

ArtReview

Truth, Justice and the New American Way



Jeder Mensch ein Cowboy

Dan Attoe *Natural Selections*

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Who wants a resuscitation of Impressionism? Dan Attoe does. The American artist was already known for spiky, contrarian canvases that impose a conflicted view on the rural idyll: nevertheless, this is an oddly archaic move. While there is intense toil in his small earlier paintings of deer hunters and homesteads, the seven new oils here – all works 2016 – are significantly looser in execution, and bigger both in size (three measure 152cm by 122cm) and ambition. Attoe, once a skate-punk kid, has previously admitted that he was never fully at ease growing up in Idaho ranger stations where his father worked. His sardonic take on rural Americana persists, as evidenced by the wry thought-inscriptions that whisper from the heads of his tiny figures. Rendered in a minuscule script, these peter out into an uncaring world. Such pitiful declamations are, Attoe suggests, just about all we have when confronted by the natural world's immensity and blank indifference.

His swoops and drips of paint are now spruce, as with *Landscape with Free Time and Money*, a serene vision of blue hills, a conflation – as with all the works here – of real and imaginary landscapes. But the dream of utopia is qualified by Attoe's sarcastic texts, which are folksy and

devoid of sanctimonious windbagery. His geographies are loci of pleasure – rest stops such as *Mountain Lodge in Snow*, which recalls the Timberlodge Hotel near Mount Hood in Oregon, a winter wonderland with an architecture similar to the Overlook from Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980). Closer inspection reveals an inscription that reads, amusingly, 'There's nothing to worry about'. *Visitor Center with Pines* sees an empty A-frame cabin reflecting beams of a xanthic dawn before the tourists descend: given mankind's jaundiced trashing of nature, that's perhaps the best time to arrive. Another diminutive lady tries to reassure us: 'Everything will be alright'. Maybe that's all we need to hear just now.

Attoe's take on the landscape of pleasure, this belated Pacific Northwestern version of the genre, unsurprisingly majors in the use of blue. These blues are generally inclement, his seas colder, the glaucous hills more mulchy than the balmy vistas of the Southern California Impressionists. We see skies of teal and steel blue-grey peaks interspersed with wispy banks of white painted fog. Here, too, are streaks of Prussian blue that represent the giant trees Attoe grew up among, where the foliage is

hung thick and falls down deeply. And then there are his seas, turquoise grading into viridian waters as the coastal shelf nears.

People struggle in Attoe's bucolic world, but he's sympathetic to their plight. In *Mountain with Stage* four actors stand apart from one another on a proscenium, an enormous painted mountain as backdrop. An actress confesses, 'I can't concentrate'; a male costar tells her, 'It's okay, nobody can'. In *Light Water with Fir Trees*, four female figures walk in spooky procession, like disembodied spirits: one of them thinks, 'This isn't the first time you've been here'. And in *Mountain Lake with Floaters* a tiny woman in the shallows says to herself, 'Everything I did was planned the whole time'. She stares out, towards deeper waters, at two people of indeterminate age relaxing on rubber rings. The enigmatic script knowingly begs explication. Impressionism is most strikingly recalled in *Beach with Cliff*, which is unafraid to reference Claude Monet's *The Manneporte near Étretat* (1886). Here a giant arch of rock, with its gargantuan foot, threatens to crush the scattered bodies on the sand. Despite hints of Thoreau-like skulking back into nature, Attoe's arboreal worlds are honourable apparitions of a compromised placidity. *John Quin*



Visitor Center with Pines (detail), 2016, painting, oil on canvas on panel, 122 x 122 cm.
Photo: Matthias Kolb. Courtesy Peres Projects, Berlin