Enclosures, Fields, Territories and Portraits

8/12/70

In early August among the spruce
fall parti-colored leaves
from random birch that hide
their crowns up toward the light—
deciduously needle-nested—
among the tumbled rocks—a
man-made scree below a house—
a dull green sumach blade
slashed with red clearer than
blood a skyline red a first
fingertap, a gathering, a climax

—James Schuyler

December 27 (1898)

[…] The edge of the woods from Stony Creek was very tangled with long, green, thorny tendrils of wild-roses. The ground at the foot of the hill was marshy in spots, elsewhere the leaves were matted and laid by the weight of a snow which had melted. Clusters of green ferns spread here and there. There were some brilliant spots of moss and every now and then I would start at a piece of dead white birch stirred by my foot which looked very much like a frozen snake. I found a large snail, some yellow dandelions and a weed of some sort, heavy-grey on the face but deep purple on the under side. […] I was also struck by the curious effect of the sunlight on the tops of the trees while so much darkness lay under the limbs.

—Wallace Stevens, Journals

"I am not a landscape painter," says Eric Aho. A surprising statement, perhaps, from one whose name, from his first painting exhibitions about twenty-five years ago, has become almost synonymous with sublimely sensual and painterly landscapes. Always, though, from when he first began to paint, there has been the strong pull of abstraction—which was probably inevitable given the seductive physical qualities of oil paint, and late twentieth-century traditions in and around the greater New York School (of which I count Aho a member). Over the past several years the abstract elements and sensibility that were always in his work have come to play a much larger part, although landscape undoubtedly remains a strong, a primary presence.

It's not that he calls himself an abstract painter either—he has said that painting abstractions without external reference does not satisfy him. "By itself, the representational landscape is too pedantic; while pure abstraction is too arbitrary for me." In many of the newest paintings, Aho often begins with distant "vignettes of observed places, all painted from memory." Lower down, where one might expect to find the foreground of the image, is instead what he calls "a topography," a "wilderness" of paint, or what he has compared on another occasion to a "scrim—one set of marks superimposed over another," making its own alternate, coexisting space. The painting does not fully reveal itself at first, but slowly over time, keeping the viewer in a state of stimulating ambiguity, fostering creative misunderstandings, and going off on tangents. In Aho's work the very terms abstract and realistic cease to be especially meaningful.

Aho sees the world, and the canvas, with a poet's immediate responsiveness to experience, to color, shape, texture—and to what can be sensed but not be seen. New England, where he lives and paints, is a landscape of extremes and roiling changeableness: not always such a benign place. In summer green foliage takes over with an almost horrible rainforest fecundity, yet in the blank whiteness of winter it is impossible to believe that the world was ever green. Between them, the weird red and orange spectacle of autumn and the time-lapse movie that is spring, when plants burgeon before one's very eyes. I used to visit New England only in the summer and could only imagine, rather disbelievingly, the winters there. New England is never whole and complete (in the sense that, say, California is), or is so only in memory or art. It was in terms of violent changes of (chromatic) temperature, formal restlessness, and painterly sensuality, that I first apprehended Aho's recent paintings. And through his powerful evocation of seasonal phenomena I felt the importance of memory for his work: his uncanny ability to paint what isn't there—and to make what is there disappear.

*
* *

Eric Aho was born in Melrose, Massachusetts, in 1966. His father's parents emigrated from Finland early in the twentieth century, and his father grew up in a Finnish community in Massachusetts; his mother is of New England Irish heritage. During Eric's early childhood in Melrose, a suburb north of Boston, the family, which included Aho's two younger brothers, was comfortably integrated into that blue-collar community, where "people knew how to pronounce my name." In 1974 when Eric was eight, they moved to a rural town in the pinewoods of southern New Hampshire. There, he suffered culture shock when local youths thought "Aho" was somehow an Asian name (the Vietnam War was fresh in everyone's mind) and vandalized the family mailbox. This expression of blind ignorance and hostility goaded Aho into a new level of self-realization, and the knowledge that "the world was going to be different" from now on. The mid-New England rural landscape where he grew up and now again lives and paints, is associated both with warmly recalled outings in the woods with his father, but also this early existential anxiety. The recent painting *1974* refers specifically (if privately) to the emotional swings of that year, and with its vast range of marks, hues, and values—from a moody purple-black underbelly, to sharp jabs of bright "hazard" orange and baby blue, to evanescent washes of yellow and pink—it crackles with what can only be called awareness.

Aho earned a BFA in printmaking at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston. Owing to a tremendous sense of restlessness, he left New England, traveling abroad to complete graduate studies: to London; to Havana; to western Russia and Finland, where he studied on a Fulbright Fellowship from 1991 to 1992. For some fifteen years, he traveled back and forth "compulsively" to Scandinavia, especially to Finland, where he continues to maintain a close relationship to the country of his father's family, and whose "forested and boggy" landscape he finds parallel in many respects to that of central New England. "I'm a hybrid—Euromerican," Aho jokes during my visit with him in Vermont last June. This being 2015, our conversation inevitably gets around to Karl Ove Knausgaard's multivolume novel, *My Struggle*, and Eric tells me of his interest in Knausgaard's project and the personal connection he feels to the author, being within a couple years of his age, and having grown up listening to the same bands while living in a similarly rural place. I tell Eric that I like the part when Knausgaard says he does not share the enthusiasm of many fellow Scandinavians for travelling to exotic tropical places like Thailand or Bali, but is more interested in visiting places which are similar to his native Norway, yet subtly, disconcertingly different, like the coast of Maine and Canada. How being in an alternate version of one's own world is stranger and more stimulating than being in a completely different one. Aho's own travels throughout Scandinavia, Finland, and Russia in the 1990s were born of the same layered impulse that remains relevant to Aho's painting today, the idea of congruent worlds: the painted world; the lived-in world; the imagined world; the remembered world overlaid upon one another.

Aho came relatively late to painting, and it was only when he was hired as art instructor at the Putney School in Vermont (where he taught from 1989 to 1997) that he began painting seriously—pushed to do so by the fact that he was supposed to be teaching it. That he taught himself at the same time he taught his teenaged students (Putney is an independent coeducational boarding school) seems relevant in thinking about Aho's painting. It may be connected to the feeling one may get that every Aho painting is in a kind of Socratic dialogue, with itself and with the viewer.

As a child, Aho drew obsessively—quite often, he says, things he fervently desired to possess but could not (snowmobiles, motorcycles). Drawing them was to have them—in a way. He still feels that for him painting is still somehow mysteriously tied to the idea of possessing—but now his subject is less easy to grasp: landscape, seasons, air, weather, memory, others' memories, history, art history, fiction, time, light, music, even the fabric of life itself? Nothing that one actually can possess, in fact, except through art and the physical properties of paint.

Eric Aho's family home in southern New Hampshire was within a short drive of Mount Monadnock, which was a frequent destination for Aho while in high school. Later, when he moved to Vermont, the singular peak was visible from the campus of the Putney School and became the subject of many early paintings, including a cycle of works made from various vantage points around the base of the mountain. Many of the works in this group place Monadnock in the upper register, similar to the way he has recently treated another notable peak, northern New Hampshire's Mount Chocorua, in more recent works, such as *Chocorua* and *The Mountain*. Also nearby is the town of Dublin, New Hampshire, at the foot of Monadnock, host to an active community of painters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries whose unofficial doyen was Abbott Handerson Thayer (1849–1921), the painter of many impressionist (proto-expressionist) views of Monadnock and Dublin Lake. His occasional courting of rough, ungainly painterly effects anticipates mid-twentieth-century gestural painting in a way that sets him apart from, say, his near-contemporary Sargent. Thayer's painting *Monadnock No. 2*, for example, is surprisingly prescient and Aho-like, not only in its free and plainspoken paint application, but in the rendering of evening light between stands of dark hemlocks as a shocking flurry of violet marks that seem to lie flat and extraneously upon the surface of the image.

But Abbott Thayer is also remembered today for his in-depth study of the protective coloration of birds, reptiles, and other animals, which led to the invention of camouflage in World War I. Aho knows and admires Thayer's Monadnock landscape paintings, (as well as his beautiful allegorical figure paintings), but when I mention his predecessor's involvement with camouflage, Aho makes an immediate connection to his own paintings, with the observation that, like camouflage, "they simultaneously reveal and conceal."

The point of camouflage is not simple concealment but fitting in, hiding in plain sight, superimposing one pattern onto another similar one, as one might superimpose Scandinavia upon New England, say, or an image of one landscape element on another. Related formal ideas occur in many of the paintings: I ask Aho about the broken or parallel lines which ladder up and down or side by side in several paintings, such as *Forest*, *Unorganized Territory (Frozen Lake)*, *Wald*, or *Wilderness Studio*. Aho explains that they are meant as indications of trees—that he wanted to paint trees without painting trees. The lines are nothing so literal as the spaces between trees, or the edges of trees, although perhaps the effect can be compared to imagining a tree superimposed upon itself, to cancel itself out, so to speak, but slightly off-register, so that all one sees is the place where it failed to line up, a kind of nimbus. Certainly his overlays of large, flat, arbitrarily shaped forms on many paintings, such as the blue and white slabs in *River Crossing (Meurthe)* or the bright orange archipelago of shapes in *Wilderness Studio*, for example, or even the painterly blue and white and pink areas in the center of *Barrow*, are formally reminiscent of the shapes used in camouflage. As such they can subliminally suggest ideas of concealing, revealing, and experiencing simultaneously a surface reality and a deeper one.

The eye, accustomed to Abstract Expressionist engagement with the surface of the picture plane, wants to read such nonrepresentational elements as being "in front" of the landscape illusion, which they both are and are not. There is a delicious spatial and formal ambiguity to a painting like the exciting *River Crossing (Meurthe)*, 2015. Here,

the viewer is brought into the painted space by the seemingly "closer" abstract shapes in the painting's lower half, as he or she tries to piece together their possible relationships to each other and to the distant landscape at the horizon, which hovers like a memory or a premonition. The space thus created almost appears curved, non-Euclidian, as though light and matter were being bent toward the viewer by the gravitational weight of his or her own presence.

Aho's paintings evoke a sense of mystery, pregnancy, of things about to happen, or having just happened; of what is missing, or is hiding in plain sight. *Beekeeper*'s overlay of green, brown, and yellow solid shapes also specifically suggests military camo, by accident and design. If *Beekeeper* appears unusually focused, expectantly, almost ominously, on the evanescent center of the image—where gather a black splotch, a white mist, a blue reflection (of what?) the interrupted orange lines of invisible trees, and a wavering, revenant yellow zigzag—that may be because Aho originally painted in that spot an image of a small house, a shack, belonging to a local reclusive Vietnam veteran who raised bees. The shack was a kind of hideout, a hermitage from the outside world. Finding the image of the shack "too specific" Aho erased and obscured it, but as with any camouflaged object or animal it is still there, as the viewer can sense. What could not be effaced, however, was the painting's focus on that spot, due partly to the illusion of perspective that the green foreground retains, and the resulting feeling of suspense and foreboding.

*

* *

The "wilderness" of New England is a reclaimed one: much of what we see today as dense, chaotic forest was once cleared fields, as the surviving traces of stone walls meanderingly absurdly through them attest. In this sense, the title of Aho's ongoing series *Unorganized Territories* seems more descriptive of New England than previous references to wilderness. The term "Unorganized Territories" refers to unincorporated, sparsely populated towns or wider areas of states or countries without local governance. In recent years, a number of small, poor towns in Maine—particularly in the north of the state—which had long been self-governing, found themselves unable to afford the costs of providing services, and elected to put themselves under the direct, if distant, control of the state of Maine. It's hard to know whether this gives them more "freedom" or less, an ambiguity which interests Aho. But clearly it is the term itself and its implication for the way a painting space might be constructed and end up looking (note: *un*organized, not disorganized), recognizing New York School traditions of immediacy and improvisation, that appeals to him.

Memory itself is an "unorganized territory" which, as Proust explored, is unlocked by sense impressions. Aho has mentioned the Proustian way "the smell and sight of sunlight on the pine forest floor" transports him back to childhood and scavenging for firewood with his father in the New Hampshire woods. [1] His painted work is comprised of visual equivalents of such epiphanies, which through his art become our epiphanies too. All it might take is a color, a shape, to set it off. *Unorganized Territory (Frozen Lake)* for instance, has something of the improvisational air of an Abstract Expressionist painting, but one where every mark seems to betoken a remembered physical sensation: the feeling of icy coldness, the smell of decaying vegetation, the look of dark water beneath ice, without actually representing them. "Painting is so well suited to working from memory," says Aho.

The term and the concept of the "territory" fascinated the painter Joan Mitchell too, especially in a series of paintings she did in the early 1970s with titles like: *White Territory* (1970–71), *Blue Territory* (1972), *Closed Territory* (1973), and other works with titles and imagery bearing related connotations. In general, "territories" are demarcated areas of land, as defined physically by fences or conceptually by maps or verbal description. Many of Mitchell's paintings of this period feature prominent floating rectangles of color, the presumed "territories" of the titles, echoing the surrounding rectangle of the canvas. The possible implication, subtle and unforced, that we are in a sense seeing representations of paintings, is also reflected in Aho's recent works, notably in his *Enclosure* series.

Both Mitchell and Aho embrace the possibility that, as Aho puts it, “The painting *is* the place.” [2] In the *Enclosure* series Aho refers to the idea of congruence between the enclosure or territory delineated, and the painting itself. “The map is not the territory,” as the semanticist Alfred Korzybski famously put it, nor is the painting the territory, but the possibility remains a perennial mental game. In the story “On Exactitude in Science” the writer Jorge Luis Borges posited a map the same size as and congruent with the territory it mapped. Such a map would necessarily include a full-sized representation of itself, *ad infinitum*. [3] Aho accepts that the painting is not the territory, of course, but nonetheless is challenged and intrigued by the paradox of a painting that is in fact congruent with that which it represents. He muses on the concept of a 1:1 scale between the painting and the landscape, remarking, “The large canvases approach the actual scale of the landscape… and feel bigger than life and are terribly impractical. It’s exciting to imagine the canvas representing a plug taken from reality.” [4] The idea of a painting within a painting in inverted: the painting has become a place, which has become a painting.

Aho’s sensibilities are not grounded exclusively on this side of the Atlantic. His works also reveal affinities with the Finnish painter Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931), whose own hybrid of the modern and the romantic finds echoes in Aho’s paintings. *Wilderness Studio* is in part an homage to Gallen-Kallela, based on the isolated woodland studio that the Finnish painter built himself from logs harvested on the property, and where he painted the landscape around him. Aho admires the “seamlessness” of this: the studio is quite literally one with the landscape from which it was created, and at the same time, “a container for the imagination,” in which the landscape is reimagined and created anew. Here, the studio building nearly disappears, camouflaged beneath the bright sunset light that is rendered as large flat patches of orange and scarlet paint, as if subsumed into its very subject matter by the power of the imagination. We are reminded that for the painter, light is a solid, material substance—paint—and can be used to obscure as much as to define a subject.

*
* *

Recently, Aho has been working on a several interrelated series, which have in common their source in borrowed memories of his father’s experiences fighting in the Second World War. In the new *Continental Series (War Paintings)*, Aho takes his fascination with the passage of time, the notation of specific dates, and the intersection of world history with personal family history, already touched on in his *Ice Cut* series, to a new level.

Aho’s father was among the troops that followed the June 1944 D-Day invasion of Normandy, only weeks after the initial landings, to consolidate the territory for the push to liberate Paris. Aho has obtained the now-declassified operational reports of the battalion, giving its progress and exploits as they fought their way east through German-held territory, and has mapped it on Army-issue maps from the period (some acquired on eBay). Last summer, Aho went to the Champagne region of eastern France and began retracing a segment of the battalion’s route, stopping at areas and villages described in the reports where engagements were fought. At each of these halting places Aho made a small plein-air painting, not intended to be a final work, but simply a record of the place for personal reference. On his return to Vermont, Aho then began a series of 20 x 16 inch paintings, each corresponding to and titled with a date from the campaign.

Like paintings in Aho’s continuing *Ice Cut* series (whose subtitles commemorate the years of the Great Depression), the *War Paintings* are titled with historical dates, corresponding in this case to the dates in 1944 when his father’s company stopped at each particular location in France. Each work was painted in one day, and each day has only one painting—except in cases where the battalion remained in one location for several days, and then Aho allowed himself to work longer on a canvas, or to paint another. Titling or dating a painting (or a poem) with a specific date proposes another kind of one-to-one correspondence between a painting and the world. Equating the painting with a unique day simultaneously underscores the chance, improvisational, unrepeatable aspects of the work, and its serial quality as one of many.

Contemporaneous to these works are “Portrait Paintings,” including the paintings *General Desrousseaux* and *Nicolas (Reworked)*. Aho met the evocatively named French General Philippe Desrousseaux, a fifth-generation professional soldier, while he was researching his father’s war experience in France. Desrousseaux’s family farmlands had been a battlefield, not only in the Second World War, but since the Roman era, and his “portrait” is the landscape. The “abstract” areas in the composition of *General Desrousseaux*, particularly the large de Kooningesque yellow area on the right, define a “territory”, an enclosed field, perhaps, which is delineated and intersected by meandering lines of white edged with orange, with, branching off downward, another white line edged in blue. These may suggest roads drawn on a map, or walls, or perhaps even ribbons or threads. The way this implied yellow “territory” seems to skew down toward the viewer reminds me of Van Gogh’s several paintings of the enclosed wheat field abutting the asylum at St. Rémy, as seen from the window of the cell where he himself was enclosed. In one of them, rain is represented as a scrim of painted slashes across the entire surface, causing the eye to vacillate between the image’s illusionistic depth and the abstract marks on the picture plane, an effect reminiscent of the way Aho establishes and then contradicts pictorial space in his paintings.

General Desrousseaux and *Figures in a Landscape*, along with *Sundial* and *Plum Orchard* share a sensuous paint handling with prominent summery lemon yellow fields or “territories” which make me think of paintings that Willem de Kooning and Fairfield Porter (who were good friends) might have made if they had ever collaborated. The conventional-sounding title *Figures in a Landscape* becomes a play on words in Aho’s hands. Although Aho says he started the painting with “some ideas about a single figure standing in a field,” the viewer finds no apparent human images in it—at first. But if we take “figures” to mean “graphic representations” it becomes clear that the title is directing our attention to the interlocked “figures” of paint inhabiting most of the canvas’s lower section. In that sense the painting’s title is self-referential, and in fact could describe any one of Aho’s new paintings, which employ the device—which he has described quite matter-of-factly—of beginning with a landscape image and overlaying it with abstract, painterly marks. If “figures” are painterly marks, at the same time they are “figures” of human presence and sensibility. Making his mark on the landscape, Aho simultaneously makes reference to the classic Abstract Expressionist ethos of individual self-expression through gestural paint. But there are other presences here too, as one might well sense walking through a former battlefield: flitting, elusive, fragmentary evocations in this haunted, sunstruck landscape.

Aho exhibits a poetic sensibility in his way of beginning a painting with a landscape memory, as a poet might begin with the “gift” of a specific phrase or image, and elaborating from it in visual leaps of association. Aho’s painting is based in unlearning what one thinks one knows about what one sees (a bit like Wallace Stevens seeing a birch tree as a snake). Responding to the enigmatic beauty of the physical world in all its original incomprehensibility, Aho takes a welter of shapes and “gestalt” associations and color impressions and gives them physical form as brush strokes of colored goo. In this sense, the paintings are about working backwards, to a place before raw visual impressions were recognized and processed. The popular but still underrated painter Fairfield Porter exploited similar insights in painting his hard-won landscape and figure paintings in an age and milieu of abstraction. As he wrote to a fellow painter in the mid-fifties: “My paintings are more ‘unfinished’ than ever, because I unfinish them as I paint.”[5] In a similar way, the viewer who can disengage some of the mechanisms of understanding will find his or her perceptions of the physical world and the nature and possibilities of painting expanded by the unexpected leaps, interjections, absences, and contradictions in Aho’s work. As enjoyable as it is to analyze some of the ideas and relationships that Aho’s painting encompasses, it is also important to forget them, and let the eye feel and remember.

—Nathan Kernan
2015

Notes

Quotations from Eric Aho are from conversations with the author, June 15 and 16, and subsequent correspondence, except where noted.

1 From Chard deNiord, “Between Blinks: A Conversation with Eric Aho,” in *Transcending Nature / Paintings by Eric Aho* exh. cat. (Manchester, NH: Currier Museum of Art, 2012), 78.

2 Ibid., 85.

3 Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. by Andrew Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 325.

4 deNiord, 77.

5 Fairfield Porter in an undated letter to John Button, ca. 1950s. As cited in *The Diary of James Schuyler*, ed. by Nathan Kernan (Boston: Black Sparrow Books, 1996), 55 (fn). Collection: The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

Nathan Kernan is a writer who lives in New York. He is working on a biography of the poet James Schuyler. He is also President of the Milton Resnick and Pat Passlof Foundation.