

Elizabeth Hazan's Remarkable Inscapes

In the fall of 1883 Gerard Manley Hopkins, an English Jesuit priest whose wildly innovative poems would bring him posthumous fame in the 20th century, sought to describe in an essay titled "The Remarkable Sunsets" some startling occurrences he had witnessed in the skies above England. Although Hopkins didn't know it at the time these uncommon displays were the result of the August 1883 eruption of a volcano on the Indonesian island of Krakatoa, a massive explosion that expelled billions of tons of ash and debris into the Earth's upper atmosphere. As this mass of floating matter made its way around the globe, sunsets took on strange qualities, which were remarked on by many observers and depicted by visual artists. Among them was Edvard Munch, who while on a sunset stroll through Oslo with some friends looked up at a dazzling display: "It was as if a flaming sword of blood slashed open the vault of heaven. . . . the atmosphere turned to blood – with glaring tongues of fire – the hills became deep blue – the fjord shaded into cold blue – among the yellow and red colors – that garish blood-red – on the road – and the railing – my companions' faces became yellow-white." A decade later Munch would seek to capture this experience in a group of paintings and pastels titled *The Scream*. Like Hopkins, Munch was unaware of the relationship between the spectacular sunsets in European skies and the eruption of a volcano on the other side of the globe. The revelation that actual atmospheric conditions and not just the artist's overheated visual imagination may have influenced Munch's undulating orange and yellow bands has changed our understanding of *The Scream*, and also, perhaps our general approach to paintings that derive from the artist's experiences of nature.

Looking at Elizabeth Hazan's recent paintings—abstractions in which rich colors, by turns verdant, aqueous, mineral or fragrant, are embodied in arrays of soft-edged shapes held gently within skeins of meandering lines—it's hard not to ponder the role of atmosphere, the place of air, in our perception of the world around us. So often in her work it feels like we are looking at a landscape through the haze of a summer day or the mist of a damp dawn, discerning fields and trees refracted through some diaphanous cloud of suspended particles, dust or moisture, smoke or pollen. Well, what is paint, after all, but suspended particles of color into which we gaze?

An important and distinctive aspect of Hazan's work is how she moves across different scales and mediums. For this body of work she began with watercolors, a medium she started using during the summer of 2018. In small studies she utilizes the watercolor's capacity to bloom into translucent stains in order to evoke one of her favored parts of the world, the eastern end of Long Island, where flat open

fields predominate under a pellucid light that has attracted American painters for generations. The next phase involves using oil paint to loosely transpose the improvised watercolor composition onto a small canvas (generally about 24 by 20 inches). Now the lines become thicker and more sinuous, colors deeper and more nuanced; a marvelous painterly ambiguity comes into play. Then, turning to oil on linen, she scales up further, still letting the painting find its own way. Ultimately, each iteration is distinct and autonomous.

Although Hazan generally doesn't name actual places in her titles ("Field" followed by a number usually suffices), once in a while she gets specific, as in *Fireplace Road*. More tightly populated with jostling shapes than most of her other paintings, *Fireplace Road* relies on a palette that is more evocative of a fancy gelateria than any real landscape. Every color seems more tempting than its neighbor, each one a refined distillation of wild nature. Of course, the title evokes one of the most famous locations in American art: 830 Fireplace Road in Springs was the home of Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner. But we shouldn't take this as any allusion of influence: rather than Pollock or Krasner, Hazan looks to Rothko (especially the "Multiform" paintings of the late 1940s) and Bonnard, those masters of chromatic nuance and liminal shapes. Among contemporaries, she has clear affinities with Amy Sillman and, somewhat more surprisingly, Carroll Dunham (note how she likes to outline bulbous shapes in paintings such as *Field #86*, which also subtly evokes Guston's Roma series).

A superlative colorist, from the blinding yellows of *East of the Fields* to the cool passing shadows of *Field #74*, and a probing handler of line (the linear parts of her paintings feel thoughtful, almost hard-won rather than merely deft), Hazan is a worthy inheritor of joys of twentieth-century painterly abstraction. Yet amid the visual delights of her art there are intimations of a world out of balance. While creating this body of work she was aware in the back of her mind of summer wildfires ravaging California, and somewhere at the edge of her consciousness, as for so many of us, was the thought of what happens to low-lying islands when waters rise. When Hopkins and Munch marveled at "remarkable" skies in the 1880s the causes remained unknown to them; today, as we seek what Hopkins called "inscapes" (an apt term for Hazan's work) we are all too well aware of the interrelatedness of our fragile world, of its visible consequences, near and far.

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