

Painting Like a Poet

Lyrical brushstrokes can inform other arts disciplines

BY JOE BENDIK

Since it's National Poetry Month, I thought I'd write about the connection between poetry, painting and music. Recently, I read an article with the provocative title of "How Bob Dylan Ruined Poetry," with its premise being how Dylan's lyrics are mistakenly compared to poetry, when in fact his songs resemble paintings. For example, the album *Blood on the Tracks*, considered to be one of his most personal statements, was mostly influenced by his painting lessons. Each song is like a portrait done in a specific way. I thought I'd ask some painters about this theory and what music meant to them.

At the Sherry French gallery last Saturday, by coincidence, the theme of this exhibition was "Painting = Poetry - ut pictura poesis." Next to each painting was either a song lyric or poem, sometimes written by the artists themselves. This might seem like a simplistic, obvious premise, but it was neither; and it worked.

One of the artists showing was Douglas Martenson, part of the new breed of realist painters who magnify, digest and reinterpret reality via realism. Along with Martenson, painters like Fred Danziger, Nick Patten, Dennis Wojtkiewicz and Dennis Rudolph (to name a few) are paving trails that merge realism with ele-



Along the Coast, oil on canvas

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

ments of abstract expressionism in ways that are both subtle and bold.

Martenson explained how painting to him is both poetic and musical. "I too think there is a connection between all the arts, and music and painting are particularly aligned. I've become a big jazz fan after mostly alternative music. I just like complexity, differing melodies, chord changes, etc. That's where I think the biggest connection is... I'm after an overall mood or feeling in a painting."

Starting his paintings with a light drawing, he uses the paint directly and works a network of paint strokes to (in his words) "make an equivalent" of what

he's seeing and feeling at the time. As he adds layers of paint, he balances the tones to create a sense of harmony, much in the same way a musician writes a chord progression.

In Martenson's painting *Along the Coast*, he first guides the viewer's perspective to a middle distance, the eyes moving over the rocks; then, using a method of pushing and pulling brushstrokes, he paints the water hitting the rocks. In contrast, the darker tones in the foreground bring the eye to the middle while the waves steer your vision back into the rocks. He spoke of how "the sky keeps you compressed to that space

where the land meets the sky" until your site moves out of the image to the distant shore. By the way, "compression" is also an audio term.

I'll leave you with Martenson's words, summing up this painting and this week's column: "The sky is intentionally simplified so the rocks and water have a bigger presence. I didn't want the rocks to be menacing. I was looking for a sense of poetry where the water meets the rocks." ■

Painting = Poetry - ut pictura poesis
Sherry French Gallery
601 W. 26th Street
Through April 26