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February 2008

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### Dueling Diptychs . . . from page 1

Despite the confusion that his adoption of the vocabulary of modern abstraction seems to have caused some commentators, Nicaise stands squarely in the landscape tradition that stretches from Claude Lorraine through Claude Monet to the present, and these works recall one of the sub-titles of Stravinsky's masterpiece, the *Rite of Spring*, which the Modernist composer called *The Adoration of the Earth*. There's more than a hint of ritual and magic in the painter's decision to build a ground for his paintings out of earthen materials: sand, mortar, and wood ash among them. Seen up close, these materials give the surface a 3-D contour that is part plastic modeling done with the brush, part naturally variegated, sparkling color, and part richly evocative textures—smoke, rock, fabric -- that come about accidentally in the encounter of paint and ground. They are full of the solitary painter's private joy: the pleasure of total immersion in craft. They are also full of exquisite discoveries for the thorough viewer who takes the time to stand close (too close for most museum guardians to abide) for eyes to wander over their surfaces and into their illusive depths.

Walking down the center of the gallery, though, it's possible to miss this experience and see only a sequence of what seems at first to be repetitive canvases built from saturated whites, grays, burnt oranges, dark blues, and blood reds that are layered and streaked to form deep, primordial atmospheres or murky seas. Interpretation is optional, but the sense of space is inescapable. Over these depths float a narrow range of geometric shapes, primarily disks and circles, rectangles, and vertical or horizontal lines. [1-2] For Cezanne, these shapes were the analytical skeletons of things seen: the structural actors of a visual drama. But just as scientists have broken down the atoms that make up matter into even smaller, interacting particles -- quarks, neutrinos, and so on -- so Nicaise explores the components parts and characteristic behaviors of Cezanne's atoms. His disks tout their boundaries or brushstrokes; his circles reveal the tools that drew them. Rectangles are strokes *this* long by brushes *that* wide. They are also often the origin of the lines, which turn out to be drips. Because made by gravity, they are always parallel, but not always running down the canvas. Sometimes they rise weightlessly, and at others they run across like so many horizons. Gravity, though, appears to be a primary subject.

There are two themes present here. Nicaise works on several canvases at once, so these may well represent the results of two separate adventures in the studio. The larger canvases are single and are numbered in a sequence collectively titled *Earth Sink*. Smaller panels are shown in pairs, also numbered, and are titled *Spirit Rise*. The relation between each pair, which Nicaise considers a diptych, is variable. In "Spirit Rising 1" they merge into a single composition, in which yellow disks rise from the lower corners and float up towards the top center. More often, though, the two panels repeat the same general composition closely enough to recall stereo photos, which are familiar as the ubiquitous accessory to nineteenth century tourism, but are also part of the vocabulary of science. Thus in

### Exhibition Review: Salt Lake City Spirit and Structure

Paintings by Susan Swartz at the UMFA  
by Kimberly Rock

Sophisticated symbioses of spirit and structure awaken awe for nature's beauty in viewers of *Natural Revelations: Paintings by Susan Swartz*, on display at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts through April 13, 2008.

"I just paint," says the Park City artist of her acrylic-on-linen creations. "It's from the soul. It's from something real deep in there. And it's hard to explain it," she says. Painting entirely from imagination, Susan Swartz represents her spiritual interpretations of nature in boldly-colored, abstract works.

"Truly, this is a celebration of color; it's a celebration of painting," says David L. Dee, Director of UMFA. "You can see that she's incorporating ideas about abstraction, about reducing things to their essence," he says, describing the 17 Swartz pieces currently on display at the museum. "You can see a cross-section of work that includes [paintings] that are very much representational," Dee continues. "This is an expressive, passionate work. . . But it's also very much informed. She's very knowledgeable about art-making and art precedents."

Of her artistic predecessors, says Swartz, "The French Impressionists are my favorite." The painter, a product of an artistic and musical family, puts greatest emphasis on her spiritual interaction with nature. "I believe the ultimate teacher is the environment, is God who creates. And, it's just walking there, and painting," she says. "I feel so blessed that I look at creation on a daily basis."

An artist who begins each painting with a prayer and finishes each with the abbreviation "GTG" (Glory to God) beneath her signature, Swartz largely experiences life in spiritual terms. Among her blessings, she counts her re-emergence into the art world after spending decades away as a full-time homemaker. "Many years ago, I was showing in New York and I got some international recognition then; and I even showed in France," she remembers. "But, I had these three wonderful children; and [my husband] was clearly the bread-winner in the family. So, I really put everything on the backburner. And I stopped the showing," she says. "I never stopped the painting. But I stopped the showing. And it's only since the kids graduated from college that I started all this up in full force again," Swartz says. "I thought I had given all this up. And I do believe that God's blessing me for the decisions I made many years ago to raise my kids. I've got three great kids."

In graceful agreement with her personal values, Swartz generously contributes to not only her family, but also to multiple social and environmental causes. Active in her local community, Swartz supports programs generating empowerment of low-income and under-represented groups. Beyond her immediate sodality, her humanitarian work includes contributions to the making of evocative documentaries including 2005's Oscar-winning *Born Into Brothels*, a film about using art to lift children from the interpersonal, educational, and financial hopelessness of life as the offspring of Calcutta, India's prostitutes.

Swartz also strives to sustain Earth as a whole. The painter's appreciation and respect for nature are vividly apparent in her work. "She captures the essence of things that she cares about deeply: the environment, the earth on in which we live, the natural world that surrounds us," says UMFA's director. "I think it's unusual for a museum to have



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"Spirit Rising 2" a blue line rises from left to right in the left panel, then steps down between the panels and repeats the gesture on the right. [0]

Modern painters tend to minimize frames, preferring that their works be seen as objects with edges rather than as windows into another place. Nicaise means this palpable edge to tell us how he envisions the work: not as individual constructions so much as parts sliced from some larger, continuous field. He calls them "excavations;" he also refers to them as "journeys." Both terms resonate with time, with a feeling for its role in creating the earth we know and stocking it with artifacts for investigation. The craft of painting, then, becomes a metaphor for geologic and ultimately cosmic processes. It's not a claim Nicaise makes for himself alone. If the concept is more important than the visible product, as Modernism believes, then the process means more than the form it creates.

The echoing of images that is implicit in Nicaise becomes explicit upstairs, where photographs by George Edward Anderson are paired with images of the same places taken a century later by Peter L. Goss. Anderson was a peripatetic studio portrait photographer, a staple character of the frontier known by his wagon and tent, who settled in central Utah and undertook to capture more than mere appearances. In an effort to penetrate deeper than the grainy, black-and-white surface and the formal pose, he often posed entire families, sometimes with iconic accessories, outside their houses. Goss has located surviving buildings from among the body of work Anderson left behind, and shot new images that as closely as possible duplicate the conditions of the originals. Some of the structures are little changed, while others have only barely survived. Most argue the impoverishment of modern life: wooden trim and fretwork, like lawns, were imports that fared poorly in the desert and proved costly to maintain. Thus a stunted, blind-eyed limestone pile that I used to pass every day in Manti started out as a charming cottage, festooned with an elaborately ornamented, two-story porch. [3]

While the all-but universal disappearance of fences might signal a friendlier or more secure populace, it too probably has more to do with economics. Taste is another matter: Ellen Harmer's house may have been a plain cracker box, but it had a soft-spoken dignity that disappeared when a later owner added a pair of raised eyebrows in the form of out-scaled, architecturally meaningless brick arches. [4] Not that either Anderson or Goss passes judgment, though. The former seems to second the pride-of-ownership manifest in those folks, lined up in their Sunday best, who successfully transplanted their lives into the wilderness. In Goss, arguably what we see is how much those qualities remain as human constants through the passage of time and the alternation of circumstance.

One major problem photographers face might be thought of as their medium's indifference to its makers: to them. Viewers tend to look right past the photograph to see what it depicts. A documentary photographer like Anderson relies on point of view, in the broadest possible sense of the term, to make a personal statement. Goss, by placing himself at the service of Anderson's originals, echoes the earlier man's devotion to the subject, but gains the upper hand by forcing us, as viewers, to contemplate the circumstances in which both men worked. He not only elevates his work above mere record keeping, but gives Anderson a new vitality as well—in much the same way as the various inhabitants of these antique homes have given them new life. Finally, the survival of so much specific detail, in the face of changes that reveal the passage of time, allows us to come as close as we probably ever will to time travel.

Time has retained its mysteries while much of reality has yielded to the advance of human knowledge. While we may never understand what it is or how it works, Kurt Nicaise's topographic narratives and Peter Goss's twinned moments allow us to hold time in our minds, to imagine the past we can only imagine and see how it continually creates the present: the only thing we can truly know.

The works of Peter Goss and Kurt Nicaise will be on display at the Central Utah Art Center through February 13th.

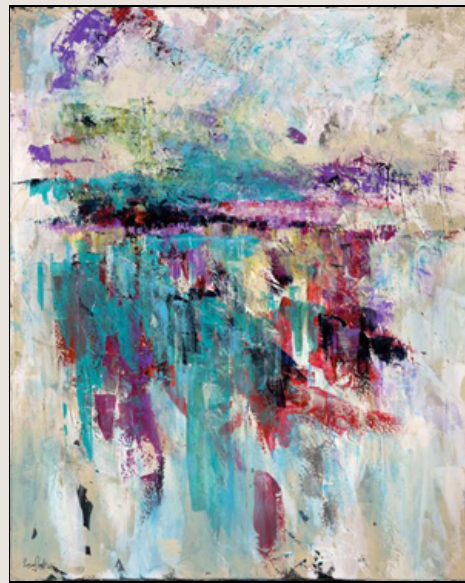
an opportunity to show an artist who has important things to say about the time in which we live, and does so with a great passion, and skill, and dedication to her craft."

Environmental endeavors have given Swartz opportunities to meet other activists including Dr. Jane Goodall, who penned the conclusion of the artist's first book. In *Natural Revelations: The Art of Susan Swartz*, Goodall, best known for her chimpanzee studies in East Africa, writes, "Susan Swartz shares my concern for the future of life on this planet." Swartz's work encourages all, writes the scientist and UN Messenger of Peace, "to do what we can to save nature itself."

In her book, released coinciding with her solo exhibition at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Swartz showcases the environment with her vibrant images of nature's glory, with sections named for the seasons, and with quotes from renowned naturalists including Thoreau, Emerson, and Longfellow. "I didn't want the only statement to be about me," Swartz says. "I wanted it to speak more to the environment."

In conjunction with the exhibit of this inspiring Utah artist, recognized in 2004 by the Harvard Divinity School for her interaction of artistry with spirituality, the museum offers a lecture series on spirituality in art. Dr. Gloria White -Hammond, co-founder of My Sister's Keeper, a humanitarian group supporting women of Sudan, speaks February 21 at 7:00 pm. April 3 at 7:00 pm, Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, Adjunct Professor in the Prince Alwaleed Bin Tala Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, will present *The Spirituality of Vision: Artistic Journeys to the Sacred*. Lectures are open to the public at no cost.

*Natural Revelations: Paintings by Susan Swartz* shows at The Utah Museum of Fine Arts, located on the University of Utah campus. The book accompanying the exhibition, *Natural Revelations: The Art of Susan Swartz* is available at the UMFA gift shop as well as from the artist's web site, [www.susanswartz.com](http://www.susanswartz.com).



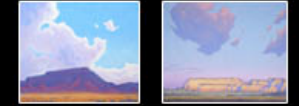
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