"Before Night Falls"

Lilly Wei, 2011

From *Graham Nickson: 1972-2011, Paths of the Sun*

There is a wonderful photograph of Graham Nickson wearing a brimmed straw hat taken not too long ago in the environs of Aspen, Colorado, mountains both tree-clad and snow-streaked towering in the background. Curiously he is standing behind an ironing board, its whiteness picked up by the white of his enveloping apron and again by the bright patches of snow, all capped by a dazzling blue sky. But no, he has not been seized by an irresistible urge to iron outdoors. He has brought the board as his worktable, he explained, part of his portable paraphernalia. There is a sheet of paper on it and near at hand is a palette propped up against a large easel. He is deeply engrossed in making a watercolor of the sunrise, although the sun appears to have risen some time ago. The photo reminds us that watercolor is not merely a medium for the amateur amusing himself with a small sketchbook and a dainty brush, nor is it always a synchronous recording of the present scene. It is a difficult and demanding medium, and *plain air* watercolor requires attentiveness, persistence and sweat. Nickson says he is often tense, anxious as he waits for the sun to rise, filled with a sense of expectancy, urgency, even under the best of circumstances, and often the circumstances are not ideal. He recalled one memorable session when a sudden, punishing storm arose. Awed by the ferocity of the spectacle, he stayed throughout the night in an attempt to capture what he saw and experienced.

Nickson ramped up his production of watercolors some years ago, around 1998, although he had used the medium almost from the beginning. But he has become more and more enamored of watercolor, considering it the equal of painting, the colors as rich as oil or acrylic, the results as complex. “Watercolor,” he said (in a conversation we had a the New York Studio School on August 2 from which all other quotes have been excerpted) “Hasn’t reached its fullest potential. With a few exceptions such as Turner or Nolde, no one has dealt with all its possibilities, which are enormous. Watercolor always surprises me and allows me to push the paintings — it’s fluid and fast. I have to make decisions instantly and get it right the first time.

Waiting is another matter, it's a different medium and much slower." Sometimes Nickson works on paintings for years, even a decade or more, and he has been known to buy them back to repaint, while his watercolors, although not instantaneous, are nonetheless completed within hours, and once completed never altered.

Like much that shapes the destinies of fortunate lives, Nickson's embrace of panoramic landscapes and skies as one of his two primary subjects (the other, of course, is his iconoclastic series of bather) was the result of happenstance. It was 1972 and he had just arrived in Rome with high hopes and great ambitions, a recent g graduate and the recipient of the coveted Rome Prize, brining with him hundreds of works on paper and documentation. They were immediately stolen due to a chain of events that included bad weather. Nickson, disconsolate, was not quite sure how to proceed. One evening, while on the roof of the Academy, he looked up and saw the sunset and had a revelation. He would paint that — which he did every day for two years, sunrise and sunset. What began inauspiciously "hanged my life." "i'm aware of the nature of painting in our time, then and now, and in the 1970s, no one painted sunsets - or sunrises. Avant-garde art was conceptual, minimalist, multimedia. I wanted to paint — already suspect — and I wanted to tackle a dangerous subject, something risky that would shock my contemporaries. What could be more radical than the sun? I wanted to pry it out of cliché, to be seen as it is." Predisposed to seek challenges and contradictions through four decades of a distinguished career, Nickson's rather quixotic desire to revivify exhausted images paid off, in memorable depictions of suns, trees, Uluru or Ayers Rock and the Sydney Opera House, to name a few, all recurrent motifs, all overexposed. Nickson's notion that the unconventional might be recouped from the conventional and without irony is a form of resistance, his road less traveled is paradoxically a well-traveled one.

Graham Nickson was born in England and studied at Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts and the Royal Collage of Art in London. He came to New York in 1976 and, while he travels widely, his principal residency has been in New York ever since. Although best known for his multiple-figured, often enormous oil and acrylic paintings of muscular bathers on beaches,

with their references to Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso, to Piero della Francesca, Poussin, Puvis de Chavannes and Seurat, this exhibitions at Knoedler, his first with the gallery, focuses on the other side of his practice and aesthetic persona: landscapes and skyscapes. In a number of ways, they function as the complement to the bathers. They are less formal but they are not impressionistic, the headiness of the immediate is balanced by an underlying structure, by horizontal, vertical and diagonal divisions, by unemphatic geometries, no matter how lively and in motion the picture seems. Much of the work shown here was made while in Italy and Australia or at home. “Locale is important, not its topography but the feel of the place and its sundry baggage.” He hopes that his work transcends the descriptive to become experiential, as indeed it does. He would like it to radiate a sense of place, to present something profound, something mysterious.

This exhibitions is divided between watercolors and paintings, and while the watercolors are greater in number, the visual and psychological impact is more evenly distributed, due to the scale of some of the paintings and their density and weight. The majority of the works are from the past decade, then jump backward to the early 1970s. The latter are oil paintings on linen and canvas, with hand-painted frames. From them, it can be seen that Nickson has been uncommonly consistent. — at least by current norms — his development steady, ardently faithful to his reiterated themes and images, his original perceptions and concerns. Most were produced in Rome and are small, some even tiny, in dimension. Their frames are hand-painted, textured, with color schemes keyed to the colors of the enclosed paintings. Nickson’s emphasis on the frame in these paintings underscores the image’s discreteness and the paintings objecthood. Updated *vedette* paintings, perhaps, they are subjectivized views seen through a window, a finely tuned juggling of the abstract and the optical, presenting a slice of the world, usually with the sky as the main protagonist. Nature might be seen through a temperament, but it is rendered by the organic materiality that is paint, by the fine, nuanced collaboration between the artist’s eye, hand, intellect and intuition.

The titled, *Red, Yellow, Green Sunse*t*, Rome*, ca. 1973-74 or *Roman Sunset: Yellow Drift*, 1973, say are straightforward, as are the compositions, with their semblances of foreground,

middle ground and background, yet it is not a pretty postcard or spatial illusion that prevails, but a canny orchestration of glowing color, landings and polymorphous forms generated by gesture, mark, the sweep of a brush, each act in response to the preceding one in works that are ultimately about themselves as much as they are about a sunset in Rome, about clouds, about weather and startlingly dramatic skies. The scene is kindling, value added to the painting that lies somewhere between the abstract and the representational, phenomena and noumena. The reality of the sky, composed of bands of assorted colors from fiery to grey, may or may not be like any really witnessed, except by Nickson's perceptive, imaginative eye. His clouds, for instance, can be a curious assortment of shape-shifting aerial flotsam. They appear as two interlocked grey forms rimmed in a yellow as if the sun were behind them in the subdued *Roman Grey Clouds, Yellow Sunset: First Series*, 1972; a violet grey calligraphic squiggle cushioned in a lighter grey in *Roman Sunset: Yellow Drift*; a procession of plumped dashes that suggest prehistoric birds in *Red, Yellow, Green Sunset, Rome*. In *Roman Rain Diptych*, 1973, a glowing pink and indigo sky, waveringly bisected along a diagonal might be a color field painting in its own right. Poised over green hills, palm trees, a pale villa, it is contrasted with the more monochromatic and serene, horizontally placed sky of its companion vista.

Then fast forward nearly thirty years. The next grouping is Nickson's *Monumental Tree* watercolors, 1999-2000. The tree is a silver maple, approximately 1950 years old, and grows in Westbury, Long Island. "We had a house in Westbury and I was looking for something to connect to. It was my daughter's birthday; she was two at the time. I wanted to give her something special, something more than just a purchased gift, so I gave her the gift of the idea of painting the tree. That was the first one (now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art). I'm always testing images to see if they are suitable and it turned out to be a perfect image. That tree had a different persona every day and was a superb vehicle for different emotional states. It had grandeur and was a marvelous foil for the sky."

Installed as a grid, monumentality of image reinforced by repetition, one immediate difference between the two bodies of work is the relationship between figure/ground. The tree

dominates in almost all of them and is often so entangled in the sky that each is inextricably part of the other as somber and brilliant saturated colors, lines and shapes flow together, echo each other, subsumed in a triumphant color bacchanalia, something for the eye to relish, revel in. Seen in different seasons, from different perspectives, the tree is always the cynosure, its presence majestic, the brush work charged, alive, as if you could trace his hand, seemingly impromptu but in actuality precise despite the quickness, the tumult. While Nickson discovered his aesthetic path early in his career, he still makes breakthroughs, and in the last decade or so, his sense of play and extravagant color, his capitulation to color's sheer, breathtaking beauty has come increasingly to the fore, his assurance part of the seduction, as if he could not falter, misplace a color, a mark.

Nickson says in these watercolors, he starts with color and then draws with it — drawing is another of his passions — the palette ranging but always rich, the scenes veering between the almost representational (*Monumental Tree Series — Serena's Tree: Gold Snow*) and the almost completely abstract (*Monumental Tree Series — Pool Tree*), demonstrating the gathering of opposites that Nickson instinctively seeks, often within the same work, to satisfy his subtle, dichotomous, dialectical vision of the world. In the repetition of motifs, they might recall Monet's grand cycles of haystacks, poplars, cathedrals, or Cézanne's La Montagne Sainte-Victoire, another pairing of opposites. Direct observation of nature is important to Nickson but his paintings and watercolors are not about fugitive effects of light and shadow parsed by color as much as they are about experience, about a ritualistic, even diaristic impulse marking and memorializing time, his version, say of On Kawara's date paintings, of 1970s serialization and systems. He is no scrupulous advocate of painting *verité*. "It was the dawn of the millennium, January 1, 2000, and I desperately wanted to make a watercolor of the tree to commemorate the day. I was freezing, the colors were freezing, it was very cold waiting for daybreak. I was certain it would be spectacular but disappointingly, it wasn't; it was cloudy, overcast. Then I though to turn on the little seasonal lights strung on the tree and that gave me the colors that the sunrise didn't."

The next selection of watercolors is from 2000-2006, almost all sited in Tuscany and Umbria. Nickson has maintained longstanding ties to these and other locations, including Australia. He went to Adelaide as a visiting artist in 1995 and has returned at regular intervals ever since, its topography the subject of many of his works although only a few are shown here, among which is the gold-violet *Broken Tree — Bundanon, Australia*, 2001, a contrast to the more generally flamboyant colors of the *Monumental Trees*. But it is the Italian watercolors that astonish, with their translucency, luminosity and swaths and swipes of gorgeous color, there isn't any other adjective — as if Nickson has pulled out all the stops. They are technicolor *tours de force*, exhilarating, the voltage set high, yet delicate, vulnerable. Any number of them suffice as examples: *Todi Sunrise*, 2006 or *Sarageto Dawn XXIV*, August 2006, teetering on the edge between reality and hallucinogenic vision, pictorial intelligence and pictorial intuition.

Two paintings, one called *Traveler: Red Sky*, 2002 (Australia) and the other *Red Lightning*, 2008-2010 (Tuscany) are also vehemently, even violently colored. (There will be a third shown, but it is still in progress at the time of this writing.) Apocalyptic, lighted by a burst of atomic red-orange at their center, these two approximate the watercolors and have learned from them, however the difference in medium and scale makes them less fluid, more textured, weightier — but only relatively so if compared to Nickson's beach *tableaux*. Both paintings are large-scale, approximately 9 x 12 feet and immersive, an infusion of blinding reds, rolled but held in check, as if on temporary pause. Red Lightning is somewhat less colorful, restricted to variations of reds, oranges and violets, from bight to dark, while *Traveler: Red Sky* displays a fuller surface palette, with dashes of green dispersed or interwoven throughout. All on the surface, what might be spatial, a void, is impenetrable. There is a thin jagged line of white that cleaves the sky, denoting a distant flash of lightning in *Red Lightning*, although otherwise it is fairly abstract, another instance of Nickson's double game, one mode pressuring the other. Only that crackled scar and the slight strip of land stretched across the bottom anchor it in the representational. The lighting makes you think of Giorgione's *Tempest*, a great favorite of Nickson's. He admires it for not yielding up its enigma, an enigma based on "banalities," despite legions of art historians and other scholars who have attempted to decode it.

Skies, sunrises, sunsets, trees, beaches, mountains are Graham Nickson's muses, his rehabilitated clichés. In pursuit of them, he has traveled the world, from Long Island to Tahiti and beyond, much the way a surfer does, dreaming of the next perfect wave. Nickson is not struck dumb by nature in its glory. Instead he is galvanized by it, deliberately searching for palpable color experiences that will startle and inspire him, for ways to translate and transform what he has seen and make it his own. One of his most treasured compliments was the observation by an artist looking at the sky one evening and exclaiming, that's a Nickson sunset.

When asked about the prevalence of sunrises and sunsets in his *oeuvre*, Nickson replied that he was drawn to transitional states, to beginnings and ends. There is something very conclusive about being out at the end of the day, working against time. The light is vanishing and by the time he is finished it is dark. There is an unsettling sense of finality. The reverse is the extraordinary optimism of the morning, painting into the light as it arrives. "it's one of the the great sensations," he said. "You feel utterly alive."