

2008

# Nature Visions

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NATURE VISIONS

by

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B.F.A., College of Santa Fe, 2004

A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree of  
Masters in Fine Arts  
Department of Art and Art History  
2008

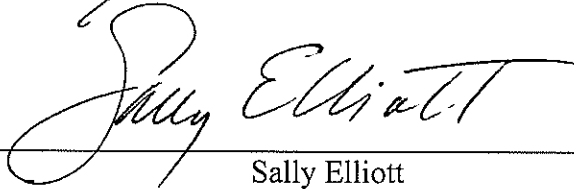


This thesis entitled:  
Nature Visions  
written by Michael Long  
has been approved for the Department of Art and Art History



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Alex Sweetman



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Sally Elliott

Date 4/15/08

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we  
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards  
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.



Long, Michael (M.F.A. Art and Art History)

Nature Visions

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Alex Sweetman

I am concerned with alternative ways of interpreting the natural world. My intentions are to deconstruct nature's physicality in order to encourage a departure of solely viewing nature as "object." I want to draw attention to the surrounding space, light, and forces unavailable to the eye.

Using contradictions such as shallow and deep depth of field, sharp and out of focus images and inconsistent surface treatment, I push past uniformity in order to challenge ideas of how nature is perceived. I want to make work that has open and mysterious qualities that suggest rather than explain. What I depict is not necessarily what I see, but certainly what I feel.

My approach is eclectic. I mix painting, color and black and white photographs, and natural elements throughout my work. The work arises out of exploration through a lifetime of observing nature, contemplation, play and experimentation in my studio.



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## CHAPTER I

### DEPTH OF FIELD

I have been using shallow depth of field in my photographic and painted work to investigate how visual perception penetrates through space. Shallow depth of field minimizes focus of objects and allows for a blending of figure and ground. Deep focus allows for accuracy in details, but conversely, minimizing focus allows for an open experience through non-specifics. Employing shallow depth of field renders large areas in the picture plane out of focus. At first glance an area that is out of focus may signify non-importance or ambiguity because of the seemingly lack of definition. The viewing eye has trouble anchoring to something out of focus. At second glance, out of focus areas may hint to something that is about to appear or about to rise up “into focus,” thus giving presence to the invisible. Out of focus guides the viewer’s eyes in a loose fashion and leads them into pictorial space that encourages sight not to be static. The relaxed state instigates wandering and wondering in want to search for “something” to focus on. At the same time it foils attempts to categorize and catalog specifics to time and place and even idea. Terry Winters paintings, both his early organic/nature shape and later mesh/lattice work, in my opinion, have employed these ideas. “...we might determine that the physical layers of color and the textured strokes that structure these works assume a precise sequence from bottom to top, from then to now. None of the works however, developed its present appearance as the result of hierarchical ordering. The logic of sequence, the obliteration of the past by the present, has



no power over Winter's art. None of the layers of effort tolerates being subordinated to any other effort. The layers, sets of marks, and phases of each of his paintings fold into a single sensation to generate an image as if form inside itself."<sup>1</sup>

Joan Snyder said, " (I was) thinking about transparency and being able to see through one of those paint strokes."<sup>2</sup> "Rather than fusing disparate spaces, Snyder's fields reclaim totality. This is not to be confused with monumentality, but rather something humbler, an intimate meditation on lived experience. The field enacts a larger expression of continuity, but accomplishes this only through attention to its smallest features, such as a twisted branch or flower stem."<sup>3</sup>



## CHAPTER II

### FORM AND SHAPE

The rendition of form and shape is important in my work, but it does not have to correlate to common or scientific classification. I seek to reference nature in ways that encourage me to see past what at first seems literal or straightforward. I look towards a greater expansiveness, push past my own knowing. "A leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time is related to the whole, and partakes of the perfection of the whole. Each particle is a microcosm, and faithfully renders the likeness of the world...so intimate is this unity that it is easily seen, it lies under the undermost garment of nature, and betrays its source in the universal spirit."<sup>4</sup>

"(Ralph Waldo) Emerson's credo "trust thyself" propelled (Richard) Pousette-Dart's belief in the individual's powers of self discovery. Emerson, like Pousette-Dart, was deeply influenced by Eastern philosophy and believed that great truths come by intuition and that they come 'unbidden.' Similarly, Pousette-Dart believed that his paintings reflected life as a 'continuum with infinite possibilities.' His technique of painting layer upon layer of pigment resulted in the continual emergence of new, 'unbidden' forms."<sup>5</sup> "The idea that informed his (Pousette-Dart) vision and process are suggested across the notebook pages: "You must rid yourself of all intentions. How do you know where to put the brush, the mark, the color? I follow what is there and is not there. I follow the spirit of what I feel and cannot see. When the brush



touches the canvas things happen that we could not know before, and our preconceptions dissolve.”<sup>6</sup>

As a person I am first and foremost interested in expanding my understanding about the universe around me. The pursuit of this idea acts to allow a forum of non-attachment. I seek to remain free to follow my own ebb and flow. Various “art works” result in “art,” but everything is only a temporary end resulting out of exploring and coming to terms with the insights, sensations, observations, and discoveries that I engage in through looking and contemplating. The physical manifestation of a photograph or a painting or combination thereof is a direct result of interpreting my inner experience.





## CHAPTER III

### PAINTING AND PHOTOGRAPHY

The media of painting and photography are both used to support and render my artistic visions. A few years ago I felt that if I had equal enthusiasm to work in painting and photography, then I must find a way for them to come together in singular projects in order bridge contemplative and formal concerns stemming from the individual media. Eclecticism is a postmodern approach that benefits my concern of working in multiple directions and visual concerns. The mixture of having paint and photographs for me embraces a new aesthetic paradigm. It honors my experimental and explorative approach that has always been the center of my art making. Postmodern positioning includes having an: irreverent attitude towards materials. This notion has encouraged me to try to operate outside expected conventions. Using a combination of the two media has allowed for a large range of insights on my part.



## CHAPTER IV

### GARDENS

“Gardens are equally vain and self-centered. Shaped by the bold will of their makers, they take on the romance of humankind’s desires for dominance”<sup>7</sup> “(The book) *Picturing Eden* focuses on the state of humankind after Eden. Paradise is no longer available to us, but from that moment on we have attempted to regain it”<sup>8</sup> I see the artwork that I have created over the past few years somewhat akin to the formation of a garden. My work represents what I have planted and cultivated. Rendering insights of the “natural” world in my work is a way to “regain” the “paradise” I harbor within. It is through my art making that I attempt to reclaim “Eden”—the state of knowing and fulfillment.

“In turning to the garden (Robert) Kushner allied himself with one of the most constant, universal, and symbolic themes in art. Every culture and religion incorporates the symbol of a garden: a place apart where heaven and earth are most closely aligned. For Buddhists it is the hidden oasis of Shambala. For Christians it is the prelapsarian Garden of Eden. And in Islam paradise is a garden symbolized by the arabesque, which is all pervasive in Islamic art. The garden is a philosophical balancing point between human control (cultivation) and wild, ordered nature, with nature offering an oral center seemingly absent from the human world. Gardens also allow paradox, reconciling opposites. They are productive and intimate, a distillation of humanity’s relation to nature.”<sup>9</sup>



Viewing the Earth on a grand scale, with its present diversity of nations and cultures, reclaiming Eden as a singular presence across the globe is impossible. Now, in the twenty-first century, it is only the material of myth. But still, even if there is one lonely weed pushing its way up from the asphalt in a parking lot somewhere in the midst of an urban setting, anyone coming across the weed has the opportunity to stop and know the magical and fierce strength of the natural world to survive and can, if willing, consider what great force truly directs the weed to grow within its own independence. This is where Eden can be found today – in any facet of nature existing anywhere, no matter in what scale, region, or situation. Presently in many populated areas of the world Eden does not encompass humankind as a visual overshadowing energy, a dominant force –it must be sought out in order to envision its power. The act of photographing and painting has been a way for me to seek out the natural world and connect to its natural energies.

Eden has come to be understood as “paradise,” something on the grandest of scales where human intention either embraces or foils its ability to be part of it. The story told that Adam and Eve had a choice. They could either obey the laws of nature and forever be nourished or disobey and be banished. The story went on to say that Adam and Eve acted in the later way. In many respects this banishment holds true for the human race, at least in industrialized societies. Severe disregard for natural environments has spoiled the inherent rights for many to connect to the Eden. Perhaps each individual must learn re-connect to paradise in their own way, no matter how small of a scale, even if that means getting acquainted with one plant, tree, or rock at a time. Working as an artist has been a way for me to become reacquainted to the natural world.



“If you go to Japan, the garden is not so much a evocation *of* paradise as a means to go *to* paradise. Placing yourself in the space, or viewing that space, allows a state of mind that takes you to paradise, as opposed to physically being in a fragment of paradise—some imperfect, flattened paradise.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise, I am not just trying to photograph or paint paradise, I am trying to find my way there.





CHAPTER V  
USE OF MATERIAL FROM NATURE

“Throughout the 20th century, artists struggled with the dilemma of Modernism: how to convey an experience of the real world while acknowledging the immediate physical reality of the materials—the two-dimensional canvas, the viscous paint—being used in the representation. (Andy) Goldsworthy has cut his way clear. By using the landscape as his material, he can illustrate aspects of the natural world—its color, mutability, energy—without resorting to mimicry.”<sup>11</sup> I have put material collected in nature into many of my works. Dried plant material, sticks, earth have been used. I like the feel of these things in my hands as well as the deeply textured surface they create when worked into the surface of my panels. The natural material helps to ground lofty thinking patterns. Having natural material in my studio bridges the gap between being in natural environments and the studio. Collecting the material and bringing it “home” is an act of appreciation. In my studio I contemplate the vast nuances in color changes as the natural material dries. Its presence comforts me. Even if the natural material that goes into my work gets covered with paint it remains whole and a part of me and from which it came. .



## CHAPTER VI

### LIGHT

“Is light best understood as an independent object or a process requiring the action of energy as it meets the interface of human vision? In what sense can the universe be said to exist apart from its human perceivers?”<sup>12</sup> Light enables us to see the physical embodiment of things and allows for visual observation. The act of looking or observing can stimulate inner senses and allow for greater experience. Engaging in observation honors inquisitiveness and in turn inspires thoughts of possibility. Belief in these thoughts of possibility is what has triggered the response manifested in my work.

I resonate with Aaron Rose’s photographs of the natural world as well as to his approach to making his images. “I didn’t want my art to be dependent upon what everybody else was saying. It was important for me to find myself even if it meant working alone, but that loneliness is not a bad trip because you get to like it...” “I guess in some ways I didn’t even need an audience, I needed seclusion.”<sup>13</sup> In the moment of making a painting or exposing a photograph I do not think about where my art fits into the context of art history or into the contemporary art scene. The main concern is to find exploration of the moment. But just for the fact that in those moments I am relating to the world within me and around me I feel I am in fact a part of art history. Time is being marked and I am directly participating with time. And no matter how any art historian, or art critic decides what contemporary issues are



relevant, the mere fact that I am working in my personal subset contained within the contemporary world makes me, I conclude, a contemporary artist working through contemporary issues.

“In (Ross) Bleckner’s canvases, light appears in many guises: as a mere residue on the surface of an object, as an emanation from the object, or as the substance of the painting itself.”<sup>14</sup> “Like his Romantic forebears, Bleckner has pursued a convincing expression of religious experience in a secular world, seeking ways in which nature reveals its transcendental mystery.” Bleckner uses “light as conveyer of symbolic meaning, whether it be light as truth, light as an image of the spirit, or light as an agent of transcendence.”<sup>15</sup>



## CHAPTER VII

### NATURE FORCES

“Nature mysticism continues to have appeal because it speaks to a need that has become impossible to satisfy in the modern urban world, that is, in the same claustrophobic cities, full of pseudo-humanity and rank artificiality, in which it originated. Amenoff’s paintings attempt to satisfy it, and, like the best romantic nature painting, reach toward mysticism...for only at the orgasmic extreme of mysticism can there be complete satisfaction of a need that has been systematically repressed.”<sup>16</sup> “In Amenoff’s paintings natural phenomena are barely recognizable, not because they have been altogether distorted, but because they have been completely transformed: they exist as aura rather than substance.”<sup>17</sup> “The transcendentalist ambition (of Amenoff) is to display the inner divinity of nature, and to show that it can only be grasped in and through passion, and that once passionately experienced it radically changes human life for the better: it answers one’s deepest need for change—the need to change oneself.”<sup>18</sup> The removal of acquaintance with nature as a focus and replaced by a modern technological world is getting more and more prevalent in contemporary societies. The rapid change in technical and digital arenas happen so rapidly it presents a notion to the population to remain constantly poised to be ready to embrace the latest and what touted as the greatest, superceding what nature can provide in terms of enjoyment and fulfillment. Contemporary society strives to render outcome through the predictability of technical and digital means. There is an attempt to eliminate expectation and chance. Perhaps this insinuates that





thoughts of variance ought to be dispelled and reduces the element of surprise. I relish the game of chance and love wandering among natural forces and among the processes of creating artwork. The unexpected is welcomed, open-endedness encouraged. Embracing the natural world through being in its physical presence or through my art making helps me to stay open and aware and contemplative about principles that are an inherent and integral part of the Earth—ones that I often find to be unpredictable, but magical.



## FOOTNOTES

1. Terry Winters, *Terry Winters: paintings, drawings, prints, 1994-2004* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p.24.
2. Joan Snyder, *Joan Snyder* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2005), p.22.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
4. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York:Random House, 2000), p..22.
5. Richard Pousette-Dart, *Richard Pousette-Dart : the New York school and beyond* (Milano, Italy: Skira ; New York, NY: Distributed in North America by Rizzoli International, 2005), p. 49.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
7. Deborah Klochko, *Picturing Eden* (George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film ; Göttingen: Steidl, 2006), p. 7.
8. *Ibid.*, p.10.
9. Alexandra Anderson-Spivy, *Robert Kushner: gardens of earthly delight* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1997), p. 59.
10. Deborah Klochko, *Picturing Eden* (George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film ; Göttingen: Steidl, 2006), p. 19.
11. Authur Lubow. "35 who made a difference: Andy Goldsworthy." *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 2005.
12. Aaron Rose, *Aaron Rose: photographs* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), p. 12.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
14. Ross Bleckner, *Ross Bleckner* (New York: Guggenheim Museum: Distributed by Harry N. Abrams, 1995), p. 2.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
16. Gregory Amenoff, *The Sky Below* (West Stockbridge, Mass.: Hard Press, 1997).



17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*



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