Posted by Bliss Bowen | Jan 18, 2018 | 0 |

Yvette Gellis, Earth Fire Wind Water

"Has there ever been a better time to discuss women and the environment?"

So asks artist Constance Mallinson in conversation about “The Feminine Sublime,” an exhibit she curated that opens at the Pasadena Museum of California Art this weekend. Addressing themes of feminine perspective, environmental degradation and the artistic concept of the sublime, “The Feminine Sublime” upends preconceived notions of what constitutes landscape painting with bold, large-scale pieces by Mallinson and four other women artists based in Los Angeles: Merion Estes, Yvette Gellis, Virginia Katz and Marie Thibeault.

The phrase “landscape painting” tends to conjure musty visions of gilt-framed portraits of European fields and Old World explorers. But as the widely respected and exhibited Mallinson explains, the form offers another way of depicting modern scenes and dilemmas. The point of grouping landscapes by women painters is not to tap into the #MeToo zeitgeist, although that makes it timely; it’s to underscore a fundamentally different relationship with nature relevant to unfolding environmental crises.

By way of explanation, Mallinson references Caspar David Friedrich’s 1818 landscape “Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog,” a masterwork of German Romantic painting; the central figure’s position astride a craggy outcrop overlooking mountains and valleys is unquestionably dominant. Hudson River School artist Asher Durand’s 1849 painting “Kindred Spirits” similarly depicts two men looking down upon a Catskill Mountains scene of nature in its bucolic sublimity. Globe-traveling painter Frederic Church, another Hudson River School leader, created three paintings of Niagara Falls that conveyed the terrifying power of nature’s beauty. Before them, 16th- and 17th-century Dutch still lifes of pearls dripping over peeled lemons and globes served to glorify Dutch colonial conquests and consumption.

Those pieces helped shape popular perceptions of landscape painting that persist to this day: mostly idyllic, representational, and male dominated. Mallinson points out that many Western and Hudson River School painters of the 19th century were paid by “railroad titans to promote the settling of the West” and the concept of Manifest Destiny; domination was woven into the paintings’ compositional structure. “You begin to feel a real tie-in between representation of nature and its exploitation,” she says.

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“This is what sublime landscape painting was about. J.M.W. Turner’s shipwrecks, or even Théodore Géricault’s ‘Raft of the Medusa,’ where guys are hanging off the raft and sharks are swimming around. [Laughs] This was ‘sublime’ imagery. The word has been a bit abused in our times — ‘Oh, that chocolate cake was sublime’ — that wasn’t the original meaning. Sublimity filled you with awe and terror; as 19th-century and 18th-century philosophers defined it, it was an experience that placed you at the brink of annihilation. … This has always been historically defined as a male experience.”

Women were traditionally “relegated to the realm of the beautiful” — to be beautiful, but not to capture sublime beauty raw in the wild as male landscape painters did. Those ideas held through the mid-20th century, with very few women painters — Helen Frankenthaler being one notable exception — dealing with landscapes or the concept of the sublime in their work. It is one reason why Mallinson feels a particular charge about this exhibit, which frames feminine perspectives of nurturing rather than domination.

“These female artists don’t shy away from immersing the viewer in this sort of terrifying experience of environmental change,” she says. “In traditional landscape painting, the viewer stands at a distance and observes and really doesn’t get immersed in the darker side of how landscape depictions can be a tool. One thing is that landscape has been primarily co-opted by advertising. If Toyota wants to sell an SUV, they park it in the middle of a stream and say, ‘Hey, you can go here too if you buy this Toyota.’ They’re actually playing out the tradition that was started by the 19th-century landscape painters, [placing] the observer in a position of domination and control of nature, without much thought to the carbon footprint or any of the consequences.”

The color and texture of Virginia Katz’s “Recomposition” pieces in the exhibit are reminiscent of stripmining debris, while the vivid, marine-quality depth of color in her “Into the Abyss” triptych is oddly disturbing — as if its beauty is not to be trusted. Estes Merion Estes’ and Yvette Gellis’ paintings also pull the viewer in with color while conveying natural motion more abstractly. Marie Thibeault’s geometric, vaguely Pollock-like constructions were inspired by confrontations between the organic and the industrial around San Pedro Harbor. Mallinson’s almost candy-colored

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“Still Life in Painting,” composed with pieces discovered on her daily walks — crumpled drawings and wrappers, abandoned toys, a tiny flag, an empty picture frame, a bra, punctured plastic — comments on treasure and trash.

“Interestingly enough, women in California back in the 19th century were some of the first to really paint the landscape,” Mallinson says. “They were not what I would call sublime landscapes, but previously, certainly on the East Coast, you didn’t just pick up your paintbox and sit on a hillside and paint; that was not considered proper. But California had a whole plein air group, some in Southern California, who actually did this. It was very bold and liberated … We rock it out here!”

In connection with “The Feminine Sublime,” PMCA will host a discussion of the exhibit’s themes by art historian Karen Kleinfelder on Saturday, Feb. 10, and a performance by LA-based artists highlighting exhibit themes as part of Free Third Thursday on Feb. 15. On Feb. 24, the museum will host a children’s workshop, “Interpreting Climate Change.” All programs are free with admission.

As for the exhibit itself, Mallinson hopes viewers will “delve deep, really look, really confront your feelings, your experiences, and anything historical that it might remind you of.” She acknowledges they are depending upon viewer sophistication, because in the way paintings perceive nature and issues such as climate change, the art also comments on landscape painting’s history and forces of culture and politics behind it.

“It’s really important that painting engage its history,” Mallinson says, noting that she has a vested interest in keeping painting alive as other mediums such as video and film vie for eyeballs and showcase space. “But I don’t want it to become just historical. I want it to be very much a part of the cultural conversation. What is it telling us? What kind of debates is it suggesting? What’s the role of aesthetics in all of this? What’s the role of aesthetics in environmental issues? These are really interesting [and] appropriate questions for painters to concern themselves with. Otherwise, painting would just be irrelevant.”

“The Feminine Sublime” is open to the public Jan. 21 through June 3 at Pasadena Museum of California Art, 490 E. Union St., Pasadena;

admission is $7 adults/$5 seniors, students and educators with valid ID/ free for children 12 and under. Info: (626) 568-3665. pmcaonline.org, constancemallinson.com/

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