Don Nice: Realist with an Edge

As a painter of recognizable objects, Don Nice operates within the shifting and relativistic ground of modern realism, a tradition that traces its sources to Courbet but has been redefined and reconstituted anew by subsequent generations of figurative artists like himself. In a current context, the artist who works from the object or from nature (in the largest sense of the word, meaning the life about us) is not necessarily, or even usually, striving for a realism of maximum verisimilitude, as, for instance, in a trompe l'oeil painting. In wave after wave of twentieth-century art, the artist-as-innovator (realist and abstract alike) has consistently turned tradition on its head as a way of breaking out of stale constructs of esthetic visualization. As Roman Jakobson notes in his seminal article from 1921, "On Realism in Art," illusionism—the faithfulness to something in the external world that defined nineteenth-century academic realism—has given way to new visual formulations that eventually "condition the very act of our visual perception." He goes on to say that

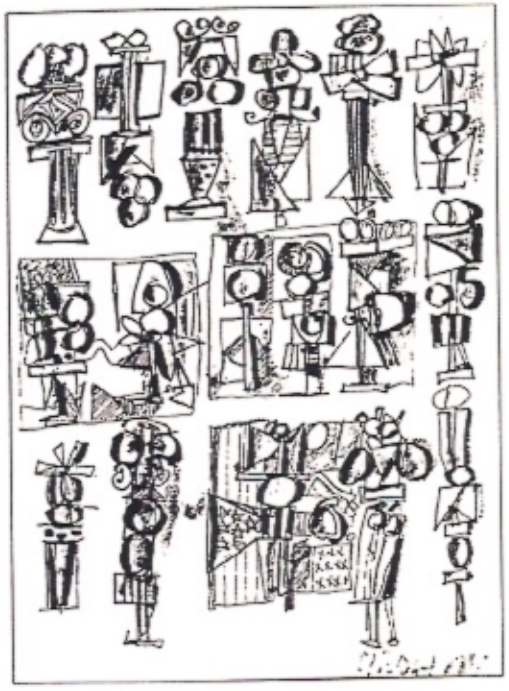
> *the painted image becomes an ideogram, a formula to which the object portrayed is linked by contiguity. Recognition becomes instantaneous. We no longer see a picture. The ideogram needs to be deformed.*[1]

Painting from the object is less about the object and more about perception, syntax, or formal visual structures (composition, contiguity, space, line, color, etc.) that hold the objective elements in view before us.

Don Nice came of age as an artist in the early 1960s, and his art was forged in the nexus between abstraction and the new realism of Pop Art.[2] The present exhibition, which features work from the past twelve years, allows us to examine Nice's art in the light of the enduring esthetic concerns that have engaged him for nearly four decades, namely, his own formal syntax for revisioning reality in new and startling ways: figure-ground relationships, compositional structure, the translation of recognizable objects into icons, and the subsequent iconoclastic deformation of those same objects.

Nice's early mentors ran the gamut of movements from those heady times of the late '50s and early '60s. They included Oscar Kokoschka (with whom he briefly studied in 1958), de Kooning and Pollock, Rothko and Gorky, Hartley and Matta, and a group of pioneering younger colleagues with whom he studied in the M.F.A. program at Yale that included Nancy Graves, Brice Marden, Chuck Close, and Janet Fish. With Pollock he shares an obsession with the totem as an avenue to the pre-conscious sources of primal, creative energy. De Kooning he admired for evolving the single, child-like mark in which shape, color, and movement merge in one monumental image. The fact that the work of de Kooning especially resonates with Nice is understandable since among the Abstract Expressionists, de Kooning found ways to let the figurative element remain beneath the overriding gesture of the painted surface. This same play between gesture and figure persists as a defining character of Nice's own art.

From Oscar Kokoschka, Nice acquired some important working habits. He recounts that he settled in Europe in the late 1950s with the intention of pursuing his art studies and career. In 1958 he and a friend applied for



(Figure 1)
Pen and ink
Sketchbook drawings
Collection of the artist

and were accepted as students in Kokoschka's large figure painting class in Salzburg, Austria. With refugees from the Hungarian Revolution (eager for any kind of work) hired as models, Kokoschka's classes consisted of one model after another assuming a pose for fifteen minutes, changing position for another fifteen minutes, and so on throughout the session. The students started fresh studies with each shift of the pose. The method demanded a rapid working process intended to develop the hand and eye while suppressing the tendency to analyze each mark. The students ended the day exhausted but with a pile of paper containing an enormous variety of figure studies.

The point was not to make a product but to experience the process of rendering a figure in space with just color, no lines. Kokoschka prescribed inexpensive paper, Pelican watercolor paints, and certain types of brushes. (Nice laughingly recalls that Kokoschka once caught him using a pencil to sketch and then filling in with watercolor and made him start over.) What was important, according to Kokoschka's instruction, was to push the "on" button, get the hand going, and find the "heartbeat" of the pose or gesture.

This emphasis on process, the literal action of painting, corresponded, of course, with what was simultaneously happening in New York—as Nice coincidentally discovered in Paris in 1959 when he saw an exhibition of Abstract Expressionist art organized by the Museum of Modern Art and touring Europe at the time. Having grown up in Visalia and Fresno, California, and having spent his college years primarily on the football field for the University of Southern California, Nice had little awareness as a young artist of what was springing up on the New York art scene. The Paris exhibition was a revelation to him—a revelation of scale and of a whole new way of painting that emerged not from preliminary drawings but directly from paint to canvas with incredible energy and immediacy. Impelled by the exhibition to further explore the work of the Abstract Expressionists, Nice soon abandoned his plans to live in Europe and returned to the United States.

Over the years Nice has continued the practice, acquired during the intense summer sessions with Kokoschka, of constantly drawing, making studies in watercolor, acrylic, pen, and pencil. One ten-foot-high wall of his studio is lined with row upon row of sketchbooks and journals. Literally every page of these sketchbooks is dense with marks of all kinds: pen drawings, watercolor sketches, collages, and small abstract and figurative designs, some of which are repeated in serial fashion across the page (Figure 1). In addition, especially in the early journals, there are pages of revealing thoughts on esthetics and commentary on artists. The sketchbooks divulge a working process he uses to this day—what he calls a "fast track" of extensive preliminary work. The trick is to keep the mind quiet by not evaluating so that when "it" happens—when something of significance emerges—there is an immediate rightness to it. Early on Nice discovered that the fluidity of watercolor gave him a certain confidence, an awareness that something other than the rational mind (what the French poets called "quelque chose d'autre") was guiding the hand, allowing color, shape, and movement to happen simultaneously—which is what he admired in de Kooning's and Pollock's work.

Out of this fast track of fecund primary work Nice started seeing

Opposite

(Figure 3)
GRAPES, 1976
Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 72 inches
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota

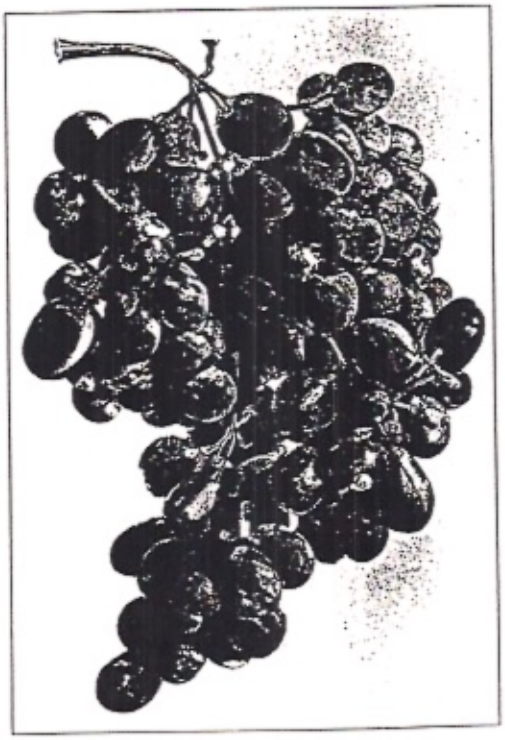
Things—actual bits of figuration that persistently emerged in his abstract work, despite efforts to suppress them. Eventually, instead of resisting the object/subject, he began to develop its very Thingness, to nurture it and allow it to emerge into the foreground of imagery. He began to investigate how to use things, how to position them, how to see them in new figure/ground relationships. Like his realist contemporaries of the '60s and '70s, Nice wanted to take into consideration a perceptual world radicalized by commercial design, flattened and layered, scaled up or down with no reference point, expanded as a result of the panoramic viewpoint of air and space travel, and disjointed and reified by video and print media. These everyday visual experiences demanded a new kind of objecthood and begged the esthetic question, "where do you put the bunch of grapes?" If you put them on a plate, you go back in history and recede into illusionism. How do you present these mundane and familiar things of everyday experience so as to revitalize realism and yet retain the liberating influence of Abstract Expressionism with its revelation of the primacy of process and gesture?

It was at this point that Nice's California roots also began to reassert themselves. His father managed a Sunkist packing house, and the ubiquitous Sunkist labels on every crate of fruit—the commercial art of Nice's youth—were imprinted on his brain and eventually formed the basis of his initial revisioning of the object (Figure 2), just as the Campbell's Soup can entered the domain of art under Andy Warhol's hand. Nice, however, saw himself as somewhat apart from the Pop Art mainstream, despite his use of popular culture subject matter. For instance, he looked to Renaissance sources to re-present the subjects of his paintings. Artists like Mantegna and Crivelli presented their madonnas and saints in ways that intrigued him. They often framed the central figure in the altarpiece so as to defy the very architectural illusionism of the space in which the madonnas and saints were situated. Nice also borrowed the convention of the Renaissance predella, using it, as we shall see, not to tell a story, but to reinforce the content by encasing the object in a highly structured framework.

Along with others like Chuck Close, Nice began to focus on scale as a way to revision objecthood. Sometimes overscaled, like the nine-foot *Grapes* (Figure 3) or the six-foot *Turnip* (both 1967), sometimes life-size, like *Gorilla* (1970) or *Buffalo* (1975) (Figure 4), these paintings force on the viewer a dissonance of size that challenges convention and expectation. Striving for a totally anti-compositional way of giving the object presence, Nice depicted objects in sharp focus placed against a flat neutral ground, endowing them with heraldic presence. Warhol's approach to depiction purposely suppressed the hand of the artist in a mechanical silkscreen technique. But underneath a similarly straightforward treatment of the object (enlarged scale; a single object against a neutral background), Nice retained a brushy, painterly touch. He has never entirely let go of his expressionist legacy, and his gestural stroke allies him more with Wayne Thiebaud than with Warhol or James Rosenquist. The viewer sees the object in sharp focus because the large scale masks the brushy stroke.

The simplicity of the single object paintings belies the prodigious amount of preparatory work leading up to the final piece, the working process that comes to light in the sketchbooks. To render each of the large animals (gorilla, steer, horse, buffalo, wolf, etc.) accurately, Nice depended on traditional techniques: close observation of real models, countless

(Figure 2)
STARKIST, 1962
Oil on canvas, 54 x 36 inches
Collection of the artist

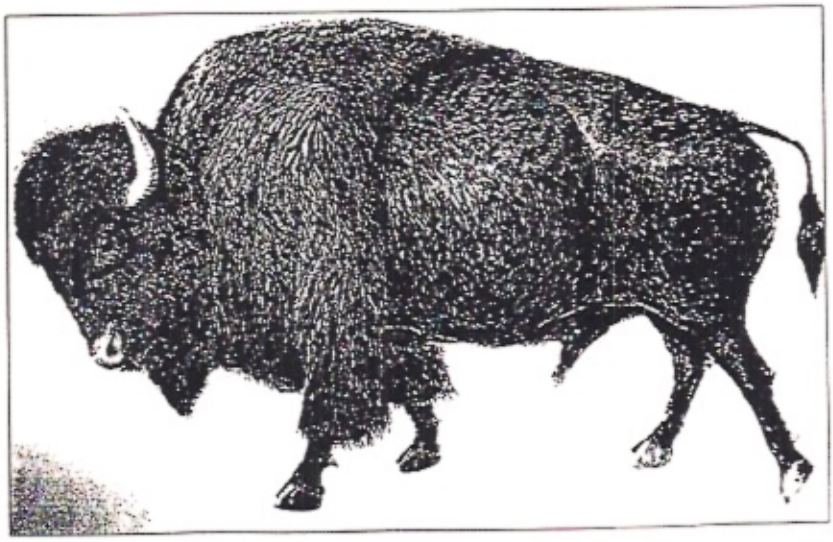


sketches, anatomical drawings, color studies, and finally the full-scale enlargement using the traditional grid and ratio method.

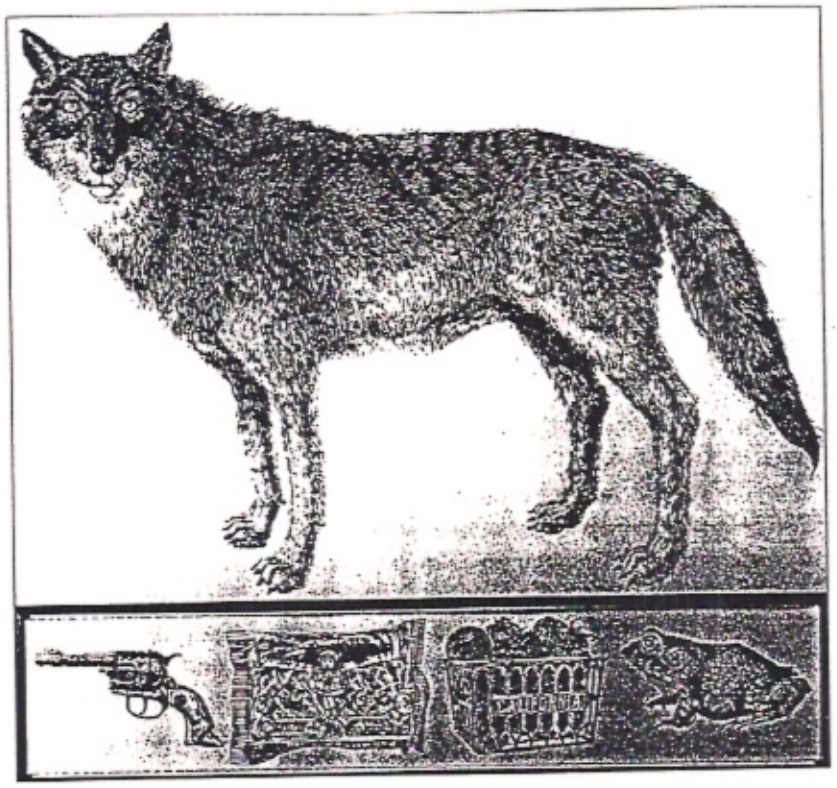
Gorilla, for instance, involved the study of the stuffed specimen in New York's Museum of Natural History. Preparatory work for *Buffalo* (which was executed for the 1976 Bicentennial Exhibition sponsored by the U.S. Department of the Interior) fills an entire sketchbook executed during a specially arranged visit to a buffalo ranch in Pierre, South Dakota in 1976. The huge sketchbook is replete with buffalo images of all types: studies of legs, hoofs, horns, and heads; color washes with notations about specific hues in various parts of the hide; witty bits of buffalo ephemera like a paper doll buffalo, a buffalo nickel, old postcards and prints, hotel receipts collaged with drawings, related or unrelated advertisement images on things like restaurant sugar wrappers; and tiny, exquisite landscape renderings of the herd scattered over the flat Dakota prairie. As is the case with many artists who are prolific draughtsmen, Nice's extensive preliminary material is largely unknown to audiences but contains a rich, hidden treasure documenting the creative process. Perusing the sketchbooks we feel like voyeurs, watching the artist let loose with uninhibited freedom as his ideas evolve before our eyes.

The large-scale animal paintings from the 1970s carried forward Nice's earlier figure/ground concern; the artist emphasized their objecthood by positioning them against a white or neutral background. Gradually, he introduced a new structural device (or syntactic element), the predella. The featured animal, reduced in size, became contextualized and shared the space with other floral and faunal elements (Figure 5). Usually, however, the context provided by the predella objects was disjointed or vaguely associative, perhaps even unrelated in meaning to the main image. Familiar objects appeared again and again in the predella: depictions of other small animals (a frog, snake, robin); items from popular culture (a bag of candy, jingle bells, a gun); flowers or vegetables (a rose or a bunch of radishes).

Once emblazoned to full scale by the artist, many of the animals joined his basic vocabulary of object-forms. He has literally reproduced them over and over again, sometimes from variously sized metal templates. Extracting the quintessential buffalo-ness or wolf-ness from the original image, the template takes center stage in new compositional contexts, transformed



(Figure 4)
BUFFALO, 1975
Watercolor on canvas, 82 x 136 inches
Collection of Graham Gund, Boston, Massachusetts

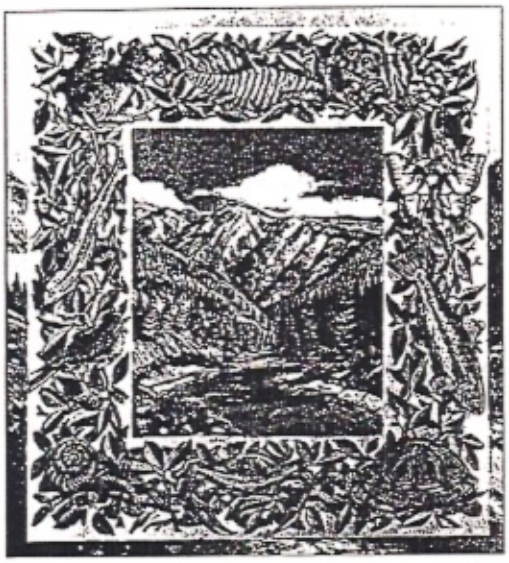


(Figure 5)
WOLF, WESTERN SERIES, AMERICAN PREDELLA #5
1975
Acrylic on canvas, watercolor on paper
65 1/2 x 70 inches
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Gift of Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz, 1992

into American icons (hence the derivation of the most recent series of American Icon paintings, sometimes abbreviated "A.I." and subtitled). The animals are the main event, invariably placed at the top of his uniformly vertical canvases, but as a result of their drastic simplification and repetition, the point is no longer the identity of Buffalo or Wolf, but the contextual situation established by the other structural or objective elements.

Early on, Nice embellished these animal kingdoms with borders and elaborate floral and fruit swags (Figure 6) inspired by Renaissance frescos and altarpieces such as Mantegna's *Madonna della Vittoria,* in which the Virgin and Child are enmeshed in a luscious garland of fruits and vines. But the artist also continues to be highly aware of American folk art traditions (his home is full of delightful folk art, pop culture objects, and of course fine art by his friends and colleagues). One thinks of the framing devices around some versions of Edward Hicks's *Peaceable Kingdom,* and the garland and cornucopia arrangements of folk art still lifes where the fruits and greenery move off the plate and table, weaving into a decorative motif that frames the whole picture. In Nice's work, the swags, which repeat the color tonalities from the dominant objects, are meant to enliven the extremities of the composition, and reinforce the energy of the main event.

First scale, then repetition and vertical placement, have been the dominant mechanisms the artist uses to impress these images on the viewer. Virtually every painting in this exhibition includes a small version of one of the large mammals Nice originally did in life-size scale. Now, rather than isolated and magnified as in the earlier work, the animals appear at the top or center of a three-part structure. This structure—the totem—has become, since the early 1980s, his primary compositional device. Nice sees the totem as "stacked information," a syntax for organizing images. As an art form in



(Figure 6)
CORNUCOPIA LANDSCAPE WITH ANIMALS, 1984
Oil on canvas, 50 x 44 inches
Pacific Bell, Los Angeles

native cultures, the totem pole serves as an emblematic representation of character or family lineage. Over the years, Marsden Hartley's emblematic paintings have been an important source for Don Nice, especially Hartley's series from 1914–15 depicting Native American themes. Echoes of the triangular format favored by Hartley became one of the basic configurations of Nice's totem paintings.

In the mid-1970s, in part inspired by his move to a lovely, sprawling eighteenth-century home overlooking the river at Garrison-on-Hudson (where he still lives), the context for the large animals became much more explicit with the incorporation of specific and accurately rendered landscape scenes. At first landscape made its appearance only occasionally as a predella section (Figure 7), but soon scenic views became the central image in the basic totem structure, around which grew the other floral, faunal, and ephemeral elements.

Nice experienced landscape in an intimate way during his youth in rural California, where he packed mules (as his father had before him) for sporting and recreational expeditions into Yosemite, herded cattle in the summers during college, and roamed the countryside in the company of his aunt, from whom he learned the rudiments of watercoloring. The transition in 1970 from New York City to the countryside of Putnam County, with its lush rolling meadows and steep rocky highlands bordering the river, was an auspicious move for Nice. The land was probably deep within his psyche, waiting for this opportunity to reemerge. In fact, among the first sites to appear in the predella scenes are those of the Hudson River environs near his home. Undoubtedly his work would have taken a different turn had he not moved there.

As a gifted watercolorist with a keen eye and sensitive touch, Nice continues the habit, drummed into him from Kokoschka, of keeping his hand and his creative energies flowing through constant sketchbook studies and countless drawings. In addition, he has executed extensive finished and exhibited watercolor series, such as the eighty sketches from his 1985 raft and boat voyage down the Hudson River (from its source at Tear of the Clouds Lake to New York City), which were shown at the Albany Institute of History and Art in 1992. He relishes the watercolors of John Singer Sargent (especially the exquisite yellow ochre washes he used to prime the paper). Sargent was, in Nice's view, invariably right on in his watercolors, almost to his own detriment. With a trace of regret, Nice acknowledges that the world doesn't need any more Sargent watercolors, beautiful as they are. The need is for risk-taking, the courage to paint dissonance, or create a new visual harmony out of dissonance. What Nice most admired about de Kooning was his ability to paint the perfect picture and then do something drastic to it (cut it up; paint over it) to shock himself—and his viewer—into something new, some re-visioning of reality. Skilled as Nice is as a landscape watercolorist, he distrusts that facility and recognizes the need to address something larger than the landscape itself, to know it and present it in a way that is larger than life.

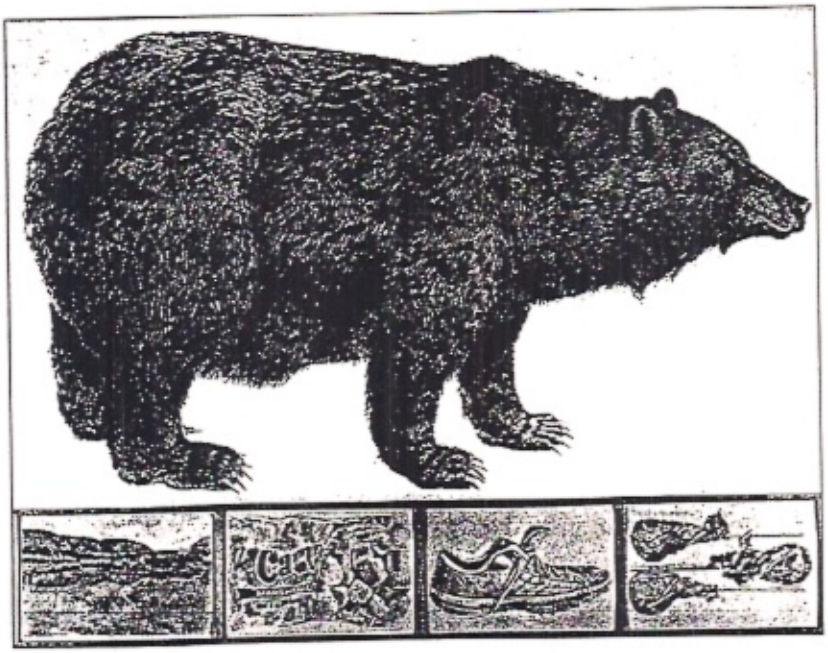
Part of the risk-taking involves lifting the landscape out of its cultural context, just as Sunkist lifted the citrus tree out of its San Joachin Valley landscape, simplified it, and recoded it into a commercial label. Jarring the landscape loose from its esthetic or sentimental roots (especially as communicated through the seductive medium of watercolor), Nice contrives to

place it within an apparently arbitrary superstructure. He takes familiar landscapes fraught with classic associations of history and sense of place (Yosemite; Moro Rock; the Hudson River Highlands; Walker Cove, Alaska), depicts them with an appropriately distant perspective, and positions them at the center of a totemic composition. The effect is an odd combination of picture-postcard perfection and incongruity, a challenge to our assumptions about the place and use of nature in art and in our everyday experience. Defying the traditional illusionism of landscape painting, Nice does not allow or invite us to enter or walk through these spaces. Like the animals, the landscapes are extractions from nature, emblematic and significant, but not meant to be awe- or emotion-inspiring.

This work is all about conveyance: how to convey or carry the landscape, along with a collection of animal, vegetable, and man-made objects, using a single or connected lattice of geometrical shapes. Objects and places are heavily mediated by an array of structural devices: the early labelistic format; the predella; compartmentalized framing systems; and, most recently, the Earth Cart. The complex relationships between these structural elements and the things portrayed have been the raison d'etre of Nice's art since the 1960s. At its simplest, the structure is rectangular, with perhaps only two divisions: the main section, and a bottom unsegmented predella strip, as in the earliest work in this exhibition, *Earth Totem II* (1985). pl 1

The *Tree of Life Series X* (1986) is another of the more simply constructed totem pictures, consisting this time of three parts: a predella (man-made objects); a central circle (landscape, this time Indian Brook Falls, near Nice's home); and a semi-circle (bear) at the top. The tripartite composition is united largely by means of the color-field wash of elemental landscape hues that are also repeated in the mundane objects (gloves, canteen, bells, and binoculars) at the lower extremity. These animals or man-made objects in the predella section intensify the primal, elemental import of the work through association with the senses, in this case, touch, taste, sound, and sight. pl 2

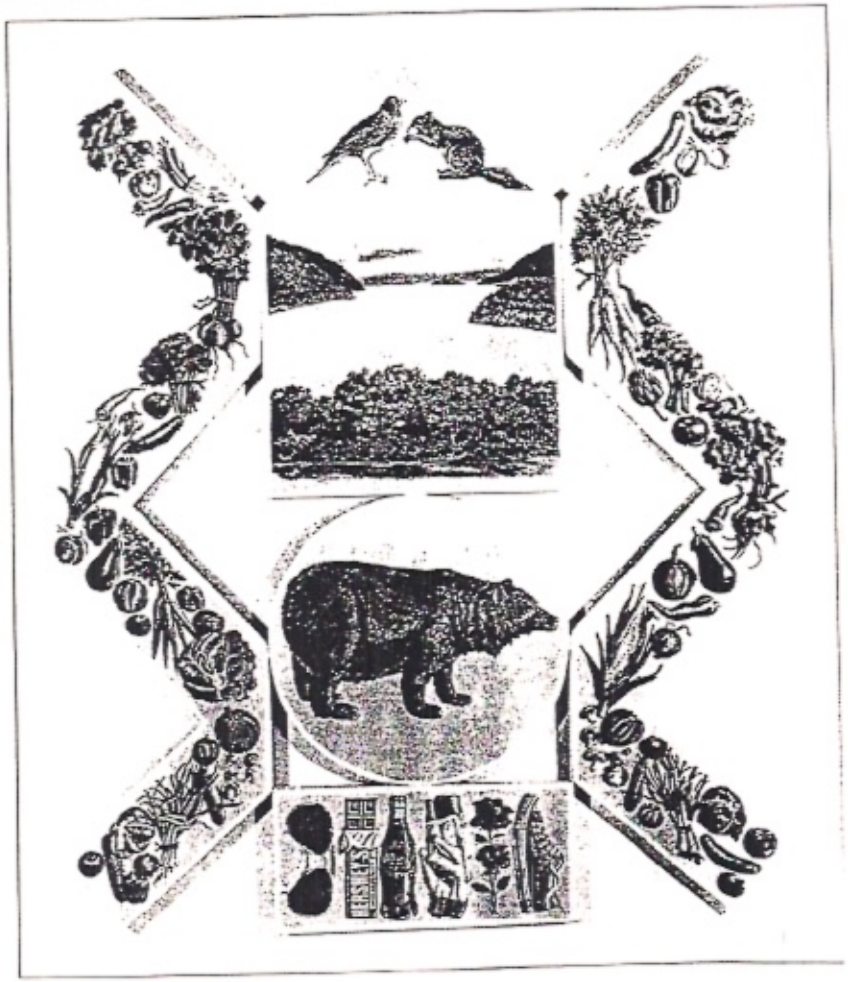
Over the years Nice has also played with shaped canvases, as in *American*



(Figure 7)
HUDSON RIVER SERIES:
BEAR, AMERICAN PREDELLA #3, 1975
Oil on canvas, 73 x 94 inches
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University,
Waltham, Massachusetts

Totem: Zig-Zag Cornucopia (1981) (Figure 8) and more recent works like
pl 16 *American Icon (Red Zag)* (1995). The ubiquitous totem, with its bottom-to-top hierarchy of subjects, is inextricably linked with the structure, though in recent years the surrounding shapes have taken on a life of their own, almost dwarfing the central totem motif.

Complicating and complementing the basic compositional structure is a wide variety of internal framing devices, beginning in the early 1980s with the elaborate garlanded swags festooned with fruits, vegetables, flowers, greenery, and the occasional snail, turtle, or other creature. The frames are integrally related coloristically or thematically with the images portrayed. In
pl 3 *Western Totem II: Coyote* (1986), for instance, the sage and sand tonalities of the desert landscape are reformulated in the exquisite, diamond-shaped rim through which we see the vista. The outer rectangle repeats the shimmering yellow-orange from the streak of gold light above the mountains. In this case, as in numerous others, the color in the framework around the totem functions like a recurring poetic device evoking the four elements: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water—those same ineffable elements summoned by Pollock in his mythic action paintings or captured in Charles Burchfield's watercolor landscapes. As with the earlier swags, these rims of elemental forces are a translation of the energy of the landscape itself into the compressed area of the painted frame. Others before him in both folk and twentieth-century art (notably John Marin and Marsden Hartley) have also



(Figure 8)
AMERICAN TOTEM: ZIG-ZAG CORNUCOPIA, 1981
Oil on canvas, 108 x 92 inches
Collection of the artist

used the painted frame for decorative purposes or to reassert the dynamic forces at work in the main event of the canvas. *Earth Totem III* (1987) is the most architectonic of the internal frames, with transitions from black to grey to white suggesting corners and edges and with triangles that mimic marble surfaces. pl 4

In the Gaia series of the late '80s, such as number XI, *Moro Rock*, the framework resembles a metal armature, aluminum grey in color, a thin cubistic structure (like a hollow, two-dimensional David Smith sculpture) to carry the three components. *Star Totem: Blue Swirl, Circle Totem* (1990), though still a wall piece, is no longer paint on canvas but a sculptural medium, cast aluminum. And, starting in 1991 with the Earth Cart series, the fixed armature becomes mobile as the whole composition whimsically takes off on two little wheels that replace the usual base of the totem. Along with this implied mobility, the composition shifts radically asymmetrical, and the large schematic patterns of swirls and zags overtake in prominence the more representational totem elements. The painted surface is no longer translucent oil or watercolor washes, but opaque and heavy. The abstract or semi-abstract shapes, separated by thick black borders, are less rendered, more flatly painted than, for instance, in the Gaia series. In works like *Earth Totem (Dark Ledges)* (1993), and *American Icon (Red Zag)* (1995), the totem objects and the surrounding elements have become increasingly schematized. Beak-like red zags, blue-black wavy stripes, gold streaks, and blue and white modulated curves are playful landscape and animal hieroglyphs that engulf the totem images. pl 12 pl 16

Though solidly grounded in a realist tradition, Nice nevertheless relies on a working process that taps into the kind of preconscious state described by Jacques Maritain as a paradoxically intelligent awareness of "the hidden workings of an immense and primal preconscious life."[3] For instance, in Nice's view, Gauguin was too preoccupied with analyzing exactly what van Gogh was up to, whereas van Gogh himself was responding directly to his inner sensibility, his preconscious intuitions. Using his journal and sketchbooks now, just as he did at the beginning of his career, Nice is continually exercising the hand in order to liberate the preconscious flow of images, gathering the bits of information, and responding to the heartbeat of living things. "The artist," he observes, "is like a radio receiver. Somehow, the more work you do and the more you are open to yourself, the more these little gifts come through. I'm very much on the edge of illustration and on the edge of depiction, but if I get that element, that light into a painting, it becomes another matter entirely." By priming himself with a continual flow of work, the artist places himself in a state of readiness—an intelligent awareness that lets the "little gifts" of preconscious creativity come through.

Speaking of Gustave Courbet's portrait of *Proudhon and His Family* (1865–67), Linda Nochlin describes it as "rich in information, not messages." Details of the philosopher's character and appearance, his political views and family values, are not communicated by virtue of some superimposed meaning, but simply and directly in terms of the things in the painting: Proudhon's shoes, the wrinkle of his proletarian blouse, the somewhat soiled sweater underneath.[4] As an heir to Courbet's realism, Don Nice likewise is not particularly interested in painting that is fraught with hidden meaning. After all, he says with a characteristic twinkle in his eye, no one would ask Cézanne, "What does this orange *mean*?" Rather, Nice presents

us with mundane objects from everyday experience or with familiar scenes and animals from our environment. Giving them to us as information, conveyed by the formal disciplines he exploits—the way he lays down paint, the way he uses shape and edge, scale and color—he allows us to decode the information and reinvent our own perceptions. Nice denies that his purpose is to propagandize about environmental issues like endangered species or wilderness preservation. However, his appropriation of compositional devices from both indigenous and Christian sources, and his repetition and prominent placement of a single large mammal or a landscape in every work requires us to re-view and think deeply about nature and our part in it.

In discussing the Proudhon portrait, Nochlin further points out that the linking of images by sheer contiguity is the fundamental principle of nineteenth-century realist art. Opposed to Romanticism or Symbolism, which invest heavily in metaphor and symbol, realist painting relies on the concrete, the accuracy of observed things. The work of Don Nice is likewise anchored in the concrete; his subjects are the stuff of our contemporary society and world, and they come to us as discrete but contiguous icons, linked as bits of information through formal composition. But what he wants to do most of all is to make paintings that have an edge to them, that jolt him (and us) out of comfortable esthetic assumptions. The evolution we see taking place in the works from the present exhibition is part of the artist's constant effort to find the dissonance that hones a new edge to his art and brings us to a new understanding, not of content, per se, but of relationship: our relationship to our world, its spaces, and its inhabitants.

Gail R. Scott
Presque Isle, Maine
August 1997

1 Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 21.

2 I am indebted to the artist for his consideration and hospitality during the two-day interview I had with him in June, 1997 in preparation for this essay.

3 Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*. New York: Meridian Books, 1955, pp. 67–68.

4 Linda Nochlin, *Realism*. Baltimore Penguin Books, 1971, p. 182.