

# E V A N S   C O N T E M P O R A R Y

## *Chocorua*

by Dave Snyder

When Isak Applin was in second grade, his bus route snaked its way to school through the beech and hemlock forests of the Taconic Mountains. In Upstate New York in fall, when the bus driver picks you up there's hardly any daylight. Applin remembers bumping along one such morning when another kid pointed to a ridge of pine trees in the dim light and announced that his father had seen a white stag in the woods there. From then on, the ridge seemed different, filled with an otherworldly potential.

"It's easy to ignore a landscape as you drive past it," Applin says, "until you know something about it. The story changes it. For every child that was on that bus, that place remained special."

This memory, a classmate gesturing out the window and the indelible mark on the landscape, can be thought of as both exemplar and source of Applin's approach to painting. To Applin, seeing the world is active (*seeing*, it should be noted, rather than *looking at* -- since the preposition sets one apart); perception is participatory. As a person develops associations with the world, the world becomes more memorable and more meaningful. Applin still thinks about that white stag when he's driving those same roads on visits to Rensselaer County, but as an adult and as a painter, Applin understands that these associations can be created as well as received. At least to some degree, this is why Applin makes work at all. He describes it as "seeing the world through making images."

The twelve paintings in *Chocorua* are the product of this kind of seeing and thinking about the world: engaged, imaginative and precise. Even while the paintings represent a diversity of modes, from narrative to interior to landscape, none operates with a single mechanism. Rather, each builds a network of complex and occasionally contradictory associations.

In *High Street Studio*, we get an interior of an artist's studio, canvases piled in one corner, while an enormous sculpture representing the transmogrification and death of the ancient hero Actaeon overwhelms the rest of the studio, impossibly large for a small space. Yet the dogs that attack Actaeon seem to extend past the edge of the sculpture, making it unclear where the environment ends and the sculpture begins. Could the dogs somehow belong to the artist not

## E V A N S   C O N T E M P O R A R Y

Actaeon? Does it matter? The myth is one of transformation and the consequences of *looking at* something. Actaeon is cursed for having looked at Artemis. After having been transformed, he looks like a stag and Actaeon's dogs don't understand that it is really him. They devour him.

If the line between the world and art is difficult to interpret in *High Street Studio*, in *RBH Porch* it's nearly impossible. Here, the viewer looks beyond an open porch onto wind-blown woods, however two sculptures of wind-blown woods sit on the porch as well. The effect is dizzying, confusing the viewer's sense of space as the visions of woods seem to oscillate between a flat, static foreground and background of great depth and movement. Both paintings engage the gulf between seeing and understand, but in *RBH Porch*, with its squared-up, direct perspective, the viewer is more directly implicated.

In these paintings, the viewer can't help worrying over what part is supposed to represent a piece of art and what part is supposed to be the real world, forgetting at least briefly that these are themselves paintings. But this difficulty in discernment is one that Applin knows well. Working a full-time day job and having lived in a series of small Chicago apartments, Applin is constantly trying to fit his paintings into his life, both spatially and temporally. Hearing Applin talk about the practicalities of art making, you get the sense he empathizes with Actaeon and is worried that his paintings may, at some point, devour him. It's an understanding of how intrusive art can be into the life of the artist, echoed in *Compound* and *Compound II*, where the artist's studio feels prison-like.

This isn't to say Applin takes a dismal perspective on art. For example, *Pissarro and Valerie Taking a Walk*, perhaps the most stunning painting in the show, shows the Impressionist walking with Applin's fiancée through a distinctly Pissarroesque landscape, interrupted on the righthand side by a distinctly Applinesque shock of trees. It's a flight of fancy, yes, but one that resonates with the same kinds of contradictions between real world and the world of images: a representation of a dead artist, side-by-side with a representation of a living woman, in a hybridized, painted world. Art historical references come up throughout Applin's paintings -- the John Constable in the background of *Untitled Sculpture with Constable Painting* or the composition in *Compound I*, which comes from photos of Edvard Munch in his studio -- but *Pissarro and Valerie Taking a Walk* makes a profoundly affectionate gesture, a welcome change from the antiseptic (or, worse, sneering) references to art history one gets used to in much contemporary art.

# E V A N S   C O N T E M P O R A R Y

Perhaps more pointedly, take the shaped panel *Chocorua*, Applin's homage to the Hudson River School of his home state. The image shows the same landscape that Asher Durand painted in *Kindred Spirits* (1849), this time with Applin's particular mark making and color palette. Yet two formal features set Applin's landscape apart from Durand's. First, this is a shaped panel, taking its form from the arching trees Durand uses as a framing element. In classic Hudson River School style, these trees emulate the interior profile of a church, a reference to the cathedral of nature, but in positive relief it becomes more of a mountain itself. Second, and perhaps more significantly, Applin removes the figures from Durand's original which showed the titular friends, painter Thomas Cole and poet William Cullen Bryant. The figures in *Kindred Spirits* engage with each other in conversation presumably about nature, but Applin wants no such proxy. *Chocorua* gives the viewer the landscape directly. "Look," this painting seems to say, "look for yourself."

Thinking about seeing as an active, generative process, is even more complicated when we're apprehending art, rather than nature. Applin's paintings provide rich associations from within, yet it's inevitable that we viewers project our own. In this way we become like the boy on the school bus, unable to separate our understanding of the thing from the thing itself and these paintings, strange and lovely, become the landscape through which we travel, at once distant yet surrounding us entirely. Look, look for yourself.