



Easy Answers [slide]
by Alison Lovejoy Spain

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
Montana State University
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Abstract:

For religious man, nature is never only "natural"; it is always fraught with religious value.- This is easy to understand, for the cosmos is a divine creation; coming from the hands of the gods, the world is impregnated with sacredness...(The gods) manifested the different modalities of the sacred in the very structure of the world and of cosmic phenomena. The world stands displayed in such a manner that, in contemplating it, religious man discovers the many modalities of the sacred and hence, of being.? Mircea Eliade in *The Sacred and the Profane* My work often deals with my own struggle to understand the disparity of suffering faced by others. The mental illness of a family member forces me to ask if mental illness is a disease or is it a sense of dis-ease in one's surroundings? Witnessing violence cycle through my family has caused me to wonder about its root causes. War, atrocities, environmental destruction and exploitation of third world peoples is regular fare on the nightly news. One must almost live in a state of constant denial in order to function. This denial creates great discomfort for some people. I believe that to work through this distress is both a powerful and healing experience.

I choose imagery based on the way my body reacts to visual stimulus. I cannot articulate the discomfort I feel at times, so I ask how that discomfort would manifest visually. I often notice patterns, forms and signs in the outside world that seem to capture some unutterable feeling. It might be the way a branch bends to the weight of snow, against a sky electrified by neon. In this fleeting moment exists both the aspiration to be divine and the burden of being human. These are the bittersweet and tender spaces that move me. I want viewers to feel unsettled and explore the painting's meaning for themselves on an intuitive level.

Tree. Mountain. Horizon. Grass. Birds. These are the forms that are the departure point for much of my painting. Landscape derived subject matter provides for both the emotional and formal qualities that move me. Natural forms use line, hue and mass to arrange themselves in space. These arrangements evoke something very visceral. I find that I can use external landscapes to map internal consciousness. Words are absent in this type of understanding and it is this experience that I seek to recapture on canvas. Within each of these forms lie infinite juxtapositions, orders and relationships.

I often use tree forms in my work due to their ability to symbolize so much. Trees are the most obviously cyclical of the plant world as they change with the seasons. They are figurative, with limbs and veins. Trees scar, age, break, bend to pressure and grow towards light. Formally, tree branches define compelling space, consistently, whether it is through the effort of a lone snag piercing a dull sky or a front yard ornamental in need of pruning. The fashion in which a limb twists, or where a node changes and creates arthritic knuckles, creates in me a response that strikes me on a gut level. It is as if some primordial knowledge resides within the specific pattern layed out by the intertwining of branches. I do not feel that I am representing literal trees, but rather the symbol of a tree. What does that tree represent? When does a symbol become so potent that it becomes a living symbol? Natural forms that evoke particular emotion usually instigate my paintings. The painting *Redemption* was inspired by a neighbor's tree that I observe every night when walking my dog. I experience a sense of calm each evening as I become lost in the rhythm of the bare branches. The bird forms are drawn from

other observations; thus the paintings are not an isolated event but the continuity of experience.

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MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
Bozeman, Montana

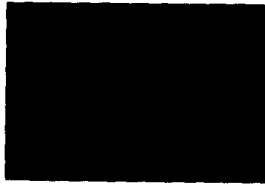
APRIL 2004

DATE:

1. *Shock & Awe*, Oil on Canvas
40" x 30"
Alison Spain, 2003



2. *Redemption*, Oil & Housepaint on
Canvas, 68" x 137"
Alison Spain, 2004



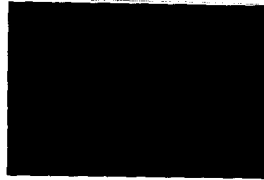
3. *V-Bomb*, Oil on Canvas
72" x 108"
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4. *Sink or Swim*, Oil & Housepaint
on Canvas, 67" x 133"
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6. *Unfortunate Casualty*, Oil &
Housepaint on Canvas, 68" x 56"
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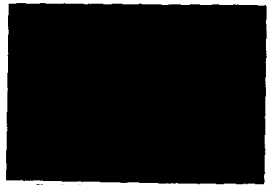
7. *Bound for Glory*, Oil &
Housepaint on Canvas, 68" x 56"
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5. *40 Days*, Oil & Housepaint on
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8. *Spilt Milk*, Oil on Canvas
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9. *Crown of Thorns for Haiti*, Oil &
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10. *Nightwalk with Cody*, Oil &
Housepaint on Canvas, 67" x 105"
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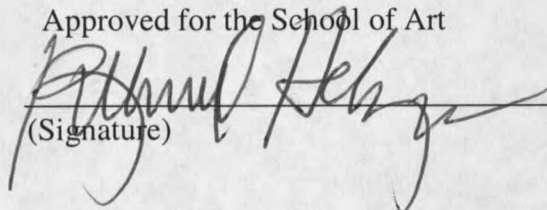
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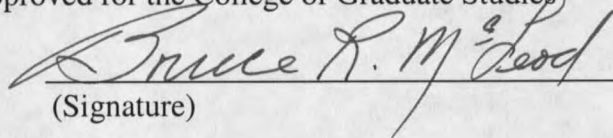
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Richard Helzer, Director


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Approved for the College of Graduate Studies

Doctor Bruce McLeod

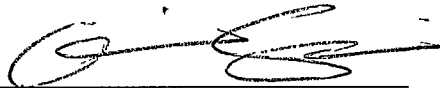

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“For religious man, nature is never only “natural;” it is always fraught with religious value. This is easy to understand, for the cosmos is a divine creation; coming from the hands of the gods, the world is impregnated with sacredness...(The gods) manifested the different modalities of the sacred in the very structure of the world and of cosmic phenomena. The world stands displayed in such a manner that, in contemplating it, religious man discovers the many modalities of the sacred and hence, of being.” Mircea Eliade in The Sacred and the Profane

My work often deals with my own struggle to understand the disparity of suffering faced by others. The mental illness of a family member forces me to ask if mental illness is a disease or is it a sense of dis-ease in one's surroundings? Witnessing violence cycle through my family has caused me to wonder about its root causes. War, atrocities, environmental destruction and exploitation of third world peoples is regular fare on the nightly news. One must almost live in a state of constant denial in order to function. This denial creates great discomfort for some people. I believe that to work through this distress is both a powerful and healing experience.

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both the emotional and formal qualities that move me. Natural forms use line, hue and mass to arrange themselves in space. These arrangements evoke something very visceral. I find that I can use external landscapes to map internal consciousness. Words are absent in this type of understanding and it is this experience that I seek to recapture on canvas. Within each of these forms lie infinite juxtapositions, orders and relationships.

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Natural forms that evoke particular emotion usually instigate my paintings. The painting *Redemption* was inspired by a neighbor's tree that I observe every night when walking my dog. I experience a sense of calm each evening as I become lost in the rhythm of the bare branches. The bird forms are drawn from other observations; thus the paintings are not an isolated event but the continuity of experience.

Body parts appear both obviously and subtly in my work. Often the parts are integrated into the landscape. In *Spilt Milk*, breasts leak milk or the sky dumps a torrent of rain. Isolated parts out of context jar the viewer into making other associations. War and sexual violence are linked, as in the painting *V-Bomb*, where female forms also suggest the earth. I ask the viewer to consider how the context changes when such a form is juxtaposed with unsuspected imagery and marks.

The use of abstracted marks requires that the viewer suspend conventional logic and relate to the marks on a sensual level. A circled mark emphasizes the importance of the mark, an individual, and the overlooked. By using both representational and non-representational imagery in my work, the audience is given some foundation, yet must participate in the decoding of the painting in order to glean meaning. Almost all of the marks that I make are rooted in the natural world. However, it is important to me that some marks remain ambiguous. I hope that the viewer will wonder about the purpose and nature of the marks. Are they stalks of grass or figures in the night? When I paint my memory of train tracks on the Texas plains, I also see the scars left by stitches and a ladder to heaven. Multiple readings promote spaciousness in the viewer that serves to combat contemporary culture's tendency to limit and define reality.

The paintings are composed of multiple layers, both visible and obscured. Compositional lines and shapes are allowed to move between layers. Background seeps into foreground. This suggests interaction between layers and that components do not exist as isolated parts. In essence, I propose through the qualities of paint that apparently remote subjects and events connect in ways that are both subtle and obvious. Using subject matter such as tree limbs that intersect reinforces this idea.

The frontal, stage-like setting of some elements contrasts with this interlacing of space. Conceptually, I am thinking of our everyday “reality” as this stage-like setting. We are players and here is our background. We move in and out of the curtain and interact with the setting of our lives. Life continually demands of its participants that we exist in such a one-dimensional manner, moving forward through Acts I, II & III. *Sink or Swim*'s reddish trees act as a stage set between the viewer and the rest of the painting. The viewer observes the drama occurring behind the trees, which begins to penetrate the red in places. The sky is behind the mountains, but also obscures the ridgeline, stepping out of its assigned role. Breaking up these planes, through piercing elements and seeping color fields, I disrupt the linear narrative and ask the viewer to consider the cyclical nature of reality.

Painting is a meditative practice through which I seek to understand the world around me. Process is an essential aspect of this practice. I am struck by the hard work involved in painting. I have learned through painting that solutions to problems are to be found in the problems themselves. This requires that one investigate difficult spaces. In my painting, uncomfortable juxtapositions ask that the viewer locate the source of the uneasiness and the solution in the painting itself. The order and process of paint instruct in the order and process of living.

LIST OF SLIDES

1. *Shock and Awe*, Oil on Canvas, 40" x 30"
2. *Redemption*, Oil and Housepaint on Canvas, 68" x 129"
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