Didier Nolet

Spirit of the Land

Robert T. Wright
Community Gallery of Art

College of Lake County
DIDIER NOLET: SPIRIT OF THE LAND

By Peter Frank

A maker of pictures, no matter his or her medium, is a conflater of moments. While an object-maker creates a thing that obdurately occupies the present tense – no matter how it might command time, the time it commands is real time – the depicter of things and the renderer of views create images that transport us through time and space to somewhere, something else at some other time. That somewhere else may be the next room, that something else may be the object or person you were just touching, that time may be five minutes ago. But, especially these days, five minutes ago is, like, so five minutes ago, and the very thing beside you may not be in another five minutes. The picture-maker is in fact not freezing a moment that didn’t freeze when it was lived, but compiling many moments into the improbable meta-moment that exists only in memory. One thinks of Mark Tansey’s painting of a plein air painter at his easel, painting – from life – a racing car at the moment it hits the wall and flies into the air. Tansey sums up the conundrum of picture-making in that hilarious but potent image, not simply by endowing the painter with the photographer’s ability to capture the instant, but by inferring how inimical the instant really is to art of any kind. Even the photograph might capture the instant, but the moment the instant is captured it is no longer an instant, but a monument to an instant.

The qualities of memory – retrospective, anthological, synthetic, dreamlike – are the very qualities of artistic images. Mark Tansey avers this in so many words (or pictures); Didier Nolet, a post-modernist of a gentler – but no less subversive – kind, accepts and builds upon this. Nolet situates his landscapes at some sort of experiential node equidistant from that seen in actuality, that seen in recollection, that seen in reproduction, that seen in current artistic interpretation, and that seen in historical artistic interpretation, that is, in our recall
Chicago Botanic Garden, 2003
Oil on canvas
14 1/4" x 36"
College of Lake County Collection
of artwork we have already seen. It is easy to identify Nolet’s painterly predecessors – Poussin and Lorrain, Ruisdael and Constable, Hudson River School painters and Luminists, Barbizonists and Impressionists, Bierstadt and Moran and Frederick Edwin Church, even Albert Pinkham Ryder and Grant Wood – but not easy to isolate them in his oils. Nolet does not mimic the particular manner of each, but invokes them all at once, in every painting he does. Similarly, he does not conjure specific locales, but evokes the conditions of experiencing such places. Many of Nolet’s paintings are identified with, even as, particular places; but his Arizona sky could hover over the Grand Canyon as soon as it could over the mountains outside Tucson, and, absent a landmark like Mt. St. Victoire, we have to take it on his word that his verdant field lies in Provence.

Perhaps if we were to take a hike through, or around, the Chicago Botanical Garden we could find the vantage point where Nolet positioned himself to paint the small canvas on that (unusually concrete) subject. But the pleasure in Nolet’s pictures is not in such topographical accuracy, but in their diffusion of such accuracy. Nolet’s landscapes are accurate not to our knowledge of landscapes, but to our sense of landscape. They are anti-scientific, anti-reportorial, as unmoored in time as myths. They reconfirm our experience(s) – indeed, some of our most pleasant experiences – of the earth’s surface. As often as not they give evidence of human presence (without ever showing a human, or any other fauna, making its way among trees and bushes, reeds and lawns, rivers and hills), and the evidence is invariably modest and comforting, suggesting that our species is capable of living harmoniously in nature. Nolet does not freight his landscapes with social criticism; they make the argument for environmental consciousness from what seems a positive vantage.

Still, there is an element of irony that pervades Nolet’s work. In the context of our angst-ridden times – times in which the dangers we have known are being replaced with dangers we don’t know – such voluptuously bucolic scenes are jarring almost to the point of effrontery. They do not truly reassure us that our natural surroundings are stable and nurturing, and they subtly critique such art that does, art that does seek to provide escape
*Stepping in the Wood, 2002*
Oil on canvas
33 1/2" x 22"
from our troubled civilization. That is to say, Nolet is no "painter of light" – or, put more bluntly, "painter lite" – but a painter in light, a painter of atmosphere. He is also a painter who plays with rather than exploits our credulity. Like so many of his post-modernist peers, from April Gornik to Joe Andoe (and Tansey himself) – but arguably even more surreptitiously than they – Nolet mediates between what is known, what is remembered, and what is desired. His light is less unlikely than theirs, and thus even eerier. The details of his landscapes are less dramatic, and thus more unsettling. In their welter of detail his prospects are at once less abstract and more generic, their virtuosity far more traditional and thus far less artistically (and at the same time far more optically) spectacular. More than the others, Nolet seeks to agitate the unsophisticated as well as the sophisticated eye.

In fact, by addressing himself to a markedly wider audience, Nolet may effectively agitate the sophisticated audience even more than do other post-modern landscape painters. Rather than mute his soft technique and luminosity in favor of a harsher approach that would distance him from kitsch associations, Nolet has if anything amped these most readily appealing qualities. In a thoroughly post-modern move, he has brought into serious artistic discourse a soupcon of the saccharine vulubility we associate with the aforementioned "painter of light" construct. As a food critic might describe this strategy, sugar is the new salt.

But Nolet is not simply puckering the minds of the cognoscenti with overly generous dollops of sweetness. That deliberate imbalance underscores, even effects, the sense of imbalance in our lives that he wishes to maintain in his pictures as a pervasive but nearly invisible frisson, a dissonance that substitutes for the poignancy we would normally expect such work to radiate. In fact, this work is notably devoid of such poignancy. It seems to have issued, as described before, from memory and dream; but it does not reek of childhood, it does not seek the snows of yesteryear. Rather, it recycles and reconsiders the mechanisms of recollection by having those mechanisms work more smoothly and
Field of Provence, 2002
Oil on canvas
40" x 60"
The Other Side of the Road, 2003
Oil on canvas
18" x 24"
impersonally than they do in real life. These paintings, so compelling in their abstract qualities of light and composition and texture, finally retain a stunning distance from human emotion. They do not mirror what we feel; they depict the intricacies of how we feel it and, even more, how we are made to feel it. Nolet's oeuvre is not a critique merely of kitsch commercialism, but of the advantage all picture-makers take of our emotions.

Didier Nolet's landscapes, then, are not mysterious, but they do work oddly. Rather than slowly drawing us in to a world of almost atavistic nostalgia, they flood us immediately with such sensation, then let that tide slowly withdraw, so that we find ourselves examining how such a tide washes over our feelings. Is Nolet attempting to deconstruct human memory and human dreaming? No, but he is deconstructing the way that pictures—especially, but not exclusively, fine-art pictures—provoke, exploit, and ultimately depend on the fact that we remember and we dream. At the end of his effort, we will remember and dream no less than we did, and pictures will stimulate our memories and dreams every bit as much. But we'll have watched how, and the process for us will now be a little bit more elective.

Los Angeles
January 2004

Peter Frank is art critic for Angeleno magazine and the L. A. Weekly, and former editor of Visions art quarterly. He has organized exhibitions for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Independent Curators Inc., the Otis Art Institute, and the Atlanta College of Art (among many other institutions). His monograph on the painter Robert De Niro, Sr., will appear in April.
Reflet dans l'Eau, 2002
Oil on canvas
28" x 40"
DIDIER NOLET

Education
1980 Diplome Superieur d’Art Plastique, Ecole Nationale Superieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris, France

Selected One-Man Shows
2004  "Looking for the Past," Perimeter Gallery, Chicago, IL
2003  Chicago Botanic Garden, Glencoe, IL
       Concordia University, River Forest, IL
2002  "Reflections of my Moods," Shora Gallery, Laguna Beach, CA
2001  "Full Circle," Lydon Fine Art, Chicago, IL
       "Ever Green," Ann Nathan Gallery, Chicago, IL
2000–1999 Elgin Community College, Elgin, IL
       "Views II," Ann Nathan Gallery, Chicago, IL

Selected Group Shows
2001  "Between Earth and Sky," O'Hare International Airport, Chicago, IL
       "Works on Paper," the Armory, New York, NY
1994  Chicago International Art Exhibition
1990  "The Chicago Show," Chicago Cultural Center

Selected Awards
1990  Edward and Eleanor DeWitt Prize, "The Chicago Show"
       Award of Excellence, "Flora '90," Chicago Botanic Garden, Glencoe, IL

Selected Collections
• Union League Club of Chicago
• Museum of Fine Arts, Pau, France
• State of Illinois Capitol Development Board
• McDonald Corp., Oak Brook, IL
• Chemical Bank of New York

Selected Bibliography
• Issacs, Deanna "Changes of Scenery," Chicago Reader, Jan. 2002
• Geroulis, Dean "Memories Inspire Painter’s Landscapes," Chicago Tribune, Dec. 21, 2001
• Artner, Alan G. – Review of one-man show at Eva Cohon Gallery, Chicago Tribune, Sept. 1995
Detour, 2000
Oil on canvas,
28" x 36"
To my students, who through their individuality and enthusiasm continually
shine new light on my creative process. ~ Didier Nolet

Exhibition Checklist

1. Field of Provence, 2002, oil on canvas, 40" x 60"
2. Last Moment, 2000, oil on canvas, 48" x 60"
3. Melting Light, 2000, oil on canvas, 21" x 65"
4. Detour, 2000, oil on canvas, 28" x 36"
5. Reflet dans l'Eau, 2002, oil on canvas, 28" x 40"
6. Le Marais, 1999, oil on canvas, 41 1/2 " x 65"
7. Stepping in the Wood, 2002, oil on canvas, 33 1/2 " x 22"
8. Acta est Fabula, 1999, oil on canvas, 26" x 35"
9. Holding the Light, 2003, oil on canvas, 28" x 72"
10. Morningrise, 2003, oil on canvas, 43" x 109"
11. Fin de Journée, 1999, oil on canvas, 30" x 24"
12. Provençal Haze, 1999, oil on canvas, 13" x 30"
13. Demeure, 1999, oil on canvas, 26" x 36 1/4"
14. Prelude, 2003, oil on canvas, 28 1/2" x 41"
15. The Other Side of the Road, 2003, oil on canvas, 18" x 24"
16. Waveland, 2001, oil on canvas, 21" x 65"
17. Spirit Mountain, 2002, oil on canvas, 43 3/4 " x 60"
18. Highland, 2003, oil on canvas, 48" x 75"
19. The Swamp, 2003, oil on canvas, 45" x 72"
20. Chicago Botanic Garden, 2003, oil on canvas, 14 1/4" x 36"

Artist’s Statement

My work reflects a blending of vision between my childhood memories in France where I grew up and my life in the U.S. for the past 20 years. The landscapes are not actual places; rather, I use the landscapes as a way to transcribe my state of mind and my emotions. They reflect the different stages of my life. I could call them "icons of my moods."
Didier Nolet

Spirit of the Land
February 27- April 10, 2004

Gallery hours:
Mon-Thu 8:00 am-9:00 pm
Fri/Sat 9:00 am-4:30 pm
Sun 1:00-5:00 pm

Spring Break Hours:
March 29 – April 2, 8:00 am-4:30 pm
Closed April 3 - 4 (Sat/Sun)

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Grayslake, Illinois 60030-1198

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