

“Graham Nickson: Transient Skies”

Karen Wilkin, 2014

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Modernism has long been equated with disregard for convention. Artists who embraced modernism were set free to ignore traditional assumptions about what a work of art could be, formally and conceptually, and given license to ignore the prescribed rules of the academy. But modernism had its own taboos. For most modernist landscape painters, for example, the lush dramas of the natural world that so delighted 19th century Romantic artists were temptations to be resisted. No delicately tinted dawns, no florid evening skies, no moonlit night scenes were allowed — just straightforward observation in the light of common day. And so, it seems, nothing could be more transgressive for a present day modernist painter than to explore than kind of “forbidden” imagery — that is, little could be more daring than probing the daily spectacle of the shift from night to day or day to night.

Graham Nickson is a modernist artist who belongs wholly to the present moment. He is interested in using his perceptions as a starting point for his imagery, but he has no desire to reproduce or interpret what he sees literally. In the same way, while he honors the great masters of the past and strives to equal their achievements, in 21st century terms, he has no wish to replicate their approach; his large canvases of beach scenes often evoke settings as idyllic as any classical Arcadia, yet they are inhabited not by joyous nymphs and shepherds, but by anxious present day people, conjured up, along with their world, in hues that can be associated only with our own time. Yet for decades, Nickson has chosen to explore subject matter that his contemporaries would not only categorize as belonging entirely to the Romantic era but would also dismiss as inappropriate, perhaps even impossible, for an artist working today even to consider, much less actually paint.

In a deliberate, perhaps contrarian refutation of such judgments, he has routinely risen at dawn to paint the sunrise or interrupted his evenings to respond to the changing light of sunset,

making these elusive moments the basis of a continuing series of potent, unmistakably contemporary watercolors. Nickson has done this at many times of year and in many places — Long Island, Italy, Australia, and New England, among other locations — testing the acuity of his sensibility not only against the day-to-day variations in the quality of light caused by changing weather, but also against the larger differences occasioned by changes of season, of proximity or distance from water, of latitude, or even of hemisphere. Every one of his encounters with these daily shifts of illumination has been unique and has provoked an image specific to the moment, place and conditions that generated it. yet, despite this specificity, Nickson's sunrise and sunset watercolors are far from being meteorological records. They are, rather, distillations of his responses to transient events into clearly invented gestures, marks, and color relationships. By truthfully embodying his perceptions in the language of paint — which is not the same as representing what was seen — Nickson stops time. His sunrise and sunset watercolors are visual metaphors for ephemeral experience that, like literary metaphors, serve to heighten the impact of whatever is alluded to. Each of Nickson's paintings has a particular rhythm, temperature, mood, and feeling-tone, which viewers will undoubtedly measure against their own memories of dawns or sunsets, but it is the way these intense, passionate paintings differ from reality that holds our attention, not their resemblance, however tenuous, to something we might have encountered. (Some years ago, during a stay in Umbria, I realized that the view out my window was familiar because Nickson had repeatedly painted it. Before long, I started judging the sunrises and sunsets against my recollections of his images ; nature usually didn't quite measure up.)

Ultimately, despite their unabashed Romanticism, Nickson's sunrise and sunset watercolors verge on being abstractions. In many of the works in this exhibition, painted on Nantucket Island, the expanse of sky that dominates the page (or subsumes the indications of landscape or shoreline) becomes a plane of dazzling bands or swirls of frankly gorgeous color; in others, made in fact, elsewhere, mysterious hues and forthright shapes suggest different origins. Yet all of these pictures declare themselves first and most powerfully in terms of saturated chroma, edge, and shape, rather than in terms of subject matter. Then, a host of associations

assert themselves, allowing us to revel in the particularity of Nickson's vision. In his arresting watercolors, fidelity to experience and invention, truth and artifice coexist seamlessly.