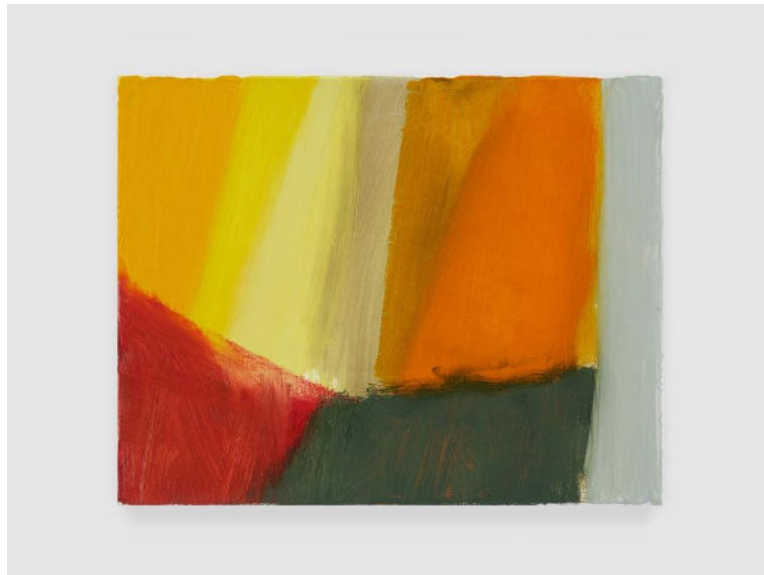


Forbes

Alan Prazniak Makes You Wonder If God Is Real, Or Just A Fluke In Our DNA

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By Brienne Walsh



Alan Prazniak, "Golden Horn," 2021, oil on canvas, 11 x 17 inches, Courtesy for the Artist and Geary.

Alan Prazniak traveled a lot during the pandemic as a painting assistant to Odili Odita, a Nigerian artist whose work continued to be installed even when nothing else was open. At night Prazniak returned to wherever he was staying, and painted gouache studies on the floor. He began with memories or thoughts of a place — the “soft drama” of clouds rolling in over a mountain in Blacksburg, Virginia, for example — and then let his mood guide his hand. “I trust my mood more than my ideas,” he says.

The gouache studies, which Prazniak calls “bedroom paintings,” are the starting point for “Field Recordings,” an exhibition of Prazniak’s recent oil paintings currently open at Geary gallery’s two locations in Manhattan and Millerton, New York, through November 6. The paintings in the exhibition, which range in size from 11 x 17 to 53 x 61 inches, appear, at first, to be landscapes from nature, but quickly, as you look at them, can

diffuse into fields of color without object or focal point that still manage to convey a sense of space.

“The paintings are landscapes until they are not,” says Prazniak. “They can kind of arrive at a different quality, a more confusing kind of space, and I’m fine with that.”

The paintings represent a breakthrough in Prazniak’s practice that was driven by a freak accident that temporarily disabled his right (and working) hand. After the accident, Prazniak was determined not to stop painting — daily labor was a practice that was drilled into him at the Tyler School of Art, where he received his BA. So, he began painting with his left hand, and found that what he describes as a “weird experiment” forced him to slow down and simplify the elements of his compositions. “I realize that the palette has its own speed,” he says.

For a long time, Prazniak had been undergoing a crisis of confidence. After graduate school at Rutgers, where he received his MFA, Prazniak struggled to find his artistic voice. Landscape paintings he made for a solo exhibition at Geary in 2018 had a similar quality to his more recent work — they were landscapes broken down into geometric forms that seemed to represent an otherworldly, or other-dimensional, space — but they seemed less skilled and less able to break through the frame and explode into physical, real space.

The paintings in “Field Recordings” do the latter. Bearing titles that suggest the places that may have inspired them — for example, “Palisades,” “At Altitude” and “Appalachia in Blue” — they miraculously manage to say something entirely new in the field of abstract painting. The brushstrokes are loose and scratchy, showing the bristles of the brush that created them. Bold, deep colors blend and erase over each other at the margins where they connect. Every gesture seems rendered without hesitation. The only way to describe looking at them is to say that they feel like a visual feast. They fill a screen to the point where you feel as though they might be capable of breaking it.

Prazniak notes that he has a special affinity for the South, despite growing up on a horse farm in rural Pennsylvania. “I feel like the air down there can support life,” he says. “It has breath in it.” As a recent transplant to the South, I know exactly what he’s talking about — and why landscape painting will never need to argue for its existence. To walk under a live oak is to feel the presence of the divine; hold your camera to it, and the spirit escapes. Prazniak’s recent paintings don’t capture the South itself, per se, but more the quality of what humans can see in nature that machines cannot. That weird spirit thing that might be real or might just be a fluke in our DNA.