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"NIGHT & DAY" CENTERPIECE

'Meditations' on destruction, renewal

James Hubbell's watercolors help put the Cedar fire into perspective

By Robert L. Pincus
ART CRITIC

March 3, 2005

James Hubbell's exhibition of watercolors, old and new, is ultimately about indomitable optimism. There's no other conclusion to reach after reading his words reproduced on a wall at the Oceanside Museum of Art and viewing the considerable number of pictures he produced after the October 2003 wildfires.

The words are from his poem, "After the Fire," which reads in part, The beauty there the Gods unearth / in the burnt stump / as much as in the burnt leaf.

However philosophical in tone, the words emanate from his and his family's tragic experience. During the Cedar fire, much of the Santa Ysabel home that he began designing and building back in 1958 was severely damaged.

For some people, such a trauma might have provoked dark, perhaps despairing, reflections. But for the longtime San Diego artist and architect, it was another in a long procession of occasions for learning something about and from the natural world. (Friends and followers have rallied to provide funds and labor to help the Hubbells rebuild their



Oak and Grey Fields 2004

compound of structures.)

It isn't surprising that "The Watercolors of James Hubbell: Meditations on Nature and Life" is the second show the OCMA has chosen to present of the artist's work. The museum, now celebrating its 10th anniversary, is a grass-roots institution that prides itself on being a champion of local art – at least, some strains of local art. And no figure represents a type of grass-roots San Diego artist more than Hubbell.

The museum's first effort was a retrospective in 1998, which encompassed sculpture, jewelry, some images and documentation of his architecture. This one was motivated by the fact that Hubbell saved earlier watercolors, in the minutes before the fire arrived at his compound, and rendered new ones in response to the changed landscape around Santa Ysabel and Julian.

Hubbell is undoubtedly better known as an architect and sculptor than watercolorist. The buildings and three-dimensional objects are intimately related – the swooping curves of his buildings are closely attuned to those in his bronzes, iron gates and stained-glass windows. I admit that I've never warmed to these forms, which are a highly stylized strain of organic forms. They allude to nature but even more so to a tradition in architecture. The Spanish architect Antonio Gaudi, a pivotal influence on Hubbell, is more engaging because his structures take the curve to extremes.

The watercolors are a distinct and more compelling body of work. In his essay for the exhibition catalog, critic Theodore F. Wolff asserts, more than once, "Everything contributes to the whole." That may be true, but if the watercolors couldn't stand alone, the museum shouldn't have made a show of them.

Fortunately, they can. Hubbell proves himself to be a keen student of early modernist watercolor, particularly early-20th-century American practitioners. There are traces of John Marin and Arthur Dove in these images, perhaps Charles Demuth, too. But the element of tribute doesn't

ART REVIEW

**"The Watercolors of
James Hubbell:
Meditations on Nature and
Life"**

*Through March 26;
Oceanside Museum of Art,
704 Pier View Way,
Oceanside. \$5; \$3, seniors,
students and military; (760)
721-2787 or [www.oma-
online.org](http://www.oma-online.org)*

overshadow his own interaction with the scene before him.

All through the selections, Hubbell gives space a seductive elasticity. He compresses the forms in "Bishop Valley" (1995) so that the sweep of the slopes closest to the viewer's eye look much like a bowl with irregular edges. And the edges of that bowl cleanly frame more distant hills or mountains as well as the sky.

The use of white, encircling the painted scene in "Bishop Valley," gives it a second frame. Hubbell demonstrates, again and again, that open space is just as important as painted space.

"The Path Up" (2001) is another prime example, in which lush color butts up against white at the outer edges of the image. It's an elegant example of how abstract and figuration go hand in glove in a medium as fluid as watercolor. The mountain is a soft cone, which intermingles cool and warm hues, while sky floats above it in successive bands of blue and purple.

Both of these selections are from a portion of the show called "California, Including the Sierra." There are four sections in all, which essentially mirror Hubbell's intent to be both local and cosmopolitan, grounded and cosmic. The other categories are: "Other States and Other Countries," "After the Fire" and "Special Section." (The special section pictures, with their precious fantasy scenes, are an unconvincing anomaly.)

Hubbell takes to the English countryside in snow or a town in Latvia with as much ease and verve as to California terrain. One of his most memorable skies, which shifts quickly from wide ribbons of lavenders to others in deep blues, makes an appearance in "Green Mountain Vermont" (1995).

All of the pictures in the show are set against white walls, except for those in the "After the Fire" section. There, the background is black.

Hear the man speak

James Hubbell will present slides and talk about his solo exhibition of watercolors this evening at 7 p.m., in the Oceanside Public Library, just west of the Oceanside Museum of Art at 300 N. Coast Highway. Admission is \$5.

Information: (760) 721-2787.

There is no dramatic stylistic shift in these pictures, but there is, as you might expect, a significant darkening of his palette.

From the outset, though, the post-fire selections aren't maudlin. Hubbell sets a charred tree against pale sky, but the land and sky display brighter hues and the picture is pointedly titled "In the Beginning" (2003). Destruction and renewal are clearly inseparable for Hubbell.

True to his words, the black and brown portions of "Oak and Grey Fields" (2004) are rather beautiful – as much as brighter portions of the picture. "First Snow" (2003) sets white against brown, chronicling the passage of time and softening of the stark landscape.

Hubbell uses the word "pause" twice in the poem on the museum walls. Fire, he implies, makes it seem as if the life of the world has stopped, as if the scene before him were a still life. But in observing his surroundings with brush and paper, he began to interpret a process of renewal. That is what these picture reveal. The regeneration of the land seems to have given him strong solace and a vital sense of inner renewal.

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