

YEE JAN BAO
OILS 1983-1985

University Art Gallery
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Yee Jan Bao

This is where we begin, but not where we end. The discourse continues, stretching and collapsing the notions of a static origin. Stylistically, Bao's canvases do formally derive, through an implied ethnic gesture, from the Chinese scrolls of the "Shan Shui" (mountain and water) genre. But the absolute horizontal and vertical axes characteristic of this style have been emotively enhanced by a fluid impasto application which swirls on the canvas surface itself. The paint has often been applied by a palette knife, which emphasizes a boldness of technique, and the canvases are very large, evoking Rothko. While Bao's pictures position themselves in terms of their own stylistic past (they are about themselves as painting—twisting past artistic traditions as a rhetorical strategy), stylistic and art historical references become only one way to speak about his paintings. His "Ryder-Sea" is indebted to this past, but only if we surrender ourselves to merely formal similarities. Interpretations that emphasize merely stylistic developments within a stable *oeuvre* or an ethnic indebtedness in a social void must be contravened.

Bao's canvases are not specifically about a stylistic past, but are involved in the process of artistic production. His canvases are sites where contemporary art production mediates concepts of the environment and our reaction to it; to city, wilderness, country, garden. Do the horizontals represent a stratified cosmos of transcendence over an urban vision of the landscape, or do they challenge our scenic overlook or snapshot mentality of the landscape? Do his pictorial texts emphasize, instead, active memories of certain roads to Oklahoma cities, and the psychological or surreal states recalled from these familiar roads which cannot be mechanically captured? Bao's texts break down the sense that painting is a static imprint of an artistic personality. The viewer travels down the same road, mapping and framing individualized phenomena. And there is no single destination. We can dwell narratively within the pictures as part of an ongoing flight of fantasy or drama.

Bao often locates the viewer at the beginning of the road, as in "Road to Ardmore," or hovering in some ideal position toward the landscape, as in "Family Outing," and in this sense his work responds to the land

"Yee Jan Bao, a naturalized American who was born in Shanghai, raised in Uruguay, and schooled in the United States, seems at first an unlikely candidate to carry on the Western landscape tradition."¹

"Bao's curious panoply of Chinese, and South and North American influences apparently has resulted in a singular vision that is tied to all three."²

1. Lynn Gumpert, Ned Rifkin, *New Work: New York Artists Outside New York*, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1984, 31.

2. *Ibid.*, 32.



1. *Arcadia, OK*, 1983-84. Oil on canvas. 6 × 5'. Courtesy of the artist.

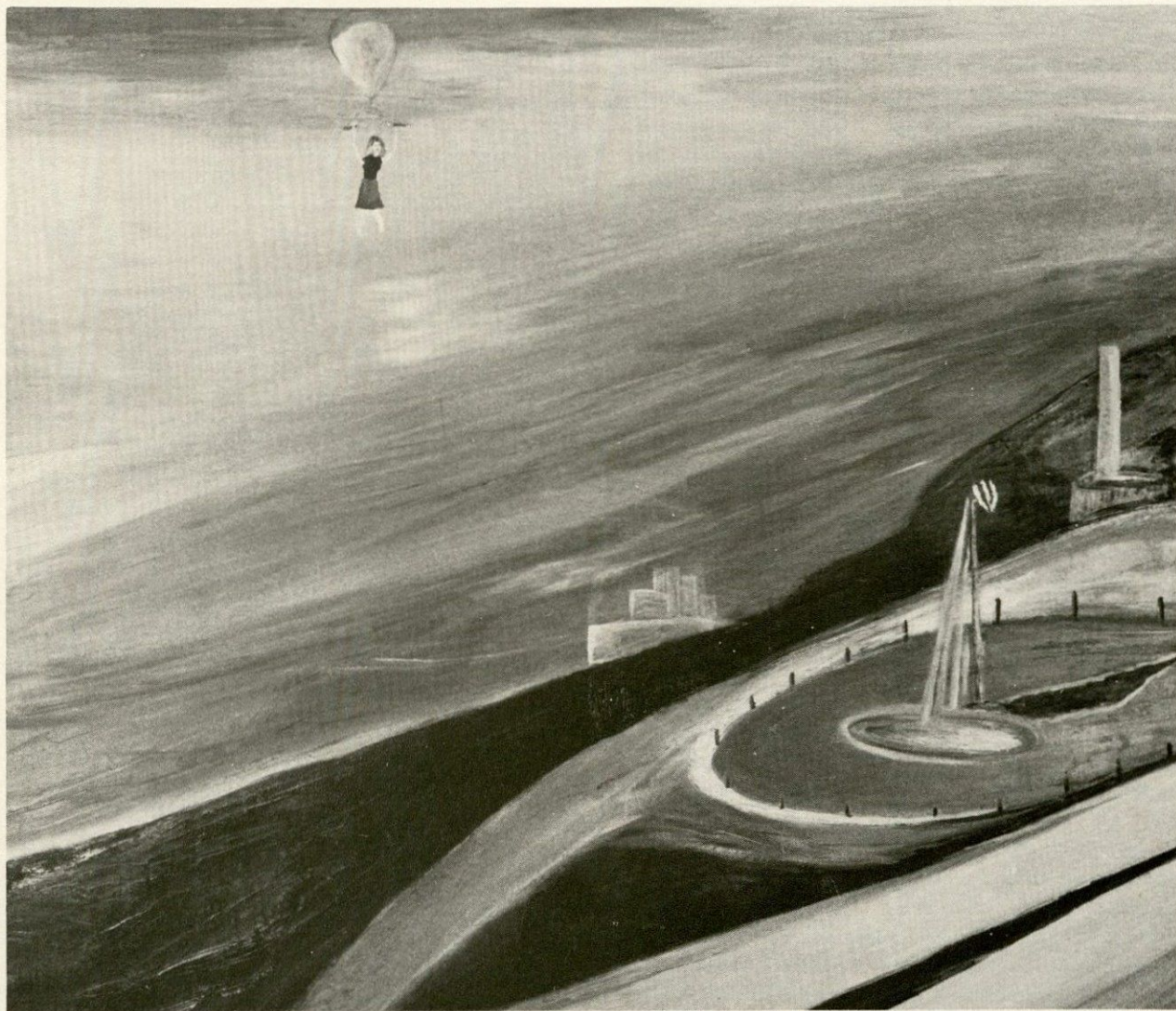
the way tourist photography does—through vistas and ideal positionings: "Here is the picture point." They also undercut this notion by pronouncing their own artifice as abstraction. This is accomplished by the addition of naively painted figural elements. Not only does this device pronounce scale the way Chinese scroll painters did, but it acts as an ironization of the photographer's pictorial code (in use by the 1850s) that included placing figures among monuments, often ruined, which acted to emphasize the site as one for active reverie. The figures often glance away and model our gaze. We look with them, as we contemplate with Caspar David Friedrich's figures. In the age of the panoptic viewpoint, human perception is photographically conceived and metaphorically framed. But the eye is not a Kodak, and this elusive dimension is what is rhetorically caught on Bao's canvases. The contemporary use of abstraction now consciously signifies expressive or mental forays, and the texts become instruments for fictional narrations of the self on the flowing roads of travel, opening new categories of experience. Abstraction has become a figurative language where man's emotions and relationships to the land have been distilled and codified. The expressive nature of abstraction, then, has become a deliberate regression, a decadent view, and a crumbling hyperbole. We know the texts are two dimensional spaces from which we construct three dimensional places. This collision of surface and depth, of fact and fiction, is the playful nature of Bao's art praxis which refuses to produce a single meaning or referent for the texts. The criteria of flatness is impure; indeed, there is no pure signification either of abstraction or mimesis.

Bao is not an illustrator of an emblematic tradition, either surreal or abstract, because he calls attention to his work's artificiality. He parodies the idea that abstraction is expression. The sublime fictionality of Bao's work undercuts a photographic identity and an imitative framework. His art "ironicizes" abstraction as expression and American Luminism as mimetic. The superimposition of figural and abstract art, where his canvases contain bits of both, underlines the artificiality of the paintings as windows onto either an outer or inner artistic vision of reality. His rhetorical re-imposition of past art traditions, from his Uruguayan color heritage, Chinese scroll perspectives, and landscape schools, do not act to



substantiate the utterly "American" gestural-ness of his work. The consuming privatisation of attitudes assumed in the car are increasingly revealed as we uncover the historicity behind an "on the road" attitude. Are we, as the 1930s WPA guidebooks suggest, discovering a lost America or is it the "great American roadside"? Bao sets out on his creative journey with no particular destination in mind and re-presents the widening vision which occurs from vistas on his subjective road of perception. But perception is always caught up in a cultural vocabulary: natural wonders and wildernesses. Niagara Falls, Yellowstone, and Yosemite are all bounded by hypothetical lines which contain a touring mentality captured at last on the sticker encrusted RV. Nature has become domesticated for our use. In "Arcadia, OK," Mt. McKinney, a small hill in an old artillery field off I-35 in Norman, fumes as a distant volcano and pictures nature's purging power imposed on a target of earth. Even if these canvases present a journey of the self, pictorially reminiscent of Steinbeck's written folk rhythms, we must realize the very American frame from the car, proscribing our perceptual landscapes. The texts interrupt the notion of automatic travel, where our eyes must continually be repositioned lest we become lulled by our motor's relentless hum. The figures tend to suggest those out-of-the-ordinary experiences that disrupt our auto-matism.

Bao's method could be called a pragmatic work, where preconceived ideas can become thwarted in the painting process. Bao reacts to what is being painted, allowing things to happen in his work that are not part of a preconception. In a sense, then, his method evolves and is inclusive, rather than exclusive—there are no preparatory drawings which define his vision. The canvas's "life" is not predetermined. This is a means of abandoning artistic intentionality. His creative process re-institutes the denatured gesture, not the decadent artistic intention. Bao's technique could be called an innocent one, where the narrative process of creating includes the admission of non-grammatical elements. He abandons total control of the end product, going with elements that appear on the canvas. It is a spontaneous writing. This metaphor mimics our experiences on the road, where sudden surprises from precipices to horrible road accidents interrupt our preconceived notions of travel. One has to work with



2. *Mercury Vapor*, 1983-84. Oil on canvas. 6 × 5'. Courtesy of the artist.

objects on the horizon of thought, must react emotionally to them, before a rational or learned response intervenes. Most of Bao's ideas are formed on the road which becomes an emblem of self-itineraries in motion through the wide open spaces of Oklahoma. The awesome nature of his created spaces is really a series of reframings on the road, and the road is the sculpture that traverses vast regions but functions to make these areas manageable. The road catalogs the varied tones, shapes, and perspectives of the landscape. Any strange vision can be memorized and instantly be transformed and depicted on canvas.

Bao calls himself a "funny Friedrich," and he parodies the religiosity of Friedrich's romantic vision of the divinity of the landscape and Kant's theory of the sublime threshold by using the golf course, or the baseball diamond, to pronounce the human proclivity to geometricize the landscape; to turn the land into manicured gardens with prescribed operations. Metaphorically, the wilderness that Oklahoma became during the Great Dust Bowl era has now become, in Bao's canvases, a symbol of human intervention which has domesticated the barren wilderness, making it flourish for the production of an urban culture. Bao does suggest the angularity of the city, as in "Shawnee-scape" or "Mercury Vapor," but these cities are rendered essentially transparent, as almost silent suggestions in the face of an inexorable nature. The titles suggest roads culminating in cities, in the grids of society, which are supported by the land through oil, livestock, and agricultural production. Cities become vertical sites that articulate rational processes—shocking us into a confrontation with the nature of our ideologically proscribed perceptions of the land. The "wilderness" has all but disappeared in this scheme, but the roadside view and the snapshot suffice to capture, from ideal vistas, the grandeur of an exalted viewpoint. Bao's city is subsumed by the swirling eddies of a nature become sublime, and golfers and families flee the wind. Indeed, the threat of the powerful tornadic winds that roar across the state is only distanced from us by the fact of representation; the formal motion pronounces an almost surreal occurrence—the recurring motif of threatening winds with the still-hovering Dorothy in "Mercury Vapor," repeating "There's no place like home."

Bao recognizes that the drama and pleasure of his works

"... little by little a logic of 'driving' has replaced a very subjective logic of possession and projection. No more fantasies of power, speed and appropriation linked to the object itself, but instead a tactic of potentialities linked to usage: mastery, control and command, an optimization of the play of possibilities offered by the car as vector and vehicle, and no longer as object of psychological sanctuary. The subject himself, suddenly transformed, becomes a computer at the wheel, not a drunken demiurge of power. The vehicle now becomes a kind of capsule, its dashboard the brain, the surrounding landscape unfolding like a televised screen (instead of a live-in projectile as it was before)."

Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," in ed. Hal Foster, *The Anti-aesthetic, Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Port Townsend, 1984, 127.



can be expressed through "negative emotion." This is a new sublimity: an arrest of thought that is both delight and dread. Bao's golf course is a manicured conceptualization in the face of an awesome wilderness, sublime because it is a threshold that admits the impossibility of entry. His color and light clarify the constructed nature of that immanent presence which the American Luminists sought to compel the urban tourists to experience in the upstate "still-savage" wildernesses.

Another awe is felt for the threat of nature's reprieve and is emphasized in the frozen gestures of "The Game." These forcefully suggest the kinetic potential of the landscape captured as a vast remnant of chaotic nature. These dream storms seize and threaten our conscious being, but because they are in the imaginative realm, the experience can be distanced and the pleasure of an immobility of thought in the face of nature's vortex is caught. (We turn, but cannot run in real time; we move in super-slow motion, constantly reframing the tornado in our mind's eye, running, but never reaching safety.) Then we wake up.

Just as Friedrich's figures, whose gaze we assume, are the act of abstracting the mysteries of nature, Bao's texts compel us, within one frame, not merely to gaze, but to consider the act of gazing. The landscapes, then, have a fantastic and cerebral function. Bao's canvases can be used to "look beyond" if wedded with an idea of nature as a receptacle of the divine, or they can engage us as representations of a particular sublime notion of the landscape. Nature can become a means for imaginative release. It is turned into a metaphoric language of the psyche. And, in an active way, the paintings use nature as a site machine, as sites for the invention of the self on the open road. But Bao's figures, which feel flat, often arrest us from looking through a window onto a particular reality, and trivialize the sublime vision by calling attention to the artifice of the work as art. The forms within the frame are reversible and tantalizing—awesomeness becomes an innocent group of children's toys and businessmen's games, because the absurdity of seeking the sublime in a representation of nature has grown up into the rational editorializing of preconceived art historical styles. The texts, in this sense, are humorous and beguiling, producing both a terror and an absurdity. Bao's sense of space is an evocation of a particular place,

a combination of the sublime and comic which leads to a terrific absurdity. If read this way, the work is a grotesquerie where an elevated style is ludicrously combined with a folk figuration—a bathetic vision of painting or a pathetic art that conjures powerful fantasies from a constructed nature. When we become tactically aware, however, the paintings admit us in a different way.

The paintings are not merely an interaction of elements which themselves pronounce content, as in Abstract Expressionism, but are explorations of a gestural style interrupted by its own content. Bao's oil "War Memorial" pronounces that a painting completed has its own life or death; it is a slice of time to be reckoned with but is easily passed by. In the depiction, the golfer is confronted by the monument looming in front of him. And he is constricted by the rules of the golf game and acts these vectors out on the landscape, even as artillery fire destroys the World War One landscape of the Somme with lines of projectiles, a series of geometries that explode on impact with the earth. The ironic thing is that the war memorial, the center of a traffic circle in Brooklyn, is set upon a golf course as if on a battlefield, functioning as a device of absurdity on the tame, ordered playing field. The use of sports fields underlies the rational or geometric approach humans place on the active, organic environment.

In a sense, war memorials are signs of Bao's gestural style, for they redirect our social goals, stand as representatives of a "glorious past," as vertical sights that arrest the play of our unconscious, raw experience. They are huge expletives in a now-dead rhetoric. It is the war monument that represents real ruptures in the progressive notion of the human reaching for and creating a new millennial garden in the wilderness. And it is this compulsion to control and to create that compels Bao's vision. The "War Monument" pronounces a surreal outlook, where a confluence of symbols come together as form. Bao's works are not mere illustrations of ideas objectified from an artist's unconscious, with nature as background, but are rhetorical fictions realized from the artist's experience. Bao self-consciously uses this notion, which aligns him with the contemporary German neo-expressionists. His palimpsest style invests in Neo-Geo.

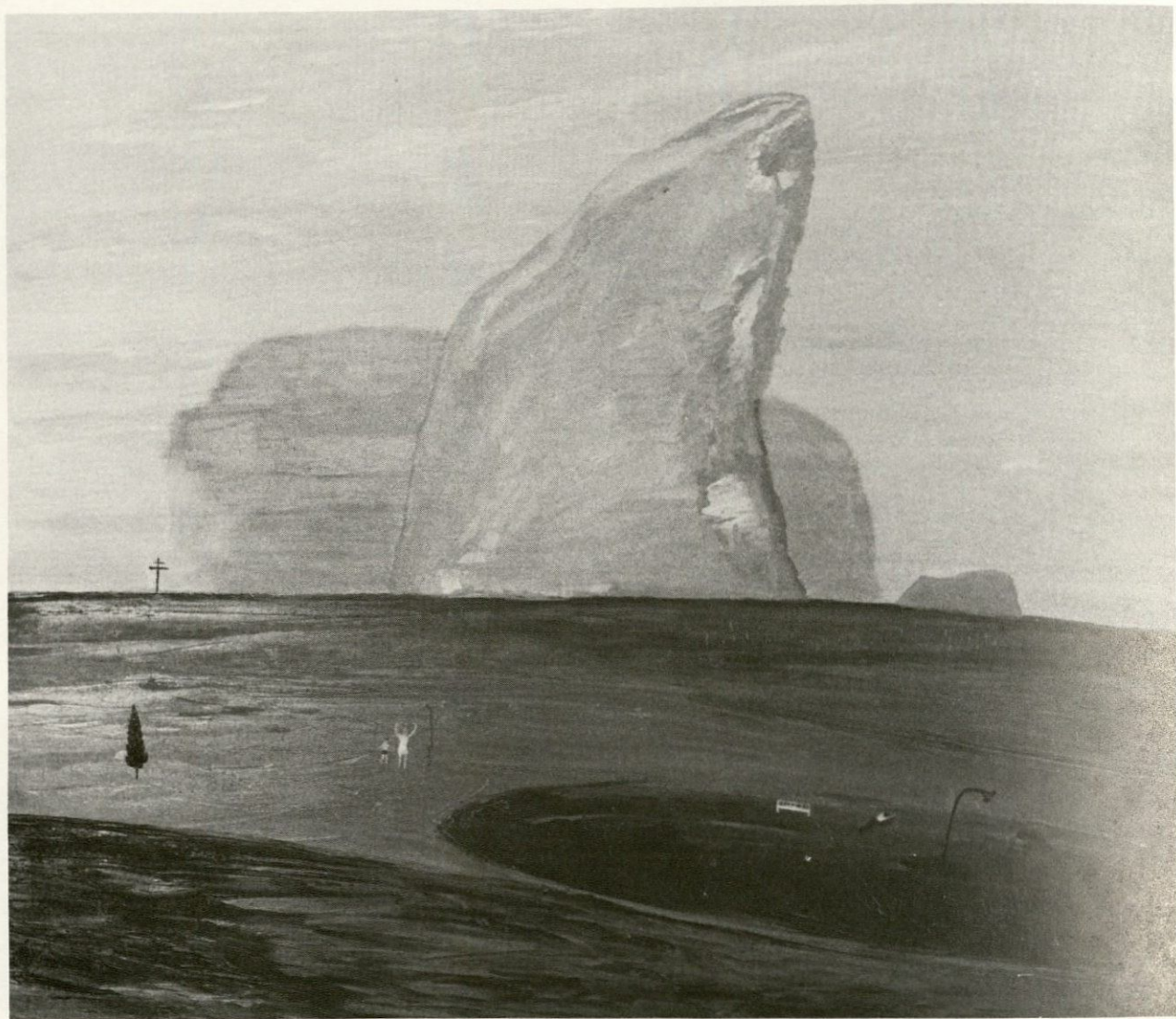
—Paul Eli Ivey, Binghamton, New York 1987

With the idea of the sublime, the feeling when faced with a work of art is no longer the feeling of pleasure, or not simply one of pleasure. It is a contradictory feeling, because it is a feeling of both pleasure and displeasure, together.

Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Complexity and the Sublime," *Postmodernism*, ICA Documents 4, London, 1986.



3. *The Game*, 1984. Oil on canvas. 6 × 5'. Courtesy of the artist.



4. *Family Outing*, 1983-84. Oil on canvas. 6 × 5'. Courtesy of the artist.



5. *War Monument*, 1984. Oil on canvas. 18 × 22". Courtesy of the artist.

Yee Jan Bao

Education: Grinnell College, Grinnell, Iowa, 1968; Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, California, MFA, 1971.

Teaching experience: University of Texas, 1971-1977; Rhode Island School of Design, 1977-1979; University of Cincinnati, 1979-1980; University of Oklahoma, 1980-1981, 1982-1985; Chicago Art Institute, 1981-1982; University of Illinois, 1981-1982; SUNY-Stony Brook, 1985- .

Selected exhibitions: Long Beach Museum, Long Beach, 1970; Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, 1971; Electra Carlin Gallery, Fort Worth, 1971; Lasur Museum, Monroe, 1973; Three Rooms Gallery, Austin, 1975; Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, 1974; University of Kansas, Pittsburg, 1975; San Antonio College, San Antonio, 1975; Fort Worth Museum, Fort Worth, 1976; Woods Gerry Museum, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, 1977; Main Museum, Providence, 1978; Edward Thorp Gallery, New York, 1980; Cameron University, Lawton, 1980; Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Blacksburg), 1980; Laguna Gloria Museum, Austin, 1981; MJS Gallery, Fort Worth, 1981; University of Houston, Houston, 1981; Oklahoma Art Center, Oklahoma City, 1982; N.A.M.E. Gallery, Chicago, 1982; C.G. Rein Gallery, Sante Fe, 1984; New Museum, New York, 1984; Gallery 53, Cooperstown, 1984; Stephen Rosenberg Gallery, New York, 1985; 56 Bleecker Gallery, New York, 1985.

Artist's Statement

This group of paintings was done 1983-1985. The aesthetic problem that interested me was how to make a painting in which one could critique the Romantic tradition of landscape and at the same time convey some intensity—which is a Romantic notion. Although these paintings do not answer any questions, in 1985 I started inserting figures into the landscape which seemed to make the paintings ironic and surreal, and potential spaces for humor and fantasy.

—Yee Jan Bao, Brooklyn, New York 1987

Paintings Exhibited

Mercury Vapor, oil on canvas, 6 × 5'

Ryder-Sea, oil on canvas, 6 × 5'

Juniper Tree, oil on canvas, 6 × 5'

Shawnee-scape, oil on canvas, 6 × 5'

Road to Ardmore, oil on canvas, 6 × 5'

The Game, oil on canvas, 6 × 5'

Aerial View, Enid, oil on canvas, 6 × 5'

Granary #7, oil on canvas, 6 × 5'

Arcadia, OK, oil on canvas, 6 × 5'

Family Outing, oil on canvas, 6 × 5'

War Monument, oil on canvas, 22 × 18"

Pastoral, oil on canvas, 6 × 5'

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