

Kate Bright

Between the Woods

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Essay by Judith E. Stein

Kate Bright's Post-Ironic Landscapes

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In her new series of wintery landscapes, Kate Bright continues to exploit the reflective potential of glitter, that low-life material with a rap sheet as long as tinsel's. Kids adore craft projects with these messy sparkles, and take virtual advantage of its razzmatazz for MySpace profiles, animated tiles and computer wallpaper. Known by the company it keeps, glitter stars in cliché holiday scenes with glistening patches to simulate snow. Surely an artist who colludes with mass culture and its sentimental trappings is advancing the ironic discourse of post-modernism.

But a sophisticated “wink wink” was not what Bright had in mind when she raided the hobby aisle, just as it played no part in the work of her influential contemporary Karen Kilimnik, who uses spare points of glitter to signal theatrical fancy. Speaking in 2001, Bright confided to an interviewer:

The glitter, from the moment I picked it up, was screaming to be sunshine on water . . . I earnestly want to capture that in a painting. In a way, it's about the impossible notion of possessing the sublime . . .

There is always this thing with glitter, all the references to kitsch and camp, which those Christmas cards had. But at the same time they are genuinely endearing, in an 'old lady-ish' way. There is a sweetness to them . . . [my work is] not about kitsch or irony. It's completely—I want to say heartfelt—but heartfelt is still so kitsch. Perhaps they are romantic, or dare I say, genuine.¹

The quest for sublimity, that mingling of astonishment and awe before the majesty of nature, is infrequently expressed as a goal of art in this day and age, and even rarer to find linked to a de-based material. But we must take Bright at her word: it is sincerity that fuels her practice.

Her use of glitter to simulate light within painted landscapes connects her work to related strategies in abstract art: both David Smith's burnished surfaces and Richard Serra's graphite drawings physically capture the environment's available light. Jane Kaufman's work with iridescent feathers, Lucas Samaras' mirrored pieces and Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt's aluminum foil assemblages

are a sampling of art by other predecessors with the canny instincts of a magpie.

What Bright alone celebrates in her new body of work is glitter's inherent visual pun on the crystalline beauty of snow. As in her last series of watery reflections, there are few clues in her closely-cropped details about context. Branches may originate in the space outside the picture plane and move beyond the boundary of the frame. In *Loaded*, the heavy white cargo all but obliterates sight of the branches underneath. As in *Bough*, *Thicket* and *Spinney*, the tight focus draws us in close, with no orienting references except the sky, a compositional choice that keeps viewers hovering like hummingbirds out of season.

Figures are not part of nature's romance for her. Nowhere are there footprints, wheel tracks or man-made structures. Although humans may have pruned the copses and created the pathways, no one has passed through for some time. It is as if she had stopped "without a farmhouse near," to watch the snow fall with Robert Frost, and then stayed around to paint it after the squall. In *Grove*, *Copse* and *Avenue*, she sites viewers on the ground, opening the distance with tunneling lanes.

The photographs—not her own—on which she bases her compositions depict winter woodlands in such disparate locales as Wales, Michigan, and British Columbia. Snow, that great equalizer, renders sense of place a non-issue.

I use glitter to make the paintings better than I could ever paint them. I couldn't do that sparkling business with just ordinary paint, and certainly not acrylic. You are constantly reminded with the application of glitter that the painting is a surface. It's not an illusion. You're not allowed to get lost in it. But you get lost in a different way. They aspire to be the perfect moment and of course the perfect moment is manufactured from various elements and therefore is unreal.

For all their illusory brilliance, Bright's images bring us back to the artifice of the painted surface, letting us see the wizard behind the curtain.

Judith E. Stein, a former curator at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, is a critic and independent curator. Her recent projects include a traveling retrospective of the prints of Jules Olitski, a forthcoming interview with Alfred Leslie for Art in America, an in-progress biography of dealer Dick Bellamy, and guest lectures at the New School and the Barnes Foundation.

NOTES

1. This and the following quotations are found in Colin Ledwith, ed., *Tailsliding* (London: The British Council, 2001).