

FAR NORTH: INTERVIEW WITH BEAU CAREY

As a culmination of a recent winter residency in Denali National Park, *Far North* marks Beau Carey's second exhibition at Goodwin Fine Art in Denver, CO. This recent offering showcases a group of exquisitely painted arctic environments that highlight contemporary themes of globalization, environmental concerns and the variety of constructs that shape our perceptions of landscape. No stranger to the harsh conditions of the northern-most hemisphere, Carey's inclusion in the Arctic Circle Residency in 2012 prompted an interest in coastal surveying and profiling, a theme he hopes to continue next year during a residency at Rabbit Island, a remote, 91-acre forested island on Lake Superior three miles east of Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula. I recently caught up with Carey to discuss his work. — Claude Smith, Albuquerque/Santa Fe Contributor



Beau Carey | Batholith, 2014, oil on canvas, 40 x 46 inches; image courtesy the artist

Claude Smith: Much of your work begins in the field: lots of wandering, careful observation and plein air painting. How important is painting-as-documentation to your process? Do you also take photos to review in your studio after the fact?

Beau Carey: That initial documentation process is essential, and both photography and painting play a role. Field painting is about an engagement with a particular place over a length of time. It invites a sustained concentration and way of looking where larger ideas emerge. It's a type of documentation but a type that doesn't function like a photograph. I worked a small painting under the Northern Lights in Denali this winter but that painting is useful not just because of the visual information it affords but in how it communicates to me other non-visual information. Some of that information is autobiographical; I look at that painting and my fingers hurt with phantom pain from the cold. I see how tired and excited I was. I remember what I had for dinner that night. But more importantly I see seeds of ideas that were forming at the time. Ideas of heavy things made light, large things being hidden, ideas that filter in to the studio. Several studio works emerged from that little painting.

I use photography as well but I tend to use it in situations where I have to document things quickly, when I'm hiking or driving. There is a mobility and speed to the camera that is beneficial when you can't set up for a long painting session. But that speed is sometimes dangerous. I see it with amateur photographers as well in myself, the tendency to take a photograph and look later. I try and avoid that even in the moment. Pros look first; amateurs look later. Painting slows me down and allows me to dwell in a place.



Beau Carey | Drift, 2014, oil on canvas, 48 x 54 inches; image courtesy the artist

CS: How does the passage of time affect your perception of the particular scene or composition long after you've left? Is that ambiguity something you embrace?

BC: Overtime things become more refined as I polish certain rough ideas had in the moment. The distance time affords makes room for a certain type of abstraction. Events and places are difficult to understand when we are immersed in them. It's hard to describe a wall with your nose pressed up against it. You need to step back. Details get lost or added that affect the way we perceive things. I abstract by filtering out or adding what I wrongly or rightly deem unessential or essential to the painting. Memory plays a role. Sometimes I'll remember a place, and at the same time I look at a field painting and photograph and huge discrepancies emerge. I'm left to sort out which is more important. Ultimately nothing is accurate, not the photo, not the painting, not my memory. The event or place remains in the past and the objects that came from it are carried into the present. The context in which they were created has shifted. The ambiguity that arises is inevitable. The studio work is the embodiment of dealing with that process.



Beau Carey | Island, 2014, oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches; image courtesy the artist

CS: Many of your studio works balance highly refined, detailed surfaces with other more raw, unfinished portions of under painting. Can you describe your process?

BC: There is an order and space to landscape that has content. Most of what we think of when we think of landscape painting comes from a western tradition of how space is ordered. I generally start each painting by establishing that order and space. Those sections are generally more refined. Once I've established those elements I try and subvert/play with them. I'm often trying to see if I can create a visual problem, an awkwardness that I can work in both formally and conceptually. Those sections are often representative of how we actually look at landscape. They are the objects, processes, and histories we often omit when looking and rather than just restoring those elements to the picture I try and deal with them in a more oblique way. They end up as places of omission or abstraction.



Beau Carey | Healy Valley, 2014, oil on canvas 44 x 48 inches; image courtesy the artist



Beau Carey | Resolute, 2014, oil on canvas 46 x 60 inches; image courtesy the artist

CS: In the exhibition description for Far North you talk about working in high winds, snowstorms and sub-zero temperatures—definitely not ideal conditions for painting, but there's definitely a certain adventure or romance to it. How much of that initial experience and process do you try to convey alongside your finished works?

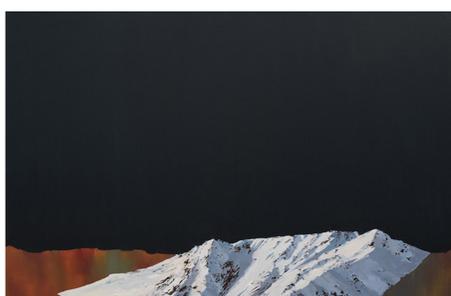
BC: I have a love/hate relationship with the romance of working in harsh conditions. There is a certain silliness to it that distracts from what I'm trying to accomplish. However as a landscape painter it is essential that time be spent in the landscape. The sites I select are interesting not just because of their remoteness and harshness but because they embody some sort of contradiction or conceptual idea that I can build a body of work around. I work in the field because the challenges and ideas it presents are difficult to obtain in any other way. Working in the studio is about eliminating outside, erratic variables that can influence the work. You control the temperature, the light, etc. Working in the field is about allowing those erratic variables to have their influence. The paintings created can be made no other way. The decisions made can be made under no other circumstances simply because those conditions cannot be anticipated or replicated. I never touch up the field paintings in the studio for this reason. They are finished works. They are primary documents of that particular place and my interaction with it. So in a sense there is no way those elements could filter into the studio because I'm not going to paint with mittens on if I don't have to, however much does come from those initial experiences. It is the larger ideas that are carried through and it's those larger ideas that I'm ultimately interested in. Those ideas get worked out in the studio.



Beau Carey | Glimmer, 2014, oil on canvas, 46 x 54 inches; image courtesy the artist

CS: What kinds of decisions do you find yourself making when you're faced with those conditions that place you outside your mental and physical comfort level?

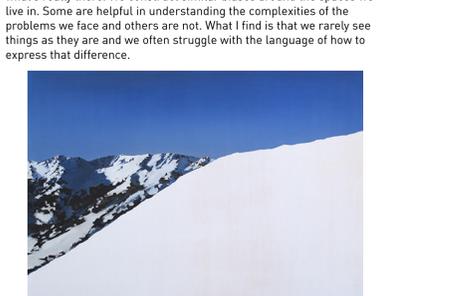
It is hard to describe those decisions because most are so uniquely dependent on the context of the situation. Most decisions are of a practical matter. Can I paint here? What will happen when the sun or wind shifts? Others are of a formal painting nature. Shadows have shifted and I have to adjust them in the image, or I can no longer feel my fingers so the foreground becomes a few quick brushstrokes. Most of the time I'm confronted with the difficulty of knowing that if I was in the controlled environment of the studio I could paint this but in the dynamic environment of the field I cannot do what I want, because of the wind, sun etc. I have to come up with shorthand to deal with the space between what I want to do and what I'm capable of. But I'm always interested in getting beyond that initial read. For example in the Arctic distances are hard to perceive. The air is so clear and dry and very little exists to determine relative size so a glacier that looks a quarter of a mile away might be five. Having to deal with such unfamiliar volumes with mittens on and paints that are near freezing created a tension, and ultimately the metaphor of clarity being distorted became very powerful and carried through.



Beau Carey | Subterrain, 2014, oil on canvas, 52 x 58 inches; image courtesy the artist

CS: Your artistic practice has taken you to places that the vast majority of people won't ever see. How have those experiences shaped your perspective of land and its cultural value here at home?

BC: I'm always looking for sites that will unfold in interesting ways as I work with them whether they are remote or close to home. How we treat the world around us is directly informed in how we are taught to see it. Landscape is a cultural process. We all tend to look at the world in similar ways. We tend to photograph and paint similar things. It's a language. I'm interested in those ways of seeing, in the ways we organize space and what that organization means. How have we seen things in the past and how are we seeing them now. I visit these remote places knowing they have a set of visual expectations attached to them. Those expectations are everything from the historical exploratory and navigational images to the contemporary kitsch, tourist images. When those expectations meet with actual experience on the ground the result is always vastly different than what's expected. We either see what we've been taught to see or we see what's really there. We construct similar biases around the spaces we live in. Some are helpful in understanding the complexities of the problems we face and others are not. What I find is that we rarely see things as they are and we often struggle with the language of how to express that difference.



Beau Carey | Savage Canyon, 2014, oil on canvas, 44 x 56 inches; image courtesy the artist

CS: What kinds of things are you hoping to focus on during your residency at Rabbit Island next year?

BC: I'm always interested in places that seek to preserve a certain rawness. We either look at the world as a finite set of resources or we don't. We either feel certain areas need protecting or we don't. Those two ideologies confront each other in almost every ecological conversation that is had today. Much of how landscapes images are structured emerged during a time when resources were looked at as boundless. I'm interested in interrogating structure. Rabbit Island is itself a place that has been set aside from the normal rigors of development. I'm interested in using the island to further my research in to how we spatially construct landscapes and how that construction relates to a history of coastal profiles used in navigation. I'll be painting as much as possible from a small boat. The island itself is entirely undeveloped short of a small lean-to so it should be ideal to hatch new ideas as well. I'm always adaptable to what the circumstances allow and inevitably this changes the work but I love the rhythm that residencies like this allow me to develop.

Beau Carey was born in and currently resides in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He received an MFA from the University of New Mexico in 2010, and soon after moved to Denver, Colorado where he was a resident artist and artist representative to the board at Redline Denver. In fall 2012, he was awarded the Arctic Circle, an international residency that takes artists aboard a tall ship into the high arctic. In March 2014 he was the first official wintertime artist in residence at Denali National Park in Alaska. Carey is a co-founder of Denver's Tank Studios, a long-term sustainable studio space, and has created bodies of work at a variety of complex sites in the west, including the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge and Victor Cripple Creek Open pit gold mine. Carey has exhibited his work throughout the country and is represented by Goodwin Fine Art in Denver, CO.

Claude Smith is an arts administrator and educator.