

The Night Drawings of David McCosh

The significance of my [work] rests on an affirmation of faith - that reality cannot be invented - that emotions must be genuine and that honest painting holds a unique position which no other activity or form can replace.

- David McCosh, Sabbatical Proposal. 1953.

I would say that Cezanne in starting to draw a given situation asked himself "how do I know" not "what do I know"... Cezanne doesn't pretend to know anything - he states as honestly as he can in painting equivalents the causes he has been able to discern in the situations that produce knowledge. Knowing is the result, not the cause.

- David McCosh, Lecture on Cezanne.

In the Night Drawings, McCosh purposefully separated the act of drawing from his observation of any subject other than the drawing itself. These drawings were made at night, in his studio, not on site while he was observing a specific subject. He didn't even base them on sketches that he had made previously of a specific subject, as was often his practice. As he drew he had in mind the northwest landscape situations, as he called them, that he had observed for years - the entanglements and twisting spaces created by dense vegetation, the cathedral lighting of the forest, the colors reflected off a sunlight stream - but he asked as he worked - how do I know these things? How do I see them?

To answer these questions he stated with paint, or ink, or watercolor, the elements of the landscape situation as he saw them. He wasn't trying to make a photographic-like summary of a visual experience. He wanted instead a piece by piece reconstruction of the activity and the elements that comprise how we see. The carefully placed marks and calligraphic lines in the black and white Night Drawings are intended to create entanglements with their shifting and twisting spaces in the same way that a careful observer sees them. McCosh said that what he knew was the result of how he saw a situation. The Night Drawings show us his process of observation, which at times was deliberate and meticulous and at other times, as in the Night Drawings with multiple colors, it moved quickly with great energy and emotional engagement.

When I first began to study the Night Drawings I wondered if they were technical exercises which McCosh designed so that he could focus on the elements of painting and drawing - the ability of the brush, for example, to make marks that sometimes surprise the painter with their individual character and which suggest a direction for the next set of marks that is different from what the painter had been thinking. The Night Drawings may have had that original purpose, but these works became more than a record of his observations, even more than a demonstration of how he observed landscape situations.

He explores in this work the potential of painting to create essence - to create meaning as poetry and music does, not through a literal description of the world, but through the creation of a work of art that states the essence of an experience in a form we all can share.

Is the complexity of these tangled webs the essence that McCosh is after? His point seems to be finding the pattern, the structure which brings order and life to the complexity we see. The Night Drawings aren't intended as chaotic experiences, but as examples of order. They are the experiences of an individual who through painting discovered something that goes beyond what he was able to observe. This is what makes painting unique among activities or forms of artistic expression. McCosh is not often thought of as a spiritual painter, whose work reflects or participates in ideas that transcend painting itself. But the Night Drawings and his related late works have a spiritual dimension that results from McCosh's discovery of order, structure, simplicity in complex and chaotic environments.

This is the fifth in a series of shows at the Karin Clarke Gallery that have presented various aspects of McCosh's long journey as a painter. I intentionally waited to show the Night Drawings until now because they embody a philosophy of painting he developed during a lifetime of study and practice. But there is another quality about them which shouldn't be missed. Many of the works in this show have an extraordinary freshness about them, with colors as bright and vivid as the day they were laid down. They were made 40 to 50 years ago, yet they haven't aged or changed and maybe they never will. They are like visitors from another time. This must have been what Henry James had in mind when he wrote about seeing great paintings from other eras:

As he stood before them the perfection of their survival often struck him as the supreme eloquence, the virtue that included all others, thanks to the language of art, the richest and most universal. Empires and systems and conquests had rolled over the globe and every kind of greatness had risen and passed away, but the beauty of the great pictures had known nothing of death or change, and the tragic centuries had only sweetened their freshness. The same faces, the same figures looked out at different worlds, knowing so many secrets, the particular world didn't, and when they joined hands they made the indestructible thread on which the pearls of history were strung.

- Henry James, "The Tragic Muse".

Roger Saydack
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