, Essex headed outside. She started painting what she thought she knew: the landscape of eastern Long Island where she grew up. "It was first with beautiful skies," she remembers, and "immediately varying and always different." There was, "an edge," to her appreciation of that particular place, in particular, "its fragility and resilience," which made it compelling.

When Essex moved to London in 1995, she took up cityscapes. She was fascinated by the shape of buildings and their relationship to the natural world, "vegetation, cloud formations, the colors of the sky."

Melanie Essex, Fresh Pond

On a trip to the canal along the English Channel, the painter saw "Brown away" by an enormous, rusted, industrial structure. Essex's painting, "Brown Away," was, she said, "a kind of cityscape." She recalls, "Interesting, environmentally problematic, and yet socially beautiful." Her confluent take recalls Sydney Goodmark's notes on his painting Landscape with Four Towers (1978), in Alan Gussow's *A Sense of Place*. The Artist in the American Landscape (1973). "Towers are commemorative in the way man-made structures too often violate a place in the landscape. I both revel at this intrusion and find myself drawn to it."

The power plant provided a way for Essex to paint the landscape without being sentimental. In sentimental pieces in her 2010-11 series, the structures sit diminutive at the bottom of large vertical canvases, as if they were looking up amazed parts of whole. As Essex has done in subsequent work, the horizon is low, the sky high, the building big. The rendering is painterly and semi-abstract—seen to a degree at times romantic.

Melanie Essex, Pink, Sky Tank, Lisbon

Another series from around this same time, Field-Dip-Figures, presents a similar above/below-divided format. In one, simple, small flat-colored figures are seen in various poses along the bottom, some of them fighting, while irregular cloud shapes float in a tall red sky. With the situation in Ukraine top of mind, the image conjures war.

Melanie Essex, Red Sky Tank, 2011-2015

In moving to Cushing, Maine, in 2018, Essex adjusted her landscape vision to a coastal milieu. As she watched the weather from her studio windows overlooking the St. George River, imagery "started to fall into place."

The resulting soft watercolors celebrate the ephemeral beauty of Maine skies. Working with a range of colors, including rich tones of red and blue, Essex uses the mist-cream however as a prompt to explore light effects and the abstract possibilities of weather. The tones at the bottom of each canvas is mostly minimal, a narrow strip of water and land, sometimes with a house.

Melanie Essex, Inside and Outside, 2019

Essex began a new series, Inside and Outside, in the winter of 2020. at the outset of the pandemic, shifting her attention from the view out her window to what was inside. "The jumble of material in my studio," she recalls, "became a kind of landscape." Far from the still-life, she had produced in art school, these works developed organically. "If somewhat disconcerting" a reflection in some ways of the new paradigm of "wooding everything from the grocery store, furiously disinfecting all surfaces and wearing latex gloves." She took some extra solace from the familiar items in her studio. "While outside, something else was in control."

Melanie Essex, Winter Dawning I, 2021

Often, Essex explains, she will use drawing "to start the process of looking." Her 2021 Winter Dawnings helped her connect with a new place. California, specifically the lay of a ridge overlooking San Francisco Bay to the east and the Pacific to the west. She worked outside until the dense fog made the charcoal on her paper start to run.

Melanie Essex, Winter Dawning I, 2021

The drawings present the landscape in graceful shadings of light and dark, with a sun shape sometimes showing through veils of mist. "Something about the scale of the landscape and the ongoing emergence of the pandemic made a difference," Essex recalls and led to a fruitful engagement. Some of these drawings recall the charcoal landscapes Emily Nielligan (1924–2018) made on Great Cranberry Island.

Melanie Essex, Night Storm

Essex's most recent series, started while in residence at Monson Arts in the fall of 2020, deals with the Covid-19 pandemic. Her work has always been rooted in the physical environment, and in the dark, the shapes sometimes ghostly. She wants to make this idea further. "There is a strength on our property that I've always found pretty annoying," she relates, but "oxidizing" she finds herself intrigued. So are we.

Portrait of Melanie Essex

Essex in Film

Essex Gallaway is somewhat reluctant to be becoming a painter, starting with film in her teen years. Her parents, Nancy Wasserman-Wilding and John Wasserman, were painters "and film seemed more modern" to her adolescent self.

Essex received a fellowship to study film editing at RADA (Central London) surprised "she only do episodes of she technique do efficiency in Nouvelle, after which she moved to New York City to work in commercial production, which took her around the world. While some of her commercials ended up in Medelley collection, she never felt her personal work resonated the attention it deserved.

Essex recently took up film again, starting with a short piece about the Bernard Langlais Sculpture Preserve in Cushing. Around Block, the original cousin of her Long Island image-making beyond, had sold a film she had made on a teenage dance program, she was a family friend, and commissioned a contiguous piece for an exhibition about the preservation of the sculpture preserve.

Essex is currently working on a film about the painter Lois Dodd whom she has known all her life. "She is a great, strong woman who inspired and encouraged generations of women artists." Dodd's film also stressed representation and figurative painting were underplaying their respective importance.

Image at top: Melanie Essex, Winter Dawning

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