DON NICE

SAMUEL DORSKY MUSEUM OF ART

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DON NICE
The Nature of Art

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Front cover
American Totem: Beaverkill Square, 1981, oil on linen,
96 x 96 inches, Courtesy Babcock Galleries

Back cover
Indian Brook Falls, 1993, oil on canvas, 60 x 60 inches,
Private Collection

Introduction

"The river is a tremendous record for us—from its virgin birth in the Adirondacks through the remnants of the Industrial Revolution, to the busy commercial harbor of New York City. This is our Parthenon, our Chartres. We must do everything we can---not to just save it, but to see it."

– Don Nice

A classic figure in American art, Don Nice brings a contemporary vision to the American landscape tradition. Deeply committed to painting the quintessential landscape, Nice comfortably juxtaposes icons of American culture such as sneakers, Hershey bars, Coke bottles, popcorn, and sunglasses, along with a diverse lexicon of flora and fauna, to create paintings drawn from his personal experiences.

Nice has painted many important works throughout the world. However, his main body of work focuses on distinctly American subjects reflecting his interest in art, nature, people, and the environment. After moving to the Hudson Valley in 1969, Nice was captivated by the majestic Hudson River, which, along with the landscape of the mountains and valley that it runs through, continues to inspire and inform his work, and is the principal focus of this exhibition.

Although rooted in the gesture of Abstract Expressionist artists and the realism of Pop artists, Nice combined these ideas to make large-scale paintings of common, everyday objects in their most abstracted forms---flat images on neutral backgrounds painted without shadow or movement and devoid of context. These single image subjects from the late 1960s became the foundation of Nice's mature style and gave direction to his inspired predella paintings beginning in the mid 1970s. The predella panel format favored by Nice was first used during the Early Renaissance and featured small pictures placed under, or sometimes around the main altarpiece to provide more information about the central picture. For Nice, this format enabled him to add complex ideas and multiple meanings to his paintings.

Building on the idea of adding multiple images to a central theme, Nice turned to the totem pole traditions of the Northwest coastal tribes. In his totem paintings, Nice not only stacked his ideas, but he also liberated his paintings from traditional canvases by adding shaped canvases with open spaces. Closely related to the totem paintings are his Gaia paintings. Named for Gaia, the Greek goddess who created the living earth out of chaos, these works probably most directly reflect Nice's interest in art and the environment. These paintings portray site-specific places with images of associated flora and fauna contained within edges composed of images extracted from nature representing earth, fire, wind and water.

The next step for Nice was to eliminate the canvas and experiment with anodized aluminum cutouts of his iconic images. Nice continues to work in anodized aluminum using organic dyes, a technique developed at Black River Prints, a division of Northern Engraving in Sparta, Wisconsin. This new technique compliments Nice's lifelong interest in the formal elements of light in art.

As Don Nice moves into his sixth decade of painting, he remains enamored of experimentation and innovation. Nice's most recent paintings include star-shaped panels, an extension of the star motif commonly found in his work over the years. For Nice, the five points of the star symbolize the four elements, earth, fire, wind and water, while the fifth point represents gravity symbolized by an apple and a nod toward Sir Isaac Newton. These works have culminated in Nice's elimination of the traditional horizon line, a convention that reassures the eye's perception while contradicting the fact that the earth is round. Called spinners, these compositions are designed to be hung or spun in any direction, reminding us that we are all part of the larger universe.

Don Nice
A Brief Biography

Born in 1932, Don Nice grew up in California's San Joaquin Valley. As a boy, he was fascinated by his grandfather's stories of encounters with outlaws, cowhands,49ers, overland stagecoaches, and the lore of local train robbers. Nice's grandfather, a physician and gold miner, provided his family with the experience of living on the range, and Nice grew up wearing chaps and herding cattle, dodging rattlesnakes and setting out barbed wire. According to Nice, "I became acquainted with the world not by television, car, train, or jet, but from the saddle on a horse or the leather of my boots: slow, steady, and in a focused way in which survival could depend on your familiarity with the land." From this experience emerged Nice's innate love for the environment.

For Nice, however, life was never just about one thing. Encouraged by his grandfather and aunt, both amateur painters, he developed an interest in painting. Also a talented athlete, Nice earned a full four-year football scholarship to the University of Southern California. After graduation he taught art at the Andrew Jackson High School for Delinquent Boys for six months, before volunteering for the draft after the Korean War. He served for two years in the United States Army at Fort Ord on the California coast at Monterey. There he was a company-level illustrator and completed a twenty-four foot mural in the mess hall, while also teaching art at Monterey Peninsula College. He exhibited his work at the Carmel Art Center, where he was introduced to an important art collector Helen Potter Russell, who took an interest in his art. After his discharge from the army, he decided to study painting in Rome, Italy, on the GI Bill.

While living in Florence, he met many artists and went to Salzburg for the opportunity to study with Oskar Kokoschka (1886–1980). Nice recalls that, "Kokoschka taught me "how to see" and to "forget about making paintings and concentrate on painting."

"Open your eyes," Kokoschka would exclaim, "look at the light, the colors, the forms and spaces, and seize it all with your brush." To this day Nice recalls Kokoschka as "the biggest influence of my life." From Italy, Nice went to Paris and saw a major exhibition called *The New American Paintings* curated by Dorothy Miller from the Museum of Modern Art. Nice, excited by the work of Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock and the possibilities of Abstract Expressionism, returned to America. He moved to Minneapolis, married Sandra Smith, who he had met in Paris, and taught painting at the Minneapolis School of Art.

In 1962 at age thirty, Nice was accepted to the graduate school of painting at Yale University. Fellow students included Chuck Close, Rackstraw Downes, Janet Fish, Nancy Graves, Robert Mangold, Richard Serra and others. However, the greatest influence for Nice was Alex Katz, who encouraged his students "to be as inventive as possible, to be as informed about art history as possible, and know as much about your self as you can and get subject matter back into painting." Nice turned his attention to his own personal life experiences and his relationship with art, nature, culture and the environment to develop a distinctive painting style that has continued to evolve over the past forty years.

In 1964, Nice began a teaching career at the School of Visual Arts in New York City where he remained for twenty-four years. Nice has had over 60 solo exhibitions in galleries and museums throughout the world. His work is represented in over 70 collections including the Albany Institute of History & Art, Arnhems Museum, Holland, Art Gallery of Ontario, Canada, Art Institute of Chicago, Century Association, New York City, Jewish Museum, New York City, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Minneapolis Institute of At, Museum of Modern Art, New York City, National Museum of Art, Canberra, Australia, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art , New Paltz, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Whitney Museum of American Art, Yale University Art Gallery and more.

—Tammis K. Groft

Tammis K. Groft is Chief Curator
Albany Institute of History & Art

DON NICE:
Given and Taken Away

Before setting off on my journey by rail to Don Nice's studio, overlooking his beloved Hudson, I bought a book of poems by Sharon Olds, *The Unswept Room*. The trip proved to be too distracting for reading. There was the discussion across the aisle of a young priest's ordination; troubling headlines turned and noisily folded every which way on broadsheets; and fleeting views through the scarred windows of trackside refuse, skeletal remains of failed industry, winter-swathed boats, and shimmering flashes of the lustrous river.


Detail *The Unswept Floor*, 2nd century CE

It was not until I was headed back to Manhattan that I turned to my purchase, discovering, coincidentally, that I had had with me all along a remarkably suitable companion to my visit. The cover of the Olds volume pictures a detail, in color, of an ancient mosaic pavement. Identified by the modern sobriquet, *The Unswept Floor*, it displays the leftovers of a lavish banquet: fish-bones, snail and nut shells, chicken feet, lobster claws, fruit stems and pits, and a sampling of other stripped-clean remains. The mosaicist imposed on this debris a rigorous vision of order, assigning stature and importance to each fragment, far exceeding its actual lowly circumstances.

Approached as if by a portrait painter, each carapace, pit, and bone is afforded a distinct identity and vitality. Each has its own subtle shadow, reflected against an otherwise uninflected, essentially airless, field of miniscule tesserae. Accents of color, a prickly form here, a counterpoint of roundness there, form an overall composition that is highly structured and thought through, while retaining, as in a musical performance, elements of improvisation, accident, and spontaneity.

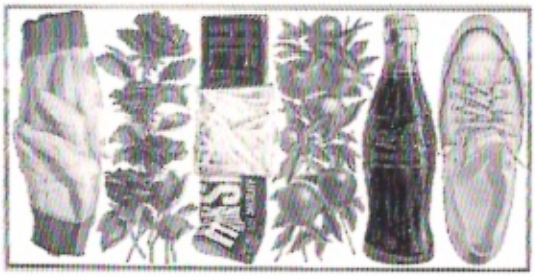
Following the practices of encyclopedists and naturalists, the painters and mosaicists of antiquity customarily identified, grouped together, and made pictures of families of objects and phenomena, whether they be winged creatures, four-legged beasts, flowering plants, or the indigestible leftovers of a feast. Their taxonomy left little to the imagination as to why members of a particular classification were placed together. The genus—animals, foodstuffs, mythological beings, or whatever—is self-evident.

Although groupings along similarly strict, empirically verifiable, lines occur in Don Nice's work, usually he forms far more complex constellations of abstract forms and representational images, juxtaposing things that have no immediately clear relationship to each other: wild animals, junk food, articles of clothing, fragments of abstract patterns, and other seemingly disjointed categories. Regardless of how inherently dissonant these images may be—animate versus inanimate, natural versus manufactured, furry versus scaley versus plastic, or abstract versus realistic—Nice manages to resolve

American Totem: Zigzag Cornucopia, 1981
Oil on canvas, 109 x 92 inches,
Courtesy Babcock Galleries

their discordance and bring visual calm and harmony to this otherwise noisy gathering of often wildly disparate elements. In the process, each unit, regardless of its independent nature, is made intensely vivid; some even assume a heroic stature. Nice's approach to the diversity of these images can be described as democratic. He refers to it as "making all the parts give themselves up to the whole."

Nice insists that he is concerned, foremost, with the formal qualities of each image: its edge, contours, a sliver of white peeking through a colossal cluster of grapes, the modulation of light across a surface. His formal preoccupations could be taken to mean that Nice's choice of subjects is arbitrary, that their combination is of no consequence or particular significance to him (or us), and that we are mistaken in our attempts to make more of them than what they are already, individually or as groupings. However, the painter's apparent detachment from the painted, his strong will toward order and objectivity, are deceptive. Try as he may to gain mastery over more chaotic impulses, his paintings nonetheless suggest a constrained fervor for each and every thing presented. The absence, generally, of readily observed nuances or clearly defined atmosphere and sense of place do not prevent the images themselves from being compelling, even disturbing. What makes them so?



American Predella Series: Valley Objects, 1983
Oil on canvas, 48 x 96 inches,
Collection of Philip Gelatt

Nice reports that images come to him from his dreams and are transposed into his pictures. If we tend to hardly question the oddly grouped constellations of images in his paintings, perhaps it is because we recognize in them the material of our own distinctly American dreams. Unlike the equally ethnocentric vocabulary of the European surrealists—the bowler hats, the French word fragments, brothel imagery, and souvenirs of war—these works conjure up archetypes arising from the American experience: buffalo and other totemic beasts, Kit-Kat candy bars, sneakers, Coke bottles, packaged cupcakes, and majestic landscapes.

In his dream studies Freud observed that the content of dreams usually expresses itself hieroglyphically, in picture puzzles. Providing an example of a rebus-like dream with incongruous images, "a house, upon whose roof there is a boat; then a single letter; then a running figure, whose head has been omitted, and so on," he comments on the tenden-

cy of the dream-work to suppress or conceal the emotional elements from waking life that originally provoked the dream. Passion is cooled down; daytime strife is reconfigured. The resulting dream imagery, drained of its underlying emotions, may appear deadpan or indifferent. Freud compares the becalmed atmosphere of a dream to "the peace of a deserted battlefield; no trace is left of the tumult of battle."

Gaia Predella 1, 1988, watercolor on paper 19 x 43 inches, Private Collection

In addition to the dream-like evocations of Nice's paintings, there is an ideological basis for his seemingly anomalous images and their unexpected combinations. Nice acknowledges his admiration for the writings of James Lovelock, whose work underscores the fragility of our planet's ecosystem and the risks to survival of seeing living things as compartmentalized and disconnected: "I see relationships in everything," Nice proclaims. "I have been familiar with James Lovelock's Gaia concept [named after the ancient goddess who created earth from chaos] that all living things and their natural environments are interconnected and form a self-evolving, self-regulating complete system."

Given these concerns and the provocative character of many of Nice's subjects—the bobcat, eagle, and striped bass, found together with mass-produced consumer goods and junk food—it is inevitable that his paintings be viewed as a form of social commentary. Many of these works contain a blending of melancholy and exaltation, promise and despair. A pathos of solitude surrounds even the most statuesque and heroic of Nice's subjects from the wild. Some appear nearly apparitional. Painted with diluted acrylics or thinned out oil paints, they fade and all but vanish before our eyes.

While his paintings may be viewed as celebrations of the wonders of nature, they can just as easily be seen as lamentations. Many incorporate structures, including predellas, adapted from earlier devotional altarpieces, The compositions of these works and their framing devices are not easily divorced from their historical associations with scenes of Christ's life and Passion. Laden with plush fruits and blossoming plant life, some of his paintings similarly recall the symbols of fecundity found in Christian iconography, where the viewer, momentarily seduced by

Hudson River Series: West Point View, Spring, 1984 watercolor on paper, 62¼ x 60¼ inches, Private Collection

signs of fruitful life surrounding a young mother and her baby, retains an underlying awareness and dread of their ill-fated destiny. The exaltation of nature and its ominous juxtaposition with the detritus of contemporary culture are intentionally prophetic. The timelessness of nature is threatened by the fervor for consumption; its survival can no longer be taken for granted.

The uncanny relationship of *The Unswept Room* to my visit with Don Nice went beyond the mosaic fragment on its cover. Olds begins one of her poems in that volume, "The Given," with a quotation from another poet, Mark Doty:

> *That we would continue to be, and to be together, had about it the unquestioned nature of a given, the tacit starting point from which the rest of our lives proceeded.*

In her poem Olds writes about an experience of her childhood in which a close friend and that girl's mother both died from inhaling lead paint they had used to spray their Christmas tree in a closed garage.

Earth Predella, 2004, detail (one of ten works), organic dyes on anodized aluminum, 24 x 16 inches, Private Collection

Nice's brother Hubert, a botanist, whose specialty was hybrid roses, died when he was 39, from inhaling insecticides.

Coming just at a time when Nice was recommitting himself and his work to nature, Hubert's death undermined his confidence in the "unquestioned nature" of the given. Returning home from his brother's funeral, Nice looked out at the Hudson and pondered the fate of the polluted river and its endangered striped bass.

—Jeffrey Hoffeld
Woodstock, New York

Jeffrey Hoffeld teaches medieval art at SUNY New Paltz.

DON NICE – Artist's Statement

Though I continue to discover visual possibilities as a modern artist, the following statement describes the development of my work from 1945 to the present. This statement was not thought out logically or planned in any rational manner. This is fitting, for I have evolved as an artist by acting on my intuition and searching for new images in my pre-consciousness. It is only now that I can look back and map the process. Important art breaks new ground and does not merely put new content on old forms or, vice versa, new forms on old content. The artist makes experience visible to the non-artist, helps others see the wonders of our planet and our existence. The earth is changing. We are changing. Wayne Thiebaud once said to me, "You cannot make end runs to create art." Creating art takes time – but the rewards are significant.

On Landscape – Toward Earthscapes

What I first thought of as a process separate from my main body of work has become the central issue in my painting. The landscapes started in the mid-1940s – my aunt, Midge Wieman, was a watercolor painter and she taught me the basics of the medium. From then on, whether in my studio or on travels, I always worked from the landscape. A struggle against the Rennaissance inventions of illusionistic space and the horizon line changed my direction. I was introduced to Cezanne and his flat overall surfaces, and I began to understand modern art. When I was a student in the 1950s, most young painters were trying to emulate the breakthrough that Pollock and others had discovered – the idea (consistent with the overall surge of Abstract Expressionism) that a painting is an object and has its own formal rules. When I finished my army service, I went to Italy for three years and worked on abstract landscapes. My inspiration at that time was the Italian painter Afro Basaldella, but a turning point came from reading an account about the American painter Arthur Dove. At the time of the Armory Show, Dove was asked how he thought his abstractions of nature related to European art. He replied that he did not abstract nature, but extracted the forces of nature. This led me to focus on the natural elements of Earth, Fire, Wind, Water – and now Gravity. I wanted to move away from the horizon line and the axis mundi – to explore and depict not a scene or description of nature, but a place with force and power. My landscapes turned into Earthscapes – new landscapes through which I hope to raise people's consciousness that we are a part of a larger world.

On Still Life – Toward the Single Image

I am an artist who believes that a work of art consists of two main ingredients, form and content – or how we organize a composition and what subject we select to put in that composition. From the era of cave paintings to the present day, civilization has been producing images of things, but a painting also has formal elements – lines, planes, masses, color, movement, and light. The Abstract Expressionists chose to eliminate the content and concentrate on the formal elements, creating the idea of painting as object. My reaction to this was to "break the formalist mold" by concentrating on painting single images on a large scale. This was a complete rejection of the prevailing modes of abstraction and non-objectivity. In the 1960s, I started painting ordinary objects – coffee cups, ice cream cones, candy bars – and that began my reinterpretation of still life painting. The large single objects I used came from the world of food. I eliminated any reference to figure and ground by eliminating the shadows and painting on a neutral white surface. I wanted no background, only the object. I also made the object as large as possible on the canvas so that it touched the edges. This gave shape to the white areas. I always prefer to work directly from the object being painted, so the process was to do a drawing from life on a grid. I would then transfer the drawing to a large canvas using the grid as a guide. In working with a single object, the traditional meaning of that object is not the issue. The issue is to give the object what Clive Bell called "significant form" – for the thing to take on a life of its own, beyond literal interpretation. It becomes decoded, transformed, meaningful. The figures in my work always have an iconic cultural reference. The West Point cadet and the Western cowboy – just like bears, buffalos, bulls, wolves, and other animals – have been reintroduced into our contemporary culture as sports teams, automobiles, towns, etc. However, they are always the same image from painting to painting – and in this way also refer only to themselves.

Beyond the Single Image – Predellas and Totems

The next progression in the still life genre was to move away from unified illusionistic space or traditional tabletop compositions – to create a completely modern still life. In an Italian Renaissance painting, the central figural composition is often surrounded with series of panels that help to tell the story being presented. These panels are called predellas. My step was to take a series of isolated images and line them up, left to right, against a neutral white background to create a still life. The content of these works can range over history, for example, a Coke bottle in place of a Chianti bottle, or a sneaker rather than a boot by Van Gogh. These objects from the everyday world come forward in a democratic manner. There can be a theme involved in the selection of the objects, making them depict a state or a town, a sports event or even an individual portrait. In the portraits, for example, I work with the subject to be painted and arrive at a series of five or six objects that stand in for (or are metaphors for) the person. This can range from their favorite food, clothing, sport – or even personal possessions. In most cases the individual objects have no narrative, but in their collective inter-relationship become

works of art. The Totems had their beginnings during a three-year stay in Italy spent visiting and copying Renaissance altarpieces. By definition, totems are "stacked information." They are part landscape, part still life, and part figure combined vertically. Swags of fruits and vegetables surround and touch these classic references to art and history stacked one atop the other. In the painting *Zigzag Cornucopia* of 1981, I finally cut out the objects, making the wall itself a ground for the painting. Within the Totems, disparate elements become one image. When this process is successful, the whole becomes more than the sum total of its parts. This is the mystery of art.

Beyond Earthscapes – Starscapes and Spinners

With the Earthscapes, the elements of Earth, Fire, Wind and Water are represented, but there is a reduction of imagery. With each unit, a direct link is made between the iconic object and the abstract element – a fish, for example, comes to represent the natural element of Water. The movement is not vertical (as is the case with the totems), but circular with the landscape in the center (generally on a free-form shape). The Starscapes mark a progression beyond the Earthscapes. In my search for a new landscape, the problems are not restricted to the traditional horizon line, but can also be found in representations on the classic rectangular-shaped canvas. To break from this past convention, I have used a triangle, a tondo, and freeforms. The idea of painting a landscape on the shape of a star came from a dream – the star is a classic form that has no specific reference and can stand as a shape on its own. Out of the Starscapes, the Spinners emerged. The Spinners have five appendages corresponding to the five elements of Earth, Fire, Wind, Water, and Gravity. They are constructed to turn when suspended from the ceiling. Placed in the air and rotating, the Spinners form another alternative to the traditional horizon line within conventional landscape painting. Suspended and turning, they reflect a distinctly contemporary orientation – a feeling of reflective floating and an experience of personal revelation. They are no longer illusions (views through window frames or figures against a ground), but metaphors addressing a relationship to the earth and to the universe.