

# TOM GOLDENBERG

## “A painting, not a picture” - Mario Naves

“A painting, not a picture”—that distinction was made by a visitor to Tom Goldenberg’s studio after having viewed the artist’s recent canvases. It’s a distinction worth mulling, particularly in an age inundated by virtual images--images with no tangible heft or intrinsic scale, images without body or presence. A painting? That’s a different animal altogether. A painting is a singular entity whose character is inextricable from its material means. A picture describes and describes only. A painting describes and—how does one put it, exactly? A painting *is*.

Goldenberg, a veteran New York painter and one-time abstractionist, is wise to this vital distinction. It’s there to see in the scabbled surfaces of his landscapes, in their turbulent rhythms and unfettered accumulations of oil, ink and charcoal. Goldenberg brings a sure sense of space and structure to his depictions of shimmering pools of water, gnarled vegetation and intricately woven vistas. You don’t have to tap too deeply into *Belle Fiore* (2012), with its bracing run of yellow-green, or *Gallatin* (2010) to glean commonalities shared with The New York School, not least in the ferocious momentum and all-or-nothing ambition. *Swift River* (2010) gestates in front of our eyes, its tangled brushwork coalescing into a craggy verisimilitude. It’s as if Goldenberg found his way back to the land through the examples set by Jackson Pollock and Clyfford Still. Goldenberg knows that influence is contrary and fluid. As a painter, he thrives on its surprising pliability.

You’d best look elsewhere for the Arcadian. The natural world, as seen in a Goldenberg, is dense with bone, grit and muscle. The artist jokes about the immaculately ordered panoramas seen in Poussin’s no-blade-of-grass-out-of-place landscapes: Did gardeners really come that cheaply in 17th century France? Goldenberg isn’t inclined to tidy or systematize nature. He’d rather revel in its unruly, almost Byzantine complexity and independence.

Goldenberg embraces technologies old and new. Abjuring ready-made tubes of paint, he grinds his own pigments in order to insure desired levels of viscosity and color saturation. (If you’re skeptical about how much of a difference that makes, take a look at his blacks and yellows, then think again.) Like many contemporary painters, Goldenberg works from photo graphs. Unlike many contemporary painters, he employs the photograph not as a crutch, but as reminder and impetus. Ultimately, the logic of the studio—that is to say, of painting—takes precedence.

It is, in fact, a testament to Goldenberg’s pictorial abilities that he brings first-hand sensation to images created at a distance. Whether he’s applied liberal doses of oil paint to canvas or staccato tracteries of walnut ink to paper, you’re never in doubt as to aesthetic rationale. Art and nature achieve a synthesis that is simultaneously hard-won and effortless, long sought after and utterly organic. Such ease and inevitability are usually the marks of an artist at the height of his powers—and so it is with Goldenberg’s remarkable landscape paintings.

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## **Endless Landscapes**

by Mario Naves, New York Observer

In the aptly titled canvas *Grandview* (2003), also on view at Salander-O'Reilly, the painter Tom Goldenberg pays homage to the rolling hills of Dutchess County, doing so through color (a beneficent yellow suffuses the canvas) and, in particular, composition. He transforms the three-part structure of landscape painting foreground, middle ground, background by multiplying it by three, so the eye takes a full nine steps before it reaches the bucolic clouds drifting over the horizon. Even with the sky, things are complicated: The clouds press forward, collapsing distance by propelling it toward the surface of the canvas. In fact, each section of the picture has its idiosyncrasies: Mr. Goldenberg's deceptively straightforward depiction of farmland is, in reality, a fairly intricate not to say abstract orchestration of space, rhythm and incident. He does something similar to the hills of Italy in *Monte Argentario* (2003), though not as persuasively. Perhaps a familiarity with upstate New York allows Mr. Goldenberg a greater sense of pictorial license. Then again, Dutchess County can't claim indigenous cactus, the subject behind the exhibitions most inspired passage of painting.

## **Gallery Going**

By Robert Messenger, New York Sun

March 18, 2004

Let me begin with a disclosure: Tom Goldenberg is a friend. But I knew him as a first-rate painter well before I knew him as a first-rate man. He is a painter of light: of landscape and how light plays across it. His new show at Salander-O'Reilly is again too small, but it exhibits the latest evolution of his work . his paintings of art's most storied landscape: Tuscany.

As you look at the paintings you won't be surprised to learn that he began as an abstractionist. The balance of fields of depiction and color are those of an abstract painter, one who has to think through every stroke with only a small painterly toolbox at his disposal. A Goldenberg painting is a sequence of almost independent shapes that come together as an evocative whole. You won't take it all in at once.

What is surprising, though, is that Mr. Goldenberg paints from photographs. This is a technique much abused in recent years by younger painters who never learned to do the traditional sketching. But Mr. Goldenberg uses it as an aide to imagination. He takes pictures of a landscape back to the confines of his studio and from them sketches the many parts of a single canvas. This is how he creates the discrete sections of his pictures.

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The method may be responsible for a Cubist sensibility that shines through in places: a sense of a scene broken down and reconstructed in a hyper-real way. A painting from his 2001 show, *.Smithfield.*, showed this extremely well, with bare, slim tree trunks and branches breaking up a landscape into obvious sections. The influence is less obvious in the new show, but trees are still the key to the blocking of the paintings.

The show is divided between paintings of Dutchess County and of Tuscany. The former are autumnal landscapes, but these are no dour studies of browns, blacks, and reds. They are explosions of gold; the foliage of high summer blazing out in one last great hurrah. A painting like the large *.Grandview.* (2003) put me in mind of Bruegel's *Harvesters* at the Met. They both feature the rich hues of fall fields, with many extra details and vistas drawing your eye out to the horizon and then back to the foreground.

Mr. Goldenberg's rich colors come from one particular source: he grinds his own paints. He uses natural pigments and then painstakingly grinds them on roughened glass before adding linseed oil. The labor gives him breathtaking greens and yellows, shocking blues and reds. His colors can give off the sense of warm, lazy sunshine we all know from country days in August or the bright light that belies the sudden chill of fall days. They are pure evocation.

The finest painting in the present show is *Roundwood* (2002), a forest scene of a path stretching through trees, with the sort of arching trunks that make such paths so charming. Off to the right is *Ruggles*, the painter's standard poodle, who adds a rare note of the animal to these landscapes. The star of the painting, though, is the dappled light of autumn, playing through the lush but dying foliage. The picture is like a memory, a feeling called up not by anything so specific as an event but a sense of pleasure in beautiful details. That feeling is, for me, the hallmark of Mr. Goldenberg's art.

I am less certain of the Tuscan pictures; they are darker and stick in my memory as nocturnes. Only two are confirmed nocturnes. *Nocturne with Moon.* and *Italian Nocturne Olive.* (both 2003). *Campagna.* (2003) is actually set in brilliant daylight. Three others exhibit traits of both day and night, but I think of them as nocturnes because the stagey light is very obviously moonlight, such as you might see in the fourth act of the *Marriage of Figaro.* or the wooing scenes in *Romeo and Cyrano.* The pictures are also no longer the vistas of Dutchess County, but close-up scenes of crowded foliage and wild-running gardens. I was reminded in places of two very different modern landscape painters: Rousseau and Bonnard.

I say I am less certain about these pictures, and that is because they surprised me with their darkness and the creeping jungle aspects. But, as ever, the painter is far ahead of his audience, seeing things I can't quite make out. What I could make out were the innumerable sections of magnificent painting in these hothouses: the contrast between the smooth cactus and the slashing delineation of the trees in *Cactus.* (2004) or the vibrant and unexpected blues that occur in *Cactus, Campagna and Monte Argentario.* (2003).

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Best of all is Olive Grove. (2003) with its unexpected perspective. You look at it and see a fine depiction of a Tuscan garden. Then suddenly you note the top of the painting is a view up a valley. The whole scene suddenly shifts, as if a movie camera were panning away. You reel a bit and lose your perspective as you are drawn upward. It's a masterful effect, something only a first-rate painter who spends his days and nights in pursuit of painterly effect could achieve.

These pictures show Tom Goldenberg continuing to forge ahead, painting landscape in a way that acknowledges his art historical forebears but is absolutely contemporary. I look very much forward to seeing where his searching brush takes us next.

## **Goldenberg's Landscapes Look at the Earth, Not Sky.**

by Hilton Kramer, The New York Observer

You may not have noticed, but we've lately been seeing something of a revival of landscape painting. This isn't a development that trend-setting museum curators are likely to be shouting about from the rooftops. For the most part, it doesn't interest them. Their trustees, all agog over the latest post-Duchampian assault on our sensibilities, would probably be appalled if it did. And many of our critics, too, tend to regard landscape painting as a ho-hum subject. It's painting, after all, and isn't painting now regarded as, well, kind of passe? Many people who are alleged to have an interest in art now think so.

Still, it's worth remembering that it was in landscape that many of the greatest achievements in modern painting had their origin. From Constable and Courbet to Manet and the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists in the 19th century, to the major modern movements of the 20th-- Fauvism, Cubism and Expressionism--landscape remained an aesthetic imperative. The early abstract paintings of Mondrian and Kandinsky were similarly derived from landscape, as indeed many varieties of abstract painting still are today. Even the Surrealists had to take account of the centrality of landscape by turning it into a genre of the grotesque.

Far from having been marginalized or rendered obsolete by the antics of so-called postmodernism--a misnomer, in any case, since most of what passes for postmodernist art today owes its existence to the conventions of Duchampian modernism dating back to World War I-- landscape continues to prosper as a source of artistic inspiration, and can be expected to do so, I dare say, as long as the sun persists in illuminating the face of the earth.

If you doubt that landscape is making a vital contribution to the life of art today, take a look at Tom Goldenberg's latest exhibition at the Salander-O'Reilly Galleries. Mr. Goldenberg is one of the most accomplished painters on the current scene, and landscape is now his principal subject. Like some other American painters of his generation (he is 53), he came to it after a period devoted to abstraction. Even if we didn't know this, we might have guessed at such a course of

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development from the artist's command of scale and structure, and the perfect "fit" achieved by all the formal elements in these paintings of landscape subjects.

Mr. Goldenberg brings to these subjects a classical rather than a romantic or expressionist sensibility, and he has naturally been drawn to the kind of terrain that lends itself to a classical order. This he has found in the countryside of Dutchess County, north of Manhattan in New York State. With its carefully tended farms, rolling hills and spacious woodlands, this is anything but an untamed wilderness. Yet it isn't suburbia, either. If we sometimes glimpse a house or a barn or some other man-made structure in these paintings, it remains subordinated to the rhythms and divisions of the land and the changing light of the seasons.

It is not--in these paintings, anyway--a land of big skies. It's a characteristic of Mr. Goldenberg's landscapes that attention to the sky tends to be minimal. More often than not, these paintings take a distant, wide-angle view of a richly variegated terrain, transforming the contours of a neatly patterned countryside into elaborate pictorial structures that rise from a closely observed foreground in broad, irregularly shaped horizontal divisions of open space, punctuated by dense shrubbery and foliage and framed by the sturdy verticals of tall, slender tree trunks.

The season tends to be midsummer, with its rich palette of sunlit greenery, or early fall, with its autumn foliage turning red and gold. The weather is always fine, and the painter's eye is as temperate as the climate: There are no tempests of the spirit here, but a rage for order and a lyrical impulse that makes itself felt without advertising its sentiments. This is nature viewed from a distance and deeply mediated by aesthetic reflection.

A somewhat different vein of nature's poetry is explored in Mr. Goldenberg's paintings of water subjects. These are close-up views of autumn landscapes in which the season's chromatic grandeur is depicted as a pictorial dialogue between what we see in the objects of the natural world and what we see in the distorting mirror of their watery reflections on the surfaces of ponds and streams. These constitute some of Mr. Goldenberg's most virtuosic painterly achievements--yet another reminder, if we still need one, that landscape remains a vital part of the art of our time.

## **Hilton Kramer, New York Observer**

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