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Nick Malone Exhibition



Introduction by Gregory Desjardins

In Malone's new paintings the elements of fire and air are represented clearly, but those of water and earth are not. The hot elements are clear, while the cold ones are ambiguous. What could be seen as earth might rather be seen as water; what could be seen as water might rather be seen as earth. Thus the paintings seem to place the viewer upon a coast, between land and sea, perhaps symbolising the division between life and death.

This possible symbolism is reinforced by the representation of fire and air, which is also not without ambiguity, appearing to be either before or after a storm and at either the beginning or the end of a day. What could be seen as a gathering storm at sunset might rather be seen as a storm dispersing with the dawn.

But it would be more accurate to say that Malone uses night and day, land and sea, as metaphors of human existence in the way poets do. Likewise the cycle of the seasons in his work becomes a metaphor of the life cycle. ('That time of year thou mayest in me behold' and 'April is the cruelest month') And the titles of the paintings reinforce this metaphorical interpretation, since they are taken largely from archaeological sites, that is, places that have suffered a kind of death. Thus the titles seem to indicate the motive for the metaphors.

Malone compares the technique of the paintings with archaeology. The finished surface of the paintings has been excavated, so to speak, by patiently scraping away what the painter himself has deposited. But we do not thereby simply return to an earlier state of the work, since the marks of this digging remain visible. Nevertheless, the technique imitates the uncovering of the past that is characteristic of archaeological excavation.

Furthermore, both the material of the paintings (which is sand-like and watery) and the tools used for working it (by brushing and scraping) are reminiscent of archaeological excavation.

Archaeology is also the subject of most of the works in the exhibition. For example, three of the works on paper are entitled 'Jericho', the title referring to the excavations recently conducted in the place of that name. Not only are such places old, but also they are part of sacred history. The archaeology of the sacred is the theme of many of the works exhibited here. Such works do not try to show these places as they were then; rather they show the present and the present attempt to recover the past.

A title is given to a painting only after it is finished because, as Malone explains, 'working on a painting itself is a process of exploration' in which the unexpected emerges. The titles depend on the associations of form and colour evoked by the finished work, such as the colour of fire or weather or blood or bone as these are remembered by a northern European sensibility as opposed, say, to an Italian one.

But this north European has also lived in northern Greece and in Wisconsin, and the combination of the warm southern landscape and the frozen Wisconsin one is filtered or mediated through a sensibility used to English light and landscape. These experiences of living abroad deepened his appreciation of the metamorphosis of ice from the polar north melting into water on its way to the equatorial south, where it evaporates into cloud and becomes rain which then turns into ice again.

This cycle in one way resembles the cycle of the seasons and in another way the cycle of human life, both of which make their appearance in the paintings. The seasons move between the hot and the cold, the wet and the dry; whereas life is a succession of generations, at the root of which is seed. Yet what we are shown in many of the paintings is the propagation of the species having ceased in certain places, and the succession of generations having come to an end.

The photographs in the exhibition provide a foil to the other works. They deal with the present instead of the past. The black and white photographs in particular draw attention to the restrained palette of the paintings and the works on paper, which are predominantly black and white.

By being unambiguous as to place and time of day, the photographs also make apparent the artist's general concern with form and illumination, with figure and ground. For example, the crane-like ruin in one of the 'Jericho' works bears comparison with the idle crane in a London scrapyards in one of the black and white photographs. Both are illuminated in such a way as to make them appear as silhouettes.



Casting I

mixed media on fabriano paper 24x18 inches



Jericho III

photograph on MDF board 40x27 inches

The title of the exhibition refers to the chamber of the mind, the Aladdin's cave of past and present experience, where the discovery of treasure is born out of and results in a kind of wonder.

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Gregory Desjardins is the editor of a ten-volume collection '*sound works*' on the work of Max Neuhaus. He is currently editing a video for the Lisson Gallery of Neuhaus' talk at the Bartlett School of Architecture, and recently interviewed Neuhaus for the catalogue of the exhibition of Neuhaus' drawings at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Italy.