

Felix Malnig • Robyn O'Neil • Melissa Oresky • Claire Sherman

On Paper

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Letter from Vermont

By Lori Waxman

It's as beautiful and restful as ever in Vermont. We've been here nearly a week, and each morning we run straight to the pond and plunge in, happy to wake up to cold, fresh water instead of the usual shower. Then coffee and breakfast on the cabin porch, which overlooks one of the most magnificent vistas of the Stowe Valley: Mount Mansfield soaring in the distance, its bare ski runs snaking down conifer slopes, to the north the dip of Smuggler's Notch winding its way to the next valley over. In between sits the Trapp Family Lodge, home of the famous singing Austrian family (really!). Behind us rises Pinnacle, with its dual peaks that we climb each year, winter and summer alike, and everywhere grow wild apples and raspberries almost ripe for the picking.

Preparing for our trip, I imagined how symbiotic a place this would be in which to write an essay for the *On Paper* show, devoted as it is to four artists invested in the landscape genre. I admit I even fantasized myself in the position of Thoreau, who moved his desk and chair outside each day so he could work under the inspiration of birdsong and gentle wind. Plenty of ravens and blue jays singing hereabouts, and the wind never stops rustling the trees – but somehow the symbiosis I'd hoped for is absent.

And how. I'm surrounded by generous beds of wildflowers and familiar, deciduous forests, not the disorienting, fractured spaces of Melissa Oresky's gardens and landfills. I'm relaxing amid the rolling hills and scalable peaks of New England cottage country, not the dark, dystopic expanses of Robyn O'Neil's endless snowfields and oceans, or the sublime, gravity-defying rock faces of Claire Sherman's Southwest. And I'm staying in an airy, sun-filled family cabin, not one of Felix Malnig's desolate suburban houses. I'm sitting pretty in a picturesque scene – perfect for the kind of decompression and rejuvenation that hard-working urbanites crave, but completely unrelated to the unsettling perspectives that each of these artists offers through their variously drawn, painted and collaged landscapes.

This morning I went out after breakfast to pick flowers for the house and herbs for lunch. Tiger lilies, red bee bombs, echinacea and some Queen Anne's lace for the big vase on the dining table, a bunch of lavender for the bedroom, chives and thyme for the omelette. The gardens are generous and forgiving, dense, perennial and always surprising. My mother tends them when she's here; they manage on their own when she's not. The meadows need no help at all, nor do the fern beds and raspberry bushes that edge the surrounding forest. Planned or not, these spaces are all gardens in one way or another, but so different from the kind that intrigue Melissa Oresky. Standing in the middle of a patch of wildflowers, I'm lulled by the lack of straight lines, by the invisible organic logic that determines what grows where, by the bees that fly from one flowering

stem to another, and by my own general irrelevance to the scene at hand. Conversely, in the formal spaces that inspire Oresky's most recent work – rock beds and German show gardens – lines not only order and fragment space, they do so to the point of total disorientation. It's almost as if the stuff of nature from which these spaces were built – pebbles and small boulders, clipped hedges and rows of annuals – finally resisted the strictures of design into which they were landscaped, rejecting the human order imposed upon them. Oresky renders this tension between the ordered and the chaotic, the human and the organic, abstractly, suggesting that it might be repressed in the gardens themselves. And she manages to implicate the viewer's body, also in a way so distinct from how it feels to be in a formal garden, where vistas are staged and pathways clear cut. Looking at her prismatic series, the viewer must choose between a dizzying multiplicity of views and viewing positions – not unlike me in the midst of a wildflower meadow, but without any of the hard lines, vertigo or intentions gone awry.

On Tuesday we hiked from the Trout Club up to Taylor Lodge and sat for a while on the cliff that overlooks the quiet, plummeting Nebraska Valley. The scenery was gorgeous but harsh, too, far greater than us two small hikers perched carefully on a ledge. Perhaps it's the superficial similarity between our situation and those depicted in Robyn O'Neil's drawings that haunts me most, for in her pictures too are towering peaks and infinite natural vistas, as well as people to explore them. And yet, these people go nowhere, see nothing. Instead of being moved forward and opened up, they shrink and shrivel, cowed by the sharp heights of graphite mountains. Instead of being inspired and invigorated, they fight and stumble, stymied by the unforgiving boundlessness of sketchy seas. These people do not – cannot – take in the dramatic, awesome landscape that surrounds them; they are engulfed by it, swallowed whole, left empty and confused, prostrate in submission. They are not just humbled by nature and their small place in it – a sensibility felt by any conscientious hiker, in fact sought by most hikers. No, these people find something very different in nature, something irrevocable: their final hours, and far from peaceful ones, bereft with failed resistance, exhaustion and loss. Perhaps they fall so hard and so completely because they resisted, because their instinct was to fight forces greater than themselves?

The hike also had me thinking of Claire Sherman's landscapes, both her large-scale oil paintings and her small mixed-media studies on paper. The natural world always seems on the verge of collapse in these images, both materially and pictorially – precipitously cantilevered rocks or the spindly limbs of a dead tree threaten to fall with as earth-shattering a crash as the strokes of paint that comprise them. Yet by some geological and compositional magic everything remains in place, held together in an exciting tension, one that suggests but ultimately refuses a stable viewing position. No stable position – impossible for a hiker. Yes, there's the exhilaration of lookouts and scrambling and challenging orienteering, but only thrill-seekers get a buzz from standing right on the edge, from having rocks shift beneath their feet, from getting lost in the woods. Such threats present themselves in Sherman's most affecting pictures, large and small, but the scale and medium of the latter – watercolor and gouache versus oil, five inches high versus nine feet – make them far less daunting, less of a bodily threat and more of an idea. Which, in the end, is closer to the experience I find myself having in the woods here, when the trail skirts a steep ravine or passes by a massive collapsed tree. What if I slip? What if a tree falls while I'm nearby? Though not impossible, these scenarios are nevertheless implausible enough to constitute intellectual fodder rather than bodily fear, something interesting to ponder while walking in the woods, not something to be genuinely worried about.

Yesterday we had lunch down in the village, at Jamie's sandwich shop on Main Street, where they make the best chicken salad sandwiches. The village is classic New England: white clapboard church with a steeple you can see for miles, steep-roofed houses with wide front porches and painted wood trim, a couple of basic shops and cafés, an inn, the town hall. Everything's within walking distance of everything else, and there are always people about – the very opposite of the kind of places pictured in Felix Malnig's paintings. No one seems to live in any of the houses he depicts, be they in Flint or Gumpoldskirchen, nor the apartment complexes, in Jerusalem or Chengdu. And the difference can't be laid solely at the door of architecture – Vermont village homes may look nothing like faceless concrete high-rises, but they don't look so unlike single-family suburban dwellings, with their covered porches and gabled roofs. No, the difference goes deeper than stylistic, to the level of urban planning, of geopolitics, and their quotidian spiritual results. The homes in Michigan may once have been full of life, but their owners lost out on that dream when General Motors closed the local plant and laid off thousands of workers, who in turn had no choice but to leave their comfortable shelters behind, to grow dark and derelict. Those in the suburbs of Vienna have met no such financial fate; no, theirs is sealed by the car-centric life of highways and traffic that living outside a city entails. The comfort or lack thereof of apartment blocks raised on the outskirts of Jerusalem and in the West Bank is irrelevant: these are dwellings built on the offensive, less to meet the needs of homemakers than of national security and the Zionist project. Those in China reveal none of the promise of living in the sky, in a flourishing zone of economic growth; their faceless, unfinished facades loom forebodingly, perhaps never to be finished now that the world markets have crashed. Malnig conveys the effect of these situations through paintings of an almost ironic beauty, with thin washes of magenta and sapphire, razor sharp edges and tearful drips, punctured by windows and unfinished window banks of bottomless, haunting black holes that would suck the soul out of anyone who happened nearby, or already did.

None of this, I'll admit, was quite what I planned to be thinking about while on holiday in Vermont. Tomorrow, alas, we return home to Chicago, to showers in the morning and a topography dictated not by mountains and valleys but by wind and skyscrapers.

Lori Waxman is an art critic for the Chicago Tribune and Artforum. She teaches art history at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and is the recipient of a 2008 Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant for her project, "60 wrd/min art critic."

Felix Malnig



Felix Malnig (Austrian, b. 1967) was raised in Germany and Canada, and currently lives and works in Vienna. Malnig studied fine arts at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, under Maria Lassnig and Christian Ludwig Attersee, and graduated in 1992. Some recent exhibitions include *Ghost Town* at the Strabag Kunstforum, Vienna; *In Between, Austria Contemporary*, Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery, Tel Aviv; *Ghost Town* at devening projects + editions, Chicago (2008); *Delusion* at Habres + Partner, Vienna (2007); *Visual Drugs*, Zurich (2006); *First View* at Hilger Contemporary, Vienna (2003); artlab, Vienna (2002); and many more. He has received numerous awards and scholarships such as: Recognition Award of Lower Austria (1993), Erwin Ringel Art Award (1999), Stipend of the City of Vienna (1999), Art Award of the City of Vienna (2000), Strabag Art Award and Recognition Award (2008); a scholarship at Accademia di Belle Arti, 1993, Venice, Italy; Artist-in-Residence programs in Budapest, Hungary (2000), Cheng Du, China (2003) and Chicago, IL (2007); and a Vienna studio grant (2006–2012). More information: www.felixmalnig.at, www.deveningprojects.com

Top: *Outskirts of Jerusalem*, 2009, acrylic and spray-paint on paper, 19.5" x 25.5"

Bottom: *Derelict House (Michigan)*, 2009, acrylic and spray-paint on paper, 19.5" x 25.5"

Page 5: *Derelict House (Michigan)*, 2008, acrylic and spray-paint on paper, 19.5" x 25.5"



Robyn O'Neil



The Pre-Conference with an Unfair Fight in the Back, 2004, pencil on paper, 7.5" x 10"

Top: *This Seething Devotion, This Ignition of Fear*, 2004, graphite on paper, 20" x 32"

Page 7: *Towards the Tranquil*, 2008, graphite on paper, 32" x 40"

Robyn O'Neil (American, b. 1977) is a Nebraska-born artist who lives and works in Houston, TX, and is primarily known for her large-scale graphite on paper drawings. O'Neil studied British art and architecture at King's College in London in 1997, and then went on to receive her B.F.A. at Texas A&M University-Commerce in 2000. She also completed graduate studies in fine art at the University of Illinois Chicago from 2000-2001. Her most recent solo exhibitions include *The Dismantled* at Praz-Delavallade in Berlin and *A World Disrupted* at Roberts and Tilton in Los Angeles. Some of her other solo exhibitions have taken place at Clementine Gallery in New York; Dunn and Brown Contemporary in Dallas, TX; Praz-Delavallade in Paris; the Frey Art Museum in Seattle, WA; and the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, TX; among many others. O'Neil's work was included in the prestigious 2004 Whitney Biennial, and she has also participated in numerous acclaimed group exhibitions taking place throughout the U.S. and internationally. Concurrent with *On Paper*, she has a solo exhibition at Tony Wight Gallery, titled *On Sinking*. O'Neil's work can be found in the permanent collections of the Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita, KS; Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX; Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, MO; among many others. O'Neil has been the recipient of multiple grants and awards, including the Hunting Art Prize in 2009, the Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant in 2008, the Arthouse Texas prize in 2005, the Artadia: The Fund For Art and Dialogue grant in 2003, and the DeGolyer Grant in 1999. She was also the International Artist in Residence for the ArtPace Foundation for Contemporary Art in San Antonio, TX, in 2003. More information: www.robynoneil.com, www.tonywrightgallery.com



Melissa Oresky



Melissa Oresky received her B.F.A. from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1996 and her M.F.A. from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 2000. Her paintings and drawings engage a revolving set of concerns, including landscape, color, science (and science fiction), the body and cognition/perception. Solo exhibitions include the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL; Western Exhibitions, Chicago, IL; Van Harrison Gallery, New York, NY; and ADA Gallery, Richmond, VA. Concurrent with *On Paper*, her work can be seen in a two-person show, *Streaking*, at Proof Gallery, Boston, MA, with Carrie Gundersdorf, and in a solo exhibition of paintings at Western Exhibitions in Chicago. Group shows include *Thinking in Color*, curated by Judy Ledgerwood, Lemberg Gallery, Detroit, MI, *Into the Midst*, Mixture Contemporary, Houston, TX, and many others. Oresky has attended residencies in Germany (Schloss Pluschow, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern), New Mexico (Santa Fe Art Institute) and Maine (Skowhegan). In 2005 Oresky received an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship. Recent projects include *Mineral Fabric*, a silkscreened artists book edited by Kayrock Screenprinting, Brooklyn, NY. Oresky lives and works in Chicago and Bloomington, IL, and is associate professor of painting at Illinois State University. More information: www.melissaoresky.com, www.westernexhibitions.com

Untitled drawings from the *Rock Garden* series, 2009, acrylic, graphite and collage on paper, 15" x 22"



Claire Sherman



Claire Sherman has had solo exhibitions at Kavi Gupta Gallery, Chicago; DCKT Gallery, New York; Houldsworth Gallery, London; Hof and Huyser Gallery, Amsterdam; and Aurobora Press, San Francisco. Sherman's work has been in recent group shows at the Neuberger Museum of Art, Bodybuilder and Sportsman Gallery, Western Exhibitions, Samson Projects, Galleria Glance and Gregory Lind Gallery. Her work is included in numerous collections, including UBS Bank, the Martin Margulies Collection and the Neran Museum of Contemporary Art. She has completed residencies at the Terra Foundation for American Art in Giverny, France, and the MacDowell Colony, New Hampshire, and will participate in the Marie Walsh Sharpe Foundation's Space Program in Brooklyn in 2009-2010. Recent press includes the *New York Times*, the *London Sunday Times*, *Flash Art*, *Time Out Chicago*, *ArtInfo.com*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. Sherman was born in Oberlin, OH, in 1981, and received her B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania and her M.F.A from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. More information: www.clairesherman.com, www.kavigupta.com

Top: *Untitled, 2009*, watercolor, gouache, water-soluble crayon and pencil on paper, 5" x 7"

Middle right: *Untitled, 2009*, watercolor, gouache, water-soluble crayon and pencil on paper, 7" x 5"

Page 7: *Untitled, 2009*, watercolor, gouache, water-soluble crayon and pencil on paper, 7" x 5"



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The Gahlberg Gallery/McAninch Arts Center would like to thank the artists, Felix Malnig, Melissa Oresky, Robyn O'Neil and Claire Sherman, the writer, Lori Waxman, and the artists' galleries – devening projects + editions, Chicago; Western Exhibitions, Chicago; Tony Wight Gallery, Chicago; and Kavi Gupta Gallery, Chicago – for their generous contribution and creativity in developing this publication and exhibition.

Barbara Wiesen

Director and Curator

Gahlberg Gallery



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