

Opinion

Seascapes in the City

By Jennifer Landes

(04/03/2007) It is always refreshing to see South Fork seascapes and the area's other customary subject matter in galleries in New York City or simply outside the East End.

Here, they can seem redundant and may suffer in comparison to the natural beauty of the day. Taken out of context and away from the actual views just outside the door, however, these paintings often achieve a greater power.

An exhibit of Richard Orient's "Landscapes" is no exception. The show, at the George Billis Gallery in West Chelsea, is alternately soothing, moody, and sublime. The contrast of the big-sky shoreline and dunes with the standard New York white box gallery space set in an industrial cityscape imbues the oil paintings with a weight and mystery that might not be appreciable otherwise.

Mr. Orient, who divides his time between Amagansett and New York, paints both urban and rural scenes. Their spontaneity belies his use of photographs and memory to construct his compositions. His urban style is precise and matter of fact. The seascapes are more abstract, in a soft and impressionistic way. Some of the darker paintings on paper can border on the expressionistic as well.



A combination of memory and photography inspires the artist's compositions of local beaches and landscapes, as in "Atlantic Beach."



The names are straightforward and often site-specific, such as "Atlantic Beach Dunes" or "Beach at Indian Wells." Nothing else is implied or taken away from the paintings' representative qualities.

They vary in style and execution. The oil paintings on canvas or panel are studied,

consistently applied color. Even the brightness of a sunny day has a cool reserve about it.

Those on paper are more spontaneous and florid, like polished sketches. The paint is darker and more saturated in color and often applied in a layered impasto. The effect over all is more emotional.

Consistent throughout is a low horizon that has come to characterize painters' approaches to depictions of the land and waterways of the East End. In such compositions, the sky is often layered, striated, complex. There is some of that same treatment here, but while the skies have allusive qualities, they are not overly dramatic.

"Storm Surf," a series of three paintings displayed together like a triptych, contributes most of the drama in the gallery. Each is painted on paper and the sky and sea share about equal space. The roiling sea looks dark and dangerous, but realistic. Mr. Orient does not exaggerate the spectacle of nature. He appears to communicate more as a witness than as an interpreter, and the resulting paintings seem to be reportage rather than idealized or unsettling embellishment.

Yet Mr. Orient's re-creations of nature also show his ability as an editor. "Atlantic Beach Morning," the only painting in the group to include houses on the shoreline, is also the most striking. After seeing a series of carefully truncated glimpses of pristine landscapes, the otherwise pleasant contrast with the buildings and electrical poles of habitation seems bracing, like a quiet rebuke to unchecked development.



"Amagansett Horizon"

In this light, the faint lines on the beach in other paintings become obvious tire tracks, another human trace in an otherwise vacant landscape. Here, the treatment is honest "warts and all" reproduction, but can also be evocative in a way similar to the Hudson River School's cautionary conservation message.

The artist's use of photographs as a compositional source allows him to vary his perspective in inventive ways. In "Atlantic Beach Dunes," the shoreline is depicted as seen from the sea. The crest of the dunes and their vegetation is the focus in "Amagansett Horizon." The distant sea serves as a backdrop or footnote to the sky.

The exhibit is on view through Saturday.

