

FLAUNT

Alan Prazniak | 'Field Recordings' At Geary Gallery

November 4, 2021
By Curtis Eckley



Alan Prazniak, Idle Moment, 2021, oil on canvas, 11 x 14 inches.

As you drive up NYS Route 44, passing between old workers' cottages that once supplied the local iron ore mines and furnaces with a steady supply of labor, and the damp forests that open up to rolling farms, you get a sense of the landscape in its totality, its quietest and most bustling held together by space and grounded by history. Millerton, NY is a long way away from Geary's Bowery location, but the two are united here in a dual exhibition of new oil paintings by Alan Prazniak, *Field Recordings*, open through November 6. Unpacking Prazniak's work is a bit like natural-history research, turning over stones in search of the unknown. The tradition of *histoire naturelle*, where the French also translate *histoire* as "story" guides the spirit of his practice in gathering visual information from his travels and distilling them onto a picture plane that never fully solidifies, but hovers like morning fog. Memories are pressed until saturation, into deep hues and loose brushstrokes.

You never fully arrive at your destination in these paintings, but for Prazniak, that's okay. Instead, we can find actuality in the apophatic, in the negation, in the cloud of unknowing. *Flaunt* had the opportunity to talk with him about horizons, nothingness, and wandering as artistic practice.

I'm curious about the conception of the show, and the decision to show in two locations, one in the city, and one upstate. What do you hope people take away from this experience?

The show covers about a year and a half of work, I had a lot of work, and I experimented with some bigger pieces that could fit better in the gallery upstate since it's a bigger space. I liked the idea that

travel was a part of my painting and a part of my process. I think during the pandemic, weirdly, I traveled a lot as my side job, so I had to find out a way to take the studio with me and bring back my ideas and drawings I made, cobble them together in my own studio in Brooklyn. That's where I got the idea for *Field Recordings*, painting plucked from the places I'd been.

There's a scientific connotation to the show's name, but it also concerns the notion of the field of painting. Were these things you were thinking about?

I think drawings for me are in a way, are sort of notations, are kind of like a record of thought and it can be a really wandering thought. I was watching a nature documentary and my wife commented on the sound design. Off the cuff I was like I kind of want to do a field recording and she said "well, you kind of *are*".

In describing your new series of painting, you said that you're after a "critical pointlessness," that you try to wring out the painting "until it's almost nothing". Could you speak a little bit more to this process?

For me, the thrill of painting is that it can get close to meaningless, or nothingness, and to me that's really exciting. A sort of a different way to take the word of pointlessness is without a point, and with these paintings the compositions are sprayed out in a way, they are simple but really demanding, and you have to stand around them.

What do you hope to achieve with this nothingness?

A more open-ended quality of the painting. It leads them to have their own life. If I sense I've arrived at the end of a painting, then I get excited. If it feels like it's almost nothing but it's still something.

Compared to some of your earlier work, these new paintings feel liberated in some way from the need to represent. The swaths of color have fully taken the field of the painting into their grasp. Is this a shift you've noticed?

Yeah, well, another big thing that happened this year, I had surgery on my right hand, and to kind of keep going during my recovery I started painting with my left hand, I didn't want to get too dormant, so the palette slows down, the painting slowed down, they got really simple, but I found a different kind of playfulness. The fantasy elements drained out of the painting, they got much more simple.

I also feel that your recent work really demonstrates your intuition as a colorist. What painters or artists do you look at?

Arthur Dove forever, I love him. Georgie O'Keeffe, she comes to mind a lot. Stanley Whitney, the greatest colorist of our time.

As a historian I'm often connecting things to the past. I see a lot of the same preoccupations in your work as that of Paul Sérusier, a student of Gauguin, in his painting *The Talisman*. Do you see your work in any sort of lineage?

I don't think too much about it. I love who I love, if you are involved with it at all, you have your ancestry you speak to, but I don't think about it too much. I love Milton Avery, but I learned quickly that he was so unique that I couldn't learn from him. There are some things you have to learn, and trust that your own understanding carries into the work.

Do you want people to read these as fully landscape, or fully abstracted?

I like when they break apart. It's a conversation really between me and the horizon. I grew up in Pennsylvania in farmland where it's all horizons, I feel it's a part of my life. Being in a studio in Brooklyn, I can then have a conversation with drawing and color I feel in a more fluid way.

I'm also interested in the scale of your paintings. They're much more intimate, which for me, allows me to fully focus on the essence of the colors. There's a meditative quality in being able to contemplate those reductions in form. How do you choose the scale that you work at?

They're kind of like head-sized, the little ones. Honestly, it's a way to make a lot of surfaces fast. I don't treat them as precious. You take the time to make a huge surface, you kind of have this weight or pressure, and I take the paintings seriously but I kind of want that sketchbook quality, and I like when you can arrive at something and that's what I like about small-scale.

You talked about wandering as an "important gesture". How does wandering factor into your recent work?

To me, wandering is a form of drawing. You can look at a map and see where you've been, that feeling of moving with impulses, the ability to say "I don't know" sometimes and that's okay. I think saying "I don't know" is actually a really important part of painting.