

## Second State

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The first time I visited Randy Stoltzfus' studio in Brooklyn it was late in the day, nearly dusk. The light level was low, particularly as the studio had only a block of windows facing north. I began looking at the paintings expecting as one does that some artificial lights would be turned on so I could see the work better. As I walked from one painting to the next I realized that Stoltzfus was not going to turn on any other lights. Soon he said something to the effect of how this was the best light to look at the work. So, I continued looking, allowing my eyes to adjust. After sometime the darks in the paintings started to float with density ever more palpable by the images of fire. Then I realized I could no longer see the paintings anymore, I could only feel them. I was



reminded of a passage from Jun'ichiro Tanizaki's essay *In Praise of Shadows*, "We delight in the mere sight of the delicate glow of fading rays clinging to the surface...there to live out what little life remains to them. The hue may differ...but the degree of difference will be ever so slight; not so much a difference in color as in shade, a difference that will seem to exist only in the mood of the viewer."

At the time of this visit, Stoltzfus had just begun the earliest paintings that were recently shown in his first solo exhibition in New York. Stoltzfus, who now lives in Brooklyn, grew up in the Shenandoah Valley as the grandson of an Amish Deacon. This person-

As a result, he creates work that is deeply embedded in the aspect of the American psyche that extends from Thomas Jefferson to the Transcendentalists (Emerson and Thoreau) and to the Luminists (Innes and Moran). His work continues the profound belief in the possibility of metaphorically finding oneself through a personal experience with the landscape. But for Stoltzfus it is not so much about showing us a specific place but rather something atmospheric, embedded in memory, history and light.

Stoltzfus' paintings contain images of fields, trees, figures, fire, the sky and the sea, but these images always become part of the larger metaphor of each work that is experienced through their richly painted surfaces, subtle and powerful color relationships, and intense shimmering light. To achieve these qualities Stoltzfus mixes powdered glass, iridescent pigment and even an occasional hint of gold leaf into his already complex palette of earth tones, warm and cool blacks, cadmiums, cobalt and ultramarine. The process of applying the paint is slow and often changes are made. It is a way of working that is romantic and may even seem by today's standards somewhat archaic. But for Stoltzfus it is this slow process that connects him with his past and his origins, and allows him to question his own place in addition to the specific signification place carries in our world today.

The Garden Gate, a monumental work at 8 x 10 feet and the largest in the show, mixes the broadest range of earth tones into an intense crescendo of yellows and whites in the center of the image. It is perhaps an open gate that is full of light we can imagine ourselves entering, a metaphor of crossing from one place into another. The quality is similar to the experience people speak of when they have returned from near death and are overtaken by an intense bright light.

Housefire presents a small house-like structure fully ablaze and floating in the deep recessional space of a dark and ominous rural landscape. The flames are

This house is on fire but it does not burn in its silence. Only the flames speak and they tell us that we are in this house, that we float in this place and, even though we may come and go, the land will remain. As Stoltzfus shows us this, even he is humble to its power. It is an allegory of the burning bush on the American landscape.

Exploding with thousands of specks of luminous color creating a dramatic surface texture is the most abstract of Stoltzfus' works, Sphinx. In this image the landscape is merely suggested by the presence in the lower right of what looks like a tree. In addition, the bottom edge is darker than the top, which gives a sense of gravity to the composition. The subtlety of these elements is enough to key us into the experience and to signify that this is some place in the world. The brightest whites are most dense in the middle and radiate out to the edges. The effect pushes the ebullient light into real space directly confronting the viewer. Unlike Housefire, with its deep recessional space, this image denies entrance past its surface. This light that pushes outward draws the viewer in and once close the surface unfolds with its own magic of transparent and opaque whites, blues, reds, browns, blacks, and gold with shimmering iridescence. The experience is similar to that of the late circular radiating paintings of first generation Abstract Expressionist Richard Pousette-Dart. But Stoltzfus' composition is less contrived in that it is hinged not on geometry as is the case with Pousette-Dart but rather on psychology and in addition his color is much more rich.

Stoltzfus is an artist who continues to believe in the power of the painted image. He continues to push the inherent paradoxical duality of the medium: the simultaneous existence of paint as substance and as image. By doing so he firmly establishes his position as a proponent of Modernism. This position maintains the definition put forth by Clement Greenberg in his essay *Modernist Painting* (1960); "The essence of Modernism lies

not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence." Although there are many who argue that we are beyond this historical moment the evidence is clear that we are not. There continues to be significant work made that not only fits into this classification but that expands how it is understood. With this work Stoltzfus takes on this challenge of expanding Modernism and in the process produces tremendous results.