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Dan Attoe, "Mountain with Stage," 2016

## THE STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE OF CIVIC AMERICA

### Ana Finel Honigman on Dan Attoe at Peres Projects, Berlin

For almost two decades, painter Dan Attoe, who lives and works in Washington State, has been creating work about the American Midwest and Pacific Northwest. In turn, his work, to an arguably greater degree than that of many his New York/LA-dwelling peers, reflects on the causes and consequences of rural America's culture and choices. It's an attribute that is only amplified by the fact that Attoe is a natural storyteller. As such, he makes canvases that are not only sensually rewarding – rich with visual detail and glistening with varnish – but also imbued with palpable empathy: compositions dominated by gorgeous, sweeping environments are populated with

small, tenderly rendered figures. Often, he arms them with language or at least places it within their reach such that witty, poignant lines of text appear as his characters' thought-bubbles or perhaps the observations of an omniscient narrator articulating contemporary America's vulnerability and anxiety. For "Natural Selections," Attoe's winter show at Berlin's Peres Projects (his eighth with the gallery), he presented seven characteristically magic-realist paintings that he produced during the run-up to the 2016 US presidential election.

In his early work, Attoe balanced surreal elements with the darkly humorous narratives one can derive from the realities of rural American life. More recently, he has focused on various of America's otherworldly natural landscapes, compositing the real spaces he knows from life with ones he conjures from imagination while visually

referencing the Hudson River school tradition and early American folk art. He then sets within these realms fragile figures seemingly tormented by loneliness, depression, and anxiety. His 2014 solo show at Peres, for example, presented people lounging or swimming in opulently constructed pools and yet disconnected from each other, distracted by their personal neuroses. The polished settings contrast with the figures' apparently chaotic internal lives. The world goes along without their involvement – a world whose beauty the figures are unable to engage, let alone enjoy.

With his turn toward fantastical landscape painting, Attoe has employed a handling of the medium that is more expressionistic and disquieting than before. The canvases that constitute this show – each cast in a blue-scale palette with accents of yellow – are executed as if in the tradi-



tion of classic East Asian ink painting: layers of washes that aim to express the spirit of nature through gestural rendering. As such, Attoe's outdoors seems to weep and quiver, with skies melting into water and trees dripping into snow, perhaps passively biodegrading from climate change or the depression plaguing their inhabitants. Meanwhile, said residents remain self-absorbed and overshadowed by their settings and by circumstances far beyond their control or comprehension. Meek and dazed, they appear as helpless prey. Even the lone dog in "Beach with Cliff" (all works mentioned 2016) appears potentially threatening as it approaches two figures: the humans shown wandering below an ominous rock formation, the dog encircled by jittery movement lines perhaps indicating its peaking nervousness. In "Mountain Lodge in Snow," skinny isolated figures wander around a sweetly-peaked mountain lodge, smoke wafting from the chimney to meet the storm clouds overhead. Beside the structure, Attoe has scrawled in firm yet fragmented script: "There is nothing to worry about."

Such showings of compromised comfort are demonstrated throughout this body of work. For example, as is the case in "Mountains with Stage," wherein a man with bad posture and a nineteenth-century waistcoat manages to communicate with the woman beside him, but only to anxiously mutter, "I can't concentrate." They are two of the four figures standing on a stage between a theatrical curtain and a massive snowy mountain. In this scene, one could project that Attoe's indie-folk idiom is here aimed at satirizing the media scrutiny of white rural voters during the presidential election. Both in this work and the others on view, characters wear simple pre-industrial clothes – those of the likes of a



"Dan Attoe: Natural Selections," Peres Projects, Berlin, 2016/17, installation view

schoolteacher, general store manager, preacher, or early pioneer settler. In response to one woman's apparent befuddlement (or perhaps historical amnesia?), a stooped man nearby responds "It's okay. Nobody can." Equally defenseless are the lithe little women in a work titled "Light Water with Fir Trees." Wearing wispy white dresses, one might take them to be cult members wandering into a woodland lake. Nearby in "Mountain Lake with Floaters," two lost figures drift apart from each other. Standing on the shore facing them is the only active character in the scene, a blond all-American vixen taunting her submissive audience: "Everything I did was planned the whole time." Their body language betrays the confusion and passivity of subjects primed to be swayed by a charismatic speaker spouting real talk about jobs, God, money, and Muslims.

As Attoe's new series takes up rural America's isolation, its worldview, and its susceptibility to political manipulation, the tumultuousness of Attoe's landscapes seems to suggest imminent (and perhaps terminal) disruption for their inhabitants. However, what is perhaps the artist's most bracing commentary comes via a sharply sarcastic work titled "Landscape with Free Time and Money." In this softly painted canvas depicting a

fantasy mountain range submerged in mist, the titular words "Free Money" rupture the illusory space. Given what is known of Attoe's position, this could be taken as a jab at city-dwellers and their blind faith in an idealistic liberal agenda (of the kind a Bernie Sanders figure might spout), and these urbanites' apparent ignorance regarding the interdependences among rural communities, Wall Street, and the fossil fuel industry.

One might also think here of the 1975 Patti Smith song "Free Money" and the related dream of another elusive luxury – "free time." By splitting the phrase so the words are stacked on top of each other, Attoe makes the free-floating letters look like billboard advertising for an unrealistic but alluringly designed fantasy. With witty polemics instead of overt sloganeering, Attoe has given us, in this new series, paintings that are as poetic as they are political and that should stand, years from now, as a testament to the mood and psychology of a nation on the brink of systemic change.

"Dan Attoe: Natural Selections," Peres Projects, Berlin, December 16, 2016–February 24, 2017.