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JOSEPH SWEENEY

Joseph Sweeney's art is able to speak to moderns using the language of classical landscape painting which contemplates nature

BY CATHY VIKSJO



Probably the one thing that people from all walks of life can agree upon is a good view. And Joseph Sweeney, 49, has painted hundreds and hundreds of them. But he is far more than a calendar artist who turns out pretty but boring pictures, according to a formula. Mr. Sweeney's paintings demonstrate an enormous amount of thought, meditation, and intelligent planning. His simplicity is deceptive. The artist's harmonious and balanced compositions actually continue the complex, classical tradition of landscape painting in our modern age.

"My geographic ranges are from the farmland of interior Pennsylvania, to the shores of the Delaware and Schuylkill River Valley, to the southern tip of New Jersey. This is

where I feel at home; this is where I like to paint," said Mr. Sweeney, whose patrons come from Boston and Florida to collect his pieces.

And let's not forget the mood of Mr. Sweeney's landscapes. They reflect a Zen-like equanimity with his surroundings that few painters have mastered. "I like to think of my art as a quiet contemplation of nature. I have used landscape as a metaphor for my own search for balance," said the artist who lives in Ardmore with his wife, daughter and two sons.

He graduated with a bachelor of fine arts degree in painting and drawing from the Philadelphia College of Art (now the University of the Arts), Class of 1976. He has a master's degree from Penn State University, Class of 1980, in art and architecture. Mr. Sweeney served in the U.S. Navy from 1969 to 1971 on a destroyer in the North Atlantic fleet. The artist has taught or is currently teaching art classes at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, The University of the Arts, Wayne Art Center and the Woodmere Art Museum.

In Philadelphia, Mr. Sweeney has been represented by Gross McCleaf Gallery on South 16th Street since 1980. And more recently, his paintings can be found at Salon des Amies on Yellow Springs Road in Malvern. Regionally, this contemporary realist has garnered considerable recognition for his art, as well as numerous awards. Other critics have written of his "striking and exquisite panoramic views" which possess a "majestic timelessness." just how he does this, of course, is the crux of the matter.

In the history of art, Mr. Sweeney likes to quote Leonardo da Vinci who wrote, "Choose only one master, Nature."

It was the French classicist Nicolas Poussin (1593-1665), not Leonardo, who formulated the golden means of landscape painting. An intellectual at heart, Poussin argued that the basis of landscape painting was to be found in the harmonious balance of the horizontal and vertical elements in the design, wrote the late British art historian Lord Kenneth Clark in his seminal study of landscape painting.

Since landscape is essentially horizontal, Poussin introduced architecture or figures to balance his compositions. "It was essential to Poussin's design that his verticals and horizontals should meet at right angles," Clark wrote.

Like Poussin, Mr. Sweeney also looks for the underlying harmonies of nature, and arranges them into a logical composition. His ordered, balanced landscapes, mostly of central Pennsylvania, are characterized by a pronounced horizontal format. Mr. Sweeney organizes the compositional elements by arranging trees, farm buildings and people at right angles. This gives his art work its vertical complement. In his popular river scenes, again primarily horizontal, the positioning of the oars provide that necessary diagonal element into depth. Rowers too emphasize this feature.

Sometimes, he will take advantage of a winding diagonal path, or the patterning of shadows cast by the sun, to give his landscapes the illusion of depth. Such is the case with 'Jack's Mountain,' a "Best-in-Show" pastel in the 98th anniversary International Exhibition of Works on Paper, sponsored by the Philadelphia Water Color Club and held last fall in Atlantic City.

It is one of the most pristine vistas in contemporary art. A New York Times art critic described it as a truly exquisite painting that recalled the great landscapes of British painter John Constable (1776-1837), who revolutionized landscape painting in the 19th century by the powers of his direct observation. It was Constable, with his fresh

naturalistic vision, who set the stage for the optical discoveries of the French Impressionists.

Constable once wrote, "I have never seen an ugly thing in my life." Temperamentally, Joe Sweeney does have a strong affinity with the English painter, particularly in his chiaroscuro, that is, the contrasts of lights and darks. For Constable, this pattern of sunlight and shadows gave his landscapes a dramatic unity.

Mr. Sweeney's aesthetics are much the same. He plans his outdoor observations in two-hour stints, catching as much as he can of atmospheric conditions before they change with the sun's movement in the sky. Said the artist, "Without light, there is nothing to paint for a landscape painter."

His descriptive powers are finely tuned. Joe Sweeney delights in the pleasure of seeing, or recording visual data, just like a poet carefully penning his words. "When I'm painting, I'm taking notes. I'm writing with paint so I have a record of the landscape. Every mark counts," said the artist who quoted Irish poet Seamus Heaney's dictum: "Landscape is sacramental; to be read as text." Joe Sweeney noted, "In looking at a landscape carefully, it is my belief that you can define the soul of a place. The experienced observer can determine the health of a place and its people just by looking at the condition of the land and its people."

Although he has absorbed several influences in the history of art, Mr. Sweeney has an entirely original and contemporary vision. He is never imitative. At the close of our century, Joe Sweeney's environmental concern for preserving our open spaces is forcefully expressed in the delicate balance between man, architecture and nature in his artwork. With strip malls multiplying like rabbits and housing developments cropping up like weeds, there is good reason to be alarmed. Said Mr. Sweeney, "I have been watching the landscape of Pennsylvania change for close to 50 years. At first, I didn't like it under any circumstances. But as the population grows, people have to go somewhere. The question is whether it is done in an unbridled fashion or is the growth done in a well-ordered intelligent plan. I vote for the plan," said Mr. Sweeney, citing Thomas Hylton's recent book, *A Plan for Pennsylvania*.

Joe Sweeney asks us to consider these issues by his in-depth exploration of the world around us. He gives substance to modern landscape. "By exploring my relationship as an individual to the natural world, I am looking for the answers to such questions as: 'How do we interact with the world around its ... What are our responsibilities to it as caretakers and where do we fit in?' The answers to these questions are out there, we have to learn to see them."

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