

ELIZABETH OSBORNE

Floating Landscapes: 1971–1979

September 8–October 14, 2006

Essay by Robert Cozzolino



Elizabeth Osborne 1973

Elizabeth Osborne's Passage

Robert Cozzolino

Throughout the twentieth century many artists practiced a strain of modernist painting that was emphatically abstract *and* realist, violating formalist arguments that representational painting is anti-modern and vanguard art devoid of subject matter.¹ Elizabeth Osborne's sea and landscapes of the 1970s push the limits of illusionism and minimalism to daring extremes, unifying apparent opposites in crisp, hallucinatory vistas. Poised between her somber 1960s figure paintings and well-known large watercolors, the landscapes resulted from an exciting convergence of subject matter and a fresh technique. Made between 1971 and 1979, these Massachusetts coast and New Mexico paintings were vital to her artistic development and professional identity. Osborne first presented them in a 1972 solo exhibition at the Marian Locks Gallery.² They were a critical and financial success; all but two works had been sold by the second day of the show.³ Nearly thirty-five years later, this is the first exhibition to explore the paintings' range, origins, and their place in Osborne's career.

By 1971, Osborne had been renting a summer house in Manchester, Massachusetts for about a decade. There she had made many watercolors but resisted translating them to canvas for fear of compromising fluidity and immediacy. An unexpected solution came through one of her students, Gloria Milgrom, at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where Osborne has taught since 1961. Osborne watched Milgrom experiment with poured paint on unprimed canvas. She recalls, "I was fascinated and thought, 'that's a great way of approaching subject matter that I've been looking at for years.'"⁴

Since the 1950s, Osborne had known of and admired the work of Helen Frankenthaler (b. 1928) and Morris Louis (1912-1962), two artists whose careers are synonymous with exploring methods of soaking and staining canvas with veils of paint. She notes, “they were coming from different places and distinctly different viewpoints. I had not tried that approach until this series, and even then, the technique was the only common ground.”

Osborne had sought a way to translate the transparency, light, and freedom of her watercolors. Thinned-down acrylic proved to be an exciting method for translating her small vibrant Manchester scenes to canvas.



Working in a studio in the Academy’s Peale House, Osborne selected from her on-the-spot Manchester studies and began re-composing them on raw canvas with a water soluble marker. Rather than simply copy, Osborne took liberties with scale, form, and color. Osborne gradually became more acquainted with the contingencies of a new, hard-to-control medium and figured out how to direct its flow and understand its varied effects. She used sponges soaked with pigment, poured thinned acrylic directly into raw canvas, and developed a new set of techniques for applying paint without brushes.⁵ *Cirrho*, a large multicolor print from 1972 reveals that Osborne eagerly and successfully adapted these motifs and methods into another medium. She deliberately overlapped the silk-screened edges of hills and water to rhyme with the staining method and chromatic effects of the paintings.⁶

This process of exploration and discovery appears to have liberated Osborne from traditional techniques she absorbed as a student at the Pennsylvania Academy (1954-58). She laments that the Academy's culture in the 1950s was "sort of conservative. There were few there at the time [on faculty] who were sympathetic towards non-objective or abstract art."⁷ It was not until she went abroad that she, "realized the full impact that American artists such as Jackson Pollock and Jasper Johns were having internationally."⁸ As a student, Osborne exchanged ideas with like-minded peers, visited exhibitions, and kept current with contemporary art journals. She looked closely at a wide-range of artists who refused to assert abstraction without subject matter or perpetuate false dichotomies of abstraction *versus* figuration. Richard Diebenkorn (1922-1993) and other California painters figured prominently in her search for "energetic" and challenging approaches to representational painting.⁹ The bold brushwork, interlocking pieces of negative space and form, and intense color in *Woman with Red* (1962) reveal the degree to which Osborne sought to



Richard Diebenkorn, *Interior with Doorway*, 1962, oil on canvas; 70 5/16 x 60 inches, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Henry D. Gilpin Fund, 1964.3

Elizabeth Osborne, *Woman with Red*, 1962, oil on canvas; 63 1/8 x 46 inches, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Gift of the Ford Foundation, 1964.1.6



integrate the figure into the substance of paint, collapsing abstraction into figuration.¹⁰

While Osborne's 1970s landscapes seem to break with her Academy experience, the conditions there during the 1950s may have helped her reconcile abstraction with realism in single compositions. Among the artists that Osborne studied with were Franklin Watkins (1894-1972), Hobson Pittman (1900-1972) and Walter Stuempfig (1914-1970). While none championed non-objective art, they incorporated lessons of abstract expressionism and surrealism in emotionally intense compositions that confront the tension between abstraction and figuration. In an extraordinary series of pastels from the 1950s Pittman positioned mystically-rendered still-life objects before austere color-fields. In one depicting peaches, the fruit emanates light, glowing like coals on fire. They slip perceptually between solid object and apparition, alternately fading into the

above left: Hobson Pittman, *Still Life: Peaches in a Goblet*, ca. 1955, pastel on gray wove paper; 19 x 12 7/16, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Bequest of Hobson Pittman, 1972.18.81

above right: Walter Stuempfig, *The Wall*, 1946, oil canvas; 31 5/16 x 48 inches, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Joseph E. Temple Fund, 1947.10

opposite: Winslow Homer, *The Fox Hunt*, 1893, oil on canvas; 38 x 68 1/2 inches, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Joseph E. Temple Fund, 1894.4

flat background or asserting themselves. In Stuempfig's *The Wall* (1946), individuals blend in with Philadelphia's urban architecture, debris and graffiti. The figure is not privileged but is absorbed into its environment, implying a bleak postwar atmosphere. More prominently, one of



Osborne's favorite paintings, Winslow Homer's (1836-1910) dramatic scene of life and death, *The Fox Hunt* (1893), has its narrative and empathetic content enabled and supported by a carefully-integrated synthesis of abstraction and illusion.

In retrospect, it is possible to see the Academy's culture in the 1950s and 1960s as integral to the support of modernist realism and Osborne part of that trajectory. An important debate in the self-conscious art world during and immediately after Osborne's student years was the viability of abstract expressionism as a vanguard style. Many considered its practitioners to have spawned a "new academy" consisting of mediocre mimics trying to copy a successful style. The magazine *Art News* printed a two-part article on the topic in which figures such as Elaine DeKooning, Ad Reinhardt and Helen Frankenthaler agreed that the derogatory connotations of an "academy" existed within New York School abstraction.¹¹ The Pennsylvania Academy, by supporting artists such as Diebenkorn, Philip Evergood, Rico Lebrun, and contemporary British painting (including Francis Bacon) in the 1950s and 1960s had at the very least avoided the implications of conformity or leaping onto a bandwagon. It aligned itself with challenging art that incorporated rather than denied the human body and the observed world. Accordingly, Osborne notes that the controversial 1959 exhibition that stressed a modern humanism, *New Images of Man* organized by Peter Selz for the Museum of Modern

Art, affirmed directions she wished to pursue.¹²

By the 1970s, when Osborne began to explore landscape with a fresh eye and approach that was unprecedented in her career, she had resisted “pure abstraction.” True to the formative experiences she absorbed at the Academy, in Europe and in her own studies, these living landscapes integrate complex methods of seeing and representing nature that synthesize abstraction and realism. All push the limits of perception and description, using phosphorescent colors, volatile combinations of hues, and unmodulated, highly saturated soaked-in areas of paint. They use pure form and color to present illusory vistas transformed through Osborne’s process of heightening and editing details. Many, such as *Passage* or *Delos* (both 1972), consist of suggestive fluid chromatic bands that swell together. Osborne’s approach towards form and color gives the landscape an organic, pulsating sensation, as though the spans of color were cells concentrated with viscous life capable of dividing and spilling forth across the canvas.

In many New Mexico paintings, such as *Monument Valley* (1974) or *Icarus* (1979) Osborne conveys specific environmental effects through the most incongruous means. By soaking the unprimed canvas with repeated inundations of wet paint the desert is powerfully conjured as a searing, arid environment, dry, devoid of air and still. In *Icarus*, she has captured the dramatic spaces where desert and fauna meet. As the pale green gives way to vibrant orange it produces the visual equivalent of a sizzling sound as early morning moisture is burned off and sent in mist into the atmosphere. These sensations result from the extraordinary luminosity of Osborne’s color, nearly psychedelic in intensity, achieved through careful layering and merging of colors.

Bluewater (1974) appropriately uses a large canvas to capture dramatic conditions and views at the edge of the sea. Deep, limitless and soothing blue pigment is punctuated by brilliant glowing orange and yellow light on jagged rocks. The canvas surface is so

infused with color that it becomes a kind of membrane, seemingly contiguous with the water it describes. As Osborne spread the water outward and back towards the horizon she employed light upward fanning motions to convey mist against a pale green sky. A pink island at left is veiled in the constant sprays from the sea. The sharp stones jutting out of the water are pressed at all sides by the blue water; because of their hot contrasting chromatic centers these shapes swell outward, expanding optically on the sea. They cause afterimages on the retina and produce phantom shapes throughout the picture.

In contrast to contemporary works by Frankenthaler, such as *Walnut Hedge* (1971) which modernist critics claim as teleological pictures, Osborne's color is much more high-keyed and can be abrasive as it vibrates against contrasting colors. It rests on the surface while it describes. Although intensified from what Osborne actually witnessed on site, it heightens the eye's excitement and somehow makes the substances represented sensuously tangible. Frankenthaler has also employed natural forms but they are left suggestive, allowed to interplay through accident. *Walnut Hedge* possesses its own space and light through Frankenthaler's subtle process of addition and application of restraint. Osborne's active landscapes press towards us, as though trying to burn themselves onto the retina as



Helen Frankenthaler, *Walnut Hedge*, 1971, acrylic on canvas; 120 x 72 inches, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Alexander Harrison Fund, 2006.¹³

an analogy to memory. *Walnut Hedge* is surprisingly, presented open, a place you can enter, an abyss of color, even, like Osborne's subjects, a pool.

Osborne recently reflected on the significance of this body of work. "A lot of new and exciting things came together in these paintings," she explains. "I was working on a larger scale than ever before in a new medium which was thrilling to use and had a great range. I put aside brushes and oils and worked on unprimed canvas. I wasn't feeling constrained by the Academy's point of view towards light and form and took liberties with my subject matter. The approach allowed me the freedom to take these forms, rocks, vegetation, water, mountains, and push them towards abstraction. It moved me more into that realm than ever before." The series represented a convergence of numerous elements and allowed her to balance new and challenging ways of working and seeing. It was something of a leap of faith and yet it has fueled her work ever since.

ROBERT COZZOLINO is curator at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. He received his Ph.D from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2006 with a dissertation on Ivan Albright (1897-1983). He has curated numerous exhibitions of modern and contemporary art including *With Friends: Six Magic Realists*, *Vik Muniz: Remastered*, and *Light, Line and Color: American Works on Paper 1765-2005*. His book, *Art in Chicago: Resisting Regionalism, Transforming Modernism*, will be published later this year. He is currently working on a major study of Pop Art and a retrospective of the artist George Tooker.

Notes:

1 For an extended discussion of this aspect of modernism see Robert Cozzolino, “Every Picture Should Be A Prayer: The Art of Ivan Albright,” chapter one. Ph.D dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2006.

2 The exhibition, “Landscapes,” October 6 – November 2, 1972, included twelve nudes in addition to the twenty-one Massachusetts subjects. Of the paintings in the present show, *Upstream*, *Passage*, and *Delos* appeared in the 1972 exhibition. Osborne’s work was also included in the group exhibition, *Topography of Nature* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, in 1972.

3 N. F. “Tops in Sales and Teaching.” *Sunday Bulletin* [Philadelphia], October 15, 1972; and Victoria Donohoe, “Lyrical Landscapes, Lithos by Miro [sic] and Tribal Sculptures.” *Philadelphia Inquirer* October 15, 1972.

4 Unless otherwise noted, all quotes by Elizabeth Osborne come from an interview with the author, conducted on July 17, 2006, in Philadelphia.

5 Elizabeth Osborne, telephone interview with the author, July 28, 2006. See also Eve Medoff, “Elizabeth Osborne: Painting with Light,” *American Artist* 41 (September 1977): 36-37.

6 Three silk-screen prints were included in the 1972 exhibition: *Teriade*, *Cirra*, and *Passage*. *Passage* was already sold out when the exhibition price list was printed.

7The Academy, like other art schools, has endured periods of conservatism and enjoyed eras that seem visionary; much depends on the presence or lack of leadership, adventurous personalities, and a climate of openness. For the Academy’s contributions to modernism see, Sylvia Yount and Elizabeth Johns, *To Be Modern: American Encounters with Cézanne and Company* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in association with the University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

8 Osborne went to Europe on Academy awards and fellowships during her school years. She received a Catherwood Foundation award (1955), Cresson Traveling Fellowship (1957) and Scheidt Traveling Fellowship (1958).

9 Cynthia Veloric, *Interview with Elizabeth Osborne*, May 24, 1991, pp. 11-13, 51-53. Archives of American Art, Oral History Collections, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. See also Diana Stampul, “Artistic Temperaments Mesh: Architect Husband, Artist Wife Blend Careers with Marriage.” *Center City Philadelphian* (January 1967): 15.

10 Osborne considered studying with Diebenkorn in California but instead traveled to Europe in 1963-64 on a Fulbright fellowship.

11 “Is there a new Academy? [part I]” *Art News* 58, no. 4 (Summer 1959): 34-37, 58-59; “Is there a new Academy? [part II]” *Art News* 58, no. 6 (September 1959): 36-39, 58-60.

12 Osborne singled out many artists who were included in the exhibition such as Willem DeKooning, Diebenkorn, Jean Dubuffet, Rico Lebrun and Nathan Olivera, as having been important to her at this time. For an important perspective on the art world at this time see Bradford R. Collins, “Clement Greenberg and the Search for Abstract Expressionism’s Successor: A Study in the Manipulation of Avant-Garde Consciousness.” *Arts* 61, no. 9 (May 1987): 36-43.