



Susan Maakestad

U R B A N A B S T R A C T I O N

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clough-hanson gallery, rhodes college, memphis, tn

Susan Maakestad: Painting the Margins

We think of some cultures (say the aboriginal peoples of Australia) as paying close attention to the landscape, investigating the intrinsic practical use of everything in it and investing each topographical outcropping with mythic significance. Whether the anthropology is accurate, exaggerated, or outright fantasy, it strikes a clear contrast with modern Western life. We are a people of the big picture, broad strokes, hurtling through space, desperate to arrive.

In urban design theorist Kevin Lynch's taxonomy¹, people (quaint pedestrian urban people) comprehend a landscape as a sequence of paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks. That's what makes space a place. Then there's the rest of the physical environment, bits like culverts, parking lots, access driveways, the space between the on-ramp and the road, staging areas, slabs of concrete poured for forgotten purposes. Forlorn passages, nonspaces, utopias.

Susan Maakestad finds these places, always empty of people, takes pictures of them, and carries them back into the studio as subject matter. In vacant margins of the city and the suburbs, something catches her eye. Maybe an interplay of lines, a pattern marked on the ground, shapes bumping together. She strips away extraneous parts of the scene—which might be the few things that other people would latch onto within it—and then paints her way into an image. The shapes become abstract and the colors head off into an imaginary realm, or into a transitory crepuscular moment when a watcher, in a heightened state of receptivity, experiences the sensation of unusually luminous color.

As she moves away from the source, strange things happen to the view. The horizon line tends to move upwards, pushing it to the upper border of the image or out of it altogether. This creates space with little vertical extent, something enclosed, a private inner space. When the image seems to settle on an initial point of perspective, the airless space undergoes a gestalt shift and the lines of a mid-distance landscape start



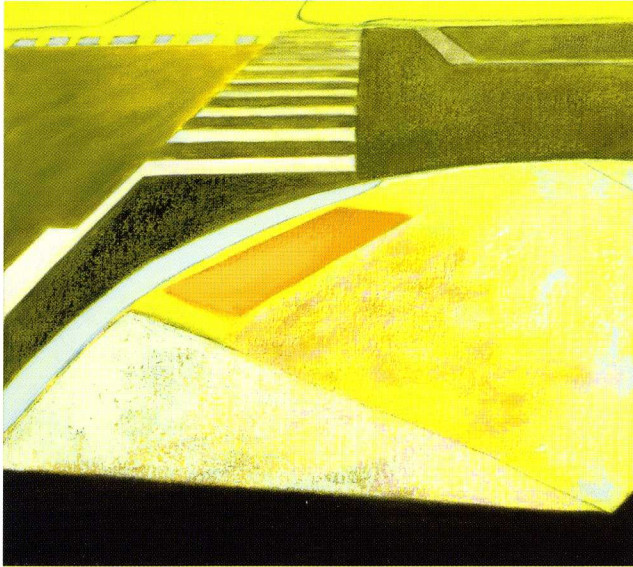
River #2 | 15" x 19" | Oil on canvas | 2005

to resemble the parceling of land seen from a great height. Eventually perception of the source gives way to an awareness of complicated systems of geometry and color.

Such patterns in the-land-as-imagined beg for and resist interpretation. Far into their voyage to the Southern latitudes, Edgar Allan Poe's characters in his *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym* explored deep chasms carved in improbable patterns that looked like letters or hieroglyphs on an Earth Art scale². The crew could not agree among themselves whether the marks were the result of conscious action, let alone start to decipher them. Maakestad provides a Rosetta Stone for mundane land patterns, using rich color to show a fuller spectrum of the emotional response to desolate urban and suburban space. Sadness and loneliness commingle with warmth and pleasure communicated through the inherent joys of color and shape.

Maakestad does not have a documentary intention, but her images impel us to consider the forces that created the places she selects. In Lynch's world of pedestrian-focused





Crosswalk #3 | 18" x 20" | Oil on canvas | 2005

urban design, people define places by the way they use them. The stretches Maakestad finds, the non-spaces, have been sacrificed to a fabricated usefulness. We depend on the drainage ditch to function, but rarely notice it. These spaces are the distinct product of an industrialized society that empties landscape of natural features, animal life and even people to make it a purely functional machine. That recreation of the Earth, obliterating its native qualities and occupants, contributes to the monstrosity of modernity (a phrase borrowed from German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk³).

The painter's treatment of this subject matter brings on ethical complexities. The lush colors redeem the space, but one wonders whether those spaces, and by implication the forces that produced them, deserve redemption. From one angle, the paintings add up to an anti-Joni Mitchell, where paving

over everything in sight is fine because it creates intriguing formal patterns that provide a jumping off point for trips into unforeseen color worlds.

French social philosopher Henri Lefebvre identified three dimensions of space: space as used, space as seen, and space as conceived⁴. Susan Maakestad's scraps of space start as pure use, space that we do not see or comprehend. For the purposes of sight, thought, and feeling, this space has been abandoned, available to a painter to depict and endow with sense. It leaves room for her to occupy it as a squatter. Why not make use of the space unclaimed by others? These paintings have multi-dimensional life in spite of the marginal and unremarkable qualities of their sources, and they constitute a significant act of creative reuse within the bleakest precincts of the contemporary landscape.

David C. Maddox

¹ Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, chap. III. (Boston: MIT Press, 1960)

² Edgar Allan Poe, "Narrative of A. Gordon Pym," chap. XXIII. In Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Tales*, pp. 356-359. (New York: Signet, 1960)

³ Peter Sloterdijk, "Histoire de l'art et histoire du néant." (from the website http://www.jean-michel-truong.net/totalement_inhumaine/page/articles/sloterdijk.html)

⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 33, 38-39. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991)



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