CURTIS ANTHONY BOZIF

GREAT LAKES

EVANSTON ART CENTER

CURTIS
ANTHONY
BOZIF

The waves came, one after another, beating against the bedrock foundation of the world. It was the pounding bass rhythm of music from the time before language, before even heartbeats. [...]

We all live on the shore. Every scrap of land on our scrap of a planet is licked at its edges by water. From the familiar, solid, safe shore we face the mystifying, uncertain, and perilous sea. Stand on the margin, and you are straddling a conjunction of boundaries. One is the strand. Another, if you are there at dawn or dusk, is the boundary between night and the day. Yet another is the boundary between the lake or river or sea as it is and as it once was and as it will be in the future.

And between nature and culture, and the known and the unknown, and the visible and the invisible. We stand, too, on a shore in the cosmos, with the earth as the beach and the universe as the sea we gaze upon. [...]

The waves arrived metronomically, ten seconds apart. Time was beating against the shore. It had rounded stones one wave-tumble every ten seconds for ten thousand years, buried them in ice for a hundred centuries, then rounded them for another ten thousand years. And the work has just begun.

From **The Windward Shore**, by Jerry Dennis. Used here by permission from the author.

CURTIS ANTHONY BOZIF & JUDY LEDGERWOOD

INTERVIEW 6/7/2019

Judy Ledgerwood: When you first contacted me for a studio visit this spring, you indicated that you were returning to painting after taking some time off. My first question is why paint? And why right now? Is it about self-expression or is it a response to something about **Painting** itself and how it functions in the world?

Curtis Anthony Bozif: The simple answer might be that painting is—has always been—the way of working, seeing, and thinking, within which I feel most comfortable; have the most command. It's also something that I enjoy doing, and I think that's important.

A more thoughtful answer might be that for me, painting is about being present. It's about focused attention and contemplation. It's about a negotiation between disorder and form, between chance, which is meaningless, and gesture, an attempt to give meaning to a body in motion. The hand, like the mind, oscillates between the perfunctory and the inspired; between self-consciousness and over-determination. What begins spontaneously and uncertain becomes an antecedent. Impulses take on purpose. Over time, there is accumulation and the generating of form.

A painting is as much a physical experience as it is a visual one. I'm thinking about surface, texture, scale, how a painting interacts with light and space. I bring this up because so much of our lives today are mediated through screens, which is to say, digital images. My job at the library involves capturing high quality digital images of objects of cultural heritage like rare books, manuscripts. Once ingested into a digital repository and made available online, more people have access to the information these images represent, but something is lost. By making it so people never have to handle it again, the material object itself disappears—literally. The book is pulled from circulation and placed in deep storage; preserved for posterity.

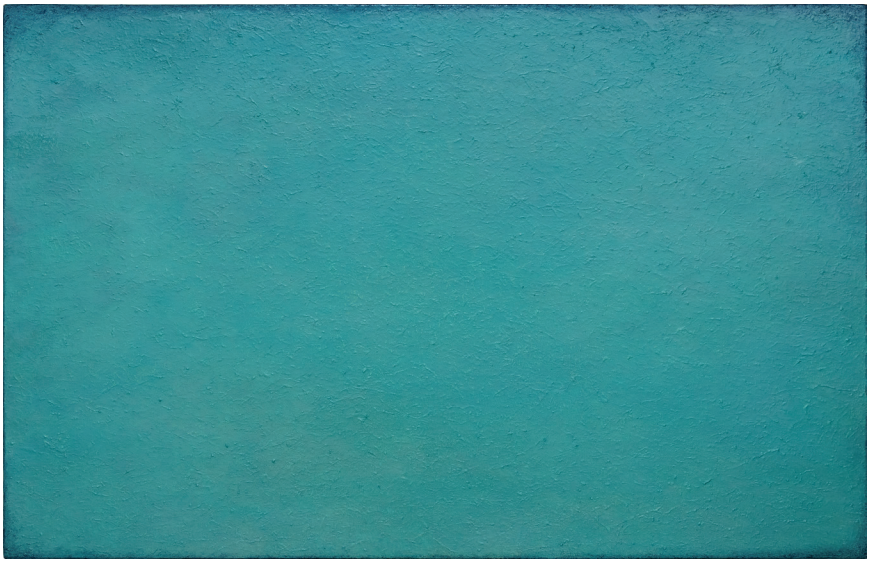
I've thought a lot about how my return to painting might be a response to my nine-to-five. Because for me, when screens dominate our culture, the act of applying brute material, i.e. paint, to a surface in order to build something that is both an image and a material object—coupled with the expectation that people will actually take seriously and contemplate this thing that is both image and object, a painting—this is a subversive act. An act of resistance against a culture dominated by screens and digital images.

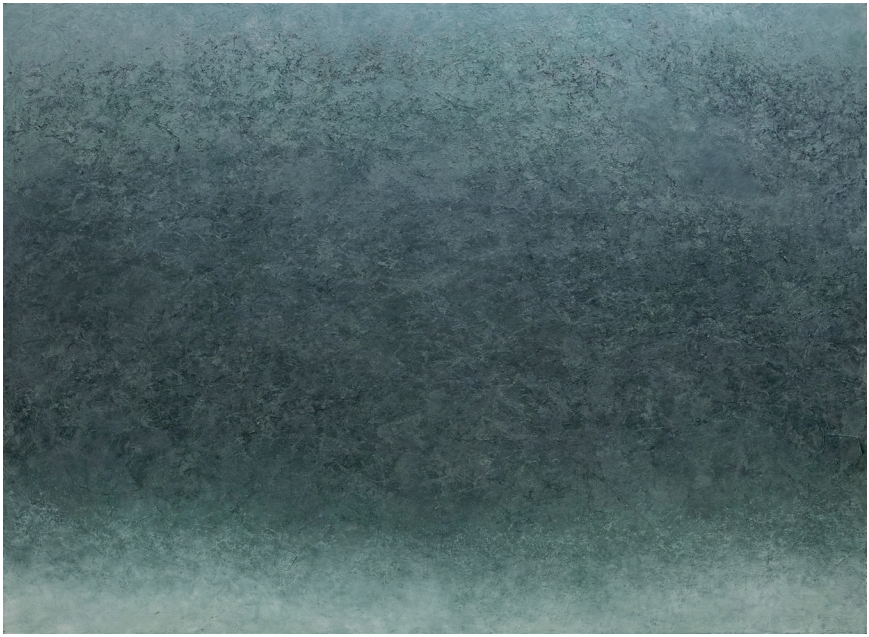
Ledgerwood: While the subject matter is the Great Lakes, the meaning of the work resides in decisions you make in the painting process; the size of the canvas relative to the body of the viewer, the orientation of the image (horizontal or vertical), paint application, and color, etc. While the content of the paintings might be different for you than for every viewer, and I wouldn't want to close down the various ways the paintings could be understood, what are these paintings about for you?

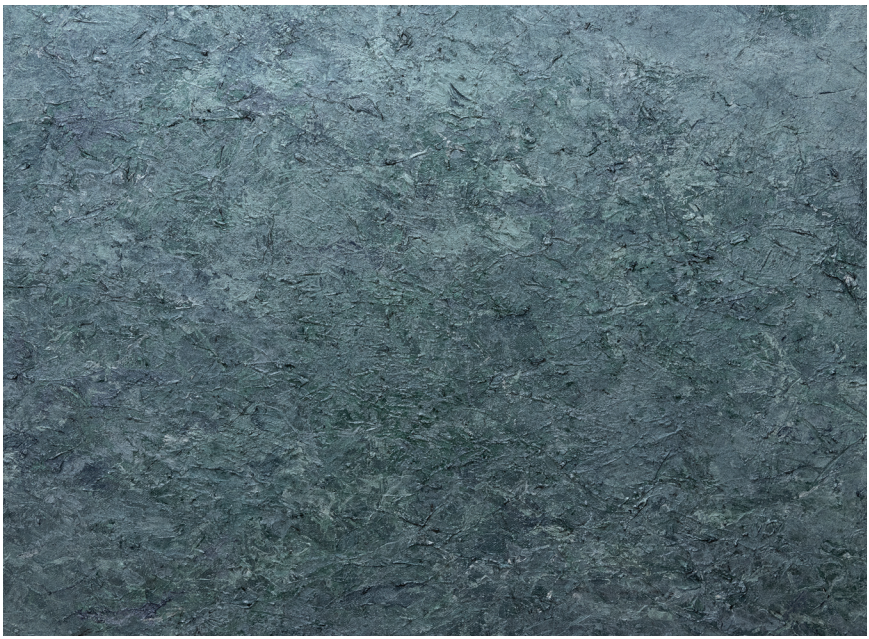
Bozif: Honestly, these paintings are about a lot of things for me, but fundamentally, they're about the Great Lakes and they're about painting. When I think of the Great Lakes I think about scale and time. By scale I mean their size relative to the human body; their time relative to human time. People often try and describe the Great Lakes by listing a bunch of figures like: they contain one fifth of the surface freshwater on the planet. This sounds like a lot, but of all the water on the planet, only two and a half percent is freshwater. So what does one fifth of two and a half percent mean? It means that the freshwater in the Great Lakes, as a natural resource, is both abundant and exceedingly rare. Similarly, we think of the Great Lakes as being very old; melt water from the end of the last ice age. But that was just 10,000 years ago. Earth is over 4.5 billion years old. On a geological time-scale, the Great Lakes, like human beings, have just appeared. Reconciling these two-time scales is impossible. In a way that's not easy to describe, I've always thought of painting as a way of thinking; a way of knowing. In that sense, these paintings have been a way for me to know the Great Lakes, but to know the Great Lakes often feels like an exercise in abstract thinking.

In terms of the paintings themselves, they're definitely about scale, texture, mark-making and color, but also light. For me, abstraction is rooted in observation. Over the last year, I paid particular attention to the color of the lakes. I was fascinated by how the color would change relative to the clarity of the water and the weather. To begin with, clarity effects how much light will pass through or be reflected by the water. So, cloud cover, fog, humidity, air pollution, the time of day, and the brightness and angle of the sun, all affect the color. As does the strength and direction of the wind, which determines the size and strength of the waves which, in turn, churn up the sand and sediment on the lake bed, changing the clarity, and thus, its color. Industrial pollution, too, has a lot to do with water clarity. So does the biology of the lakes. I'm thinking of the algae blooms that, in the past, have turned Lake Erie a slime green. I should mention that these are caused by the runoff of industrial agriculture, i.e. pollution. The zebra mussel is another good example. They're a filter feeding invasive species that's a major contributor to the increased water clarity of the Great Lakes over the last twenty years and, like so many invasive species, all sorts of cascading negative effects.

But to get back to the paintings themselves, I was thinking a lot about how light would interact with their surfaces and effect their color. I found that I could use iridescent paints and glazes to recreate some of the same effects I was seeing in the lakes. As a result, the paintings are always changing. As you move around them, the angle at which the paintings absorb or reflect light changes; the color shifts. Certain parts of the painting are obscured by a reflection while others appear to fall into shadow. So, in a sense, the paintings are hard to see. Like the lakes, they're hard to know.







Ledgerwood: During our studio visit, I was struck by the vast sense of scale that you were able to achieve by the overall build-up of minutely-sized, seemingly random brushstrokes over the entire surface. For me, the mark-making suggested infinite unknowable space and time that felt geological, as if it has accrued over eons, not just weeks. What is the process that you used to develop this sense of scale and what is the significance of the scale?

Bozif: By scale I think you mean the size and volume of the marks relative to the larger surface area of the paintings. This kind of scale has been a prominent feature of my work since my undergraduate days at the Kansas City Art Institute. The first serious paintings I ever made were actually large ballpoint pen drawings on canvas; these were sometimes eight feet long. I would use a straightedge to draw countless horizontal lines parallel to one another. Slowly, the lines would build up and the dye would saturate the canvas so completely that it would create a strange, uncanny, iridescent surface. But it was the repetitive intensity of the lines, the volume of marks, that gave the work its real power. That was a revelation for me. I think there's something fundamental about repetition. It triggers a response—both physical and psychological—relative to two universal qualities of being: labor and time.

Practically speaking, I often paint with sticks in lieu of traditional brushes. They have their own vocabulary of marks that help short-circuit tropes of gestural abstraction. They do this because they can't be loaded with a lot of paint. It's a lot of repetitive mark making: scratching, scraping, and pushing. Using a stick will quickly build texture. The more textured the surface becomes, the less control you have over the stick. The marks begin to look less human made and more natural. Through the accumulation of these marks into dense layers, I try and achieve an intensity that I hope makes the work compelling on both a physical and psychological level.

Another thing that I find interesting about this kind of scale is how it interacts with viewing distance. I read somewhere that Rothko's recommended viewing distance to his paintings was eighteen inches. A strange optical sensation occurs when you look at them this way. It reminds me of snow blindness, or color blindness, as it were. The edge of the paintings dissolve. It's very disorienting. The point is that paintings can change depending on how and where you look at them. It's not enough that a

painting be interesting from a polite distance or from the other side of the room or on Instagram. So, the sense of scale that I achieve in layers of seemingly random, minutely-sized marks creates a kind of depth that I hope draws a viewer closer. The closer you stand, the more the paintings reveal themselves. Like in sedimentation or deep space, the deeper you dig, the deeper you probe, the further back in time you can see. I think this may explain some of the associations with things like geological time and infinite unknowable space.

Ledgerwood: The surfaces of the paintings are mysterious. The build-up of pigment and textures in dense layers obscures the process, keeping it at a remove. Light reflects off the surface suggesting a flat reflective surface parallel to the viewer, but transparency within the network of paint application also reveals a shallow depth. Your paint application is both mechanical, by which I mean regular and repetitive, but also includes minimal, seemingly random visual incidents that creates an overall naturalistic impression. This effect is something like looking at a Monet water lily painting, both surface and depth. I'm curious to know how you determined that a "flat" surface focused treatment would be the best response to the subject matter when a perspectival response is a more traditional way to address landscape as subject. The shallow depth and the overall surface treatment situate the paintings alongside Modernist tropes of monochrome painting. What are you getting at by combining these tropes of representation?

Bozif: Though not a landscape painter in the traditional sense, erosion and sedimentation, growth and decay—geologic processes that help shape what we call landscape—greatly inform my work. We've already touched on some of these things. In these natural processes—of increase and decrease, of transformation by repeated addition and subtraction—I find an analogue to the act of painting itself. Thinking this way emphasizes materiality, texture, and surface. To achieve certain effects, I've embedded into these paintings sand from the Lake Michigan beaches near my home. Layers of thin glazes and iridescent paints enhance these textures. I'm interested in the tension between the depth created by these layers and the flatness that's emphasized by their reflective surface. It's not unlike looking at water.

The Monet reference is really interesting. What's missing from those water lily paintings? A horizon. Not just a horizon, but any reference of a shoreline. The images are left without perspec-

tive, they're flattened, and they explode laterally, they could go on forever. It's probably why he kept increasing the size of those canvases. For the same reasons, I intentionally make no reference to the horizon or shoreline. I think this might have something to do with the vast qualities that you were describing earlier.

Speaking of vast and mysterious. I've had the good fortune to spend some time in the deserts of the American Southwest; with their canyons, and hoodoos, and natural arches. Those landscapes are totally exposed, laid bare, obscene. In contrast, the Great Lakes, as landscape, are hidden, concealed, repressed. So, what are you left with? You're left with unfathomable mammoths in scale. You're left with natural wonders, unknowable depths, mysterious surfaces.

Again, I think it might come back to scale. If you zoom in on a landscape, at what point does it stop being a landscape? At what point does it start looking like something under a microscope? Conversely, if you zoom out, eventually you'd be left with astronomy. The same is true of time scales. How does one approach landscape on a geological timescale, which is to say, from the landscape's perspective? Or, take it a step further, how does one approach landscape from a human perspective that's

not positioned outside or **apart** from nature, but as a **part** of nature. Nature painting itself. I don't think this is an easy thing to do, but at this time in history, in the midst of climate change and ecological crises, artists who are interested in landscape as a subject have to take these things into account.

Ledgerwood: I see tropes of **The Sublime** in both landscape and abstract painting. Care to comment? Why is this idea of importance now?

Bozif: I couldn't place my work across the various meanings of that term over the years, at least not in a way that is both brief and respectful of your question. I'll just say I am fascinated by the sublime and think, for reasons I just mentioned, it might have more currency today than ever before.

Ledgerwood: In addition to the aforementioned Monet, your paintings also put me in mind of Whistler nocturne paintings and J.M.W. Turner, but only flatter, with a Late Modernist attention to overall surface like the paintings of Larry Poons or Milton Resnick. Do you situate your concerns as an artist making paintings alongside these artists or any others?

Bozif: I've only ever seen his work in reproduction, but I've read a good deal about Milton Resnick. He's certainly someone with whom I think I share some concerns. In terms of scale, the mark, and the materiality of paint.

Even though he's known primarily as a sculptor, Richard Serra's work has had a big impact on me; the way he employs weight, mass, and balance to engage the viewers body, even in his drawings. In terms of my own work, the accumulation of marks and the dense surfaces function similarly to the way weight, at least for me, functions in Serra's work.

Two other painters that I think I have an affinity with include Rothko, who I mentioned before, and Adolph Gottlieb, who's burst paintings have an immediacy and focused intensity that I really love. Gottlieb also had some interesting ideas about nature as it relates to his work.

I also appreciate the work of mid-century European painters like, Wols, Antoni Tàpies, and Jean Fautrier. They were working in post-war Europe and I think as a result their paintings appear scarred; like they've been traumatized. They're inward and cryptic and neurotic in a way the work of their American counterparts is not. I think their influences can be seen in my smaller paintings like **Dreissena polymorpha No. 1.**

Ledgerwood: What is it about painting itself as an art form and in particular the language of your paintings, which draws on tropes of both landscape and Modernist painting, that is of significance in this social/political moment? Because for me the contemplation of something vast overwhelming and mysterious completely tracks the way I feel about what's going on in the current political moment, but I'm curious to know how you arrived at a decision to paint these particular works once you returned to making art.

Bozif: Timothy Morton is a philosopher whose work I've been reading recently. He writes a lot about ecology and climate change. He's developed a term called **hyperobjects** that I find as compelling as I do useful. He describes hyperobjects as, "massively distributed entities in both time and space" that can be "thought and computed, but not directly touched or seen." Examples include global warming, nuclear radiation, tectonic plates, the biosphere, and evolution. Morton writes that, "we realize, after we discover hyperobjects, that non-human entities exist that are incomparably vaster and more powerful than us, and that our reality is caught in them."

To my ears, this sounds a lot like how you're feeling about the current state of things. And, to go back to your earlier question, it also sounds a lot like the sublime. I discovered Morton's writing only after I'd finished many of these paintings, but I was struck by how much his theorizing about hyperobjects resembled the way I had come to think about my art. The vast layers of minutely-sized, seemingly random marks, in my mind, recall the "disturbingly entangled [...] opened-ended mesh" of interconnections that you discover when you attempt to plumb the depths of a hyperobject. To take the analogy a step further, you've described the shallow depth and reflective surface of the paintings as mysterious, I've gone so far as to say they're hard to know. Like hyperobjects, the paintings are, to quote Morton again, "both vivid and slightly unreal [...] uncanny and intimate at the same time."

It's not always easy to identify what it is that you're painting. You're living in a world and responding to it. The Great Lakes are just a point of departure. What I've tried to engage with is a kind of background feeling that also extends into my foreground, a sense which I suspect many people today can identify with, that there are inexpressibly large and powerful entities that permeate the fabric of our reality, yet defy our engagement.

Land Acknowledgement

The Evanston Art Center is a non-profit visual arts organization, focused on scholarship, community, and public programs and exhibitions. It sits on the traditional homelands and near waters of the people of the Council of Three Fires: the Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Odawa, as well as the Menominee, Miami and Ho-Chunk nations. It was also a site of trade, travel, gathering and healing for more than a dozen other Native tribes and is still home to over 75,000 tribal members in the state of Illinois.

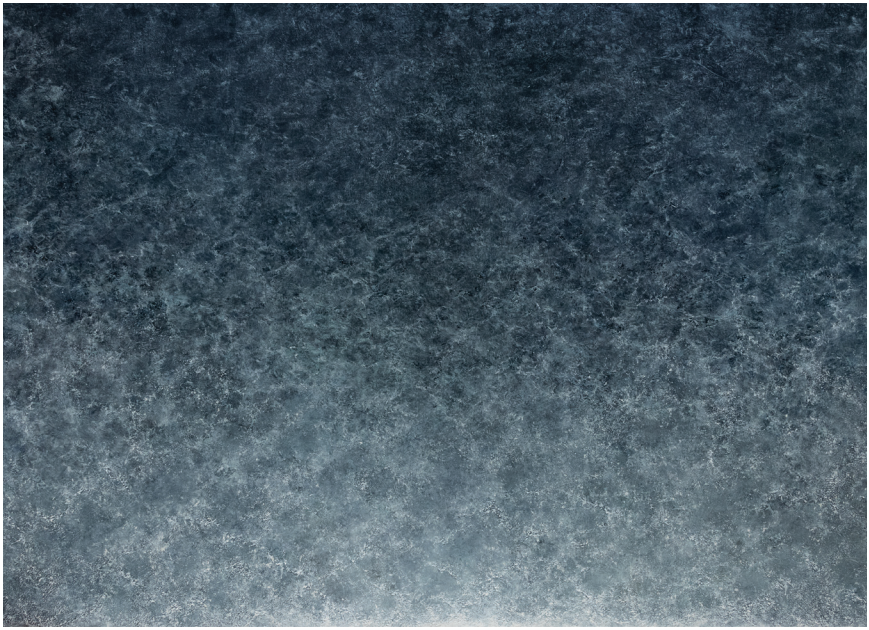


IMAGE CREDITS

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(p. 5)
Michigan, 2019
oil, wax marker, and sand on canvas, 77.25 x 46.50 in.

(p. 8 TOP)
Erie, 2019
oil on canvas, 50 x 32 in.

(p. 8 BOTTOM)
Erie (detail), 2019
oil on canvas, 50 x 32 in.

(p. 9 TOP)
Huron, 2018
oil on canvas, 70 x 50 in.

(p. 9 BOTTOM)
Huron (detail), 2018
oil on canvas, 70 x 50 in.

(p. 12)
Ontario, 2019
oil on canvas, 42 x 28 in.

(p. 13)
Michigan (detail), 2019
oil, wax marker, and sand on canvas, 77.25 x 46.50 in.

(p. 15)
Dreissena polymorpha No. 1, 2018
oil and sand on board, 14 x 11 in.

(p. 18 TOP)
Superior, 2019
oil, iron filings, and sand on canvas, 85 x 60 in.

(p. 18 BOTTOM)
Superior (detail), 2019
oil, iron filings, and sand on canvas, 85 x 60 in.

(pp. 19-20)
Superior (detail), 2019
oil, iron filings, and sand on canvas, 85 x 60 in.

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