

PHILADELPHIA SARAH McCoubrey Locks

“Fate and Transport” was the apt title of Sarah McCoubrey’s recent exhibition at Locks. The 25 paintings, mixed-medium digital prints and drawings on view (all 2012) reflect the state and possible future of the rural American landscape. A native of Philadelphia who trained at the University of Pennsylvania in the late 1970s and early 1980s, McCoubrey has lived and worked for two decades in upstate New York, where she is a professor in the art department at Syracuse University.

The show’s 11 exquisite oil-on-panel paintings, which range in size from approximately 8 inches square to 4 by 3 feet, feature McCoubrey’s trademark, painstakingly rendered natural details—threadlike blades of grass, spindly branches and bushy foliage—in scenes that bear signs of human activity and the lethal havoc it can wreak on the environment. The artist’s plein air activity and studio meditations on the changing fields and lakes around her combine to create quiet compositions inflected by magic realism. The works imaginatively register an anxiety about the soda ash and other toxic waste that has caused significant damage to local vegetation. *Snooks Pond Oil Tank Takes Off*, one of the largest paintings, features a chunk of earth being borne away by a tiny red container. At first, this central detail offers the dreamy levity of a hot-air balloon. But with time, the viewer senses that the painting, like most of the artist’s works, offers somber commentary on environmental issues. If McCoubrey’s images initially seem like daydreams, they quickly warn against the nightmares we may face if we do not change the way we treat our surroundings.

In *Fox II*, the title creature and wintry landscape evoke paintings by Winslow Homer and Pieter Bruegel, while the sky above, with its billowing clouds and stormy colors, echoes scenes by Paolo Veronese—despite being whimsically accented by a spectral white chandelier that drifts up and away. With her subtle art historical references, McCoubrey suggests that the destruction of natural beauty might have tragic consequences for future artists. The four smallest, most intimate oil paintings in the show, each titled *Wastebed*, obfuscate more than they reveal about their landscapes,



Sarah McCoubrey: *Snooks Pond Oil Tank Takes Off*, 2012, oil on panel, 45 by 37½ inches

replacing McCoubrey’s usual pictorial precision with hazier views, which lie beneath patterned layers stenciled and stamped using doilies and lace. The man-made items produce decorative surfaces that either mediate our view of the landscapes—as though we were looking out through stained-glass windows—or actually erode the skies and grassy plains they cover.

McCoubrey’s six mixed-medium pieces layer ink, gouache and gouache over digitally manipulated photographic prints. Here, she crafts fantastic scenes in which potatoes march across the landscape or fly, propelled forward by the unruly roots they have sprouted. Yet the mysterious realism of her luscious paintings is lost in these less cohesive, surreal images of nature gone awry. Playfulness is better employed in the pen, ink and gouache drawings—delicate, captivating images that seem culled from storybooks.

—Jennie Hirsh