

By Robert W. Duffy

Landscape, for artists, and perhaps for all of us, is an involving, inescapable influence, and thus for the entire sweep of human history it has been inexhaustible in its variety and poetic and mythic potentials. Apparently, it is particularly affecting to those of us who have grown up literally and metaphorically in and on the landscape of America.

The ever-sharp, ebullient critic Robert Hughes— whose roots were in the soil of the seductive landscape of Australia -- said landscape is to American painting what psychoanalysis and sex are to the American novel, which is to say fundamental. The parallelism vibrates absolutely truthfully, although landscape often itself spreads over a vast, comprehensive psychoanalytic couch, just as Freud draped the couch in his consulting room with oriental carpets.

Our European ancestors came to the new world in search of its riches and its vastness. As much as they wished to pray as they pleased, and to slip out of the collar of rigid class distinctions, what they wanted, what *we* want, is Land. But on a different, more emotional and intellectual and visual level, we Americans find ourselves compelled to look diligently to the land for inspiration, just as our ancestors, upon first encountering it, experienced the force of revelation in their experiences of its wild and dangerous passions as

well as its vast and astonishing beauty. It was, and remains, the object of intense magnetism and undeniable desire.

One of the most important American “schools” was the one populated by the so-called Hudson River School painters, poet and visionaries, who portrayed the American landscape as the New Canaan, a reward as it were for suffering and patient seeking.

In the early 19th century, William Clark and Meriwether Lewis set out to explore and to celebrate the vast Promised Land we’d acquired in the Louisiana Purchase.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, photographers who traveled to the American West and brought back photographs that reinforced our sense of wonder in the staggeringly beautiful and wild-wild West.

So too must the young artist named Douglass Freed have sensed the vastness and richness of an often maligned but actually the subtle and glorious middle American landscape.

The state of Kansas is high up on his resume. He received both his undergraduate and graduate degrees from Kansas State University at Fort Hays, and his entire career, as painter, academic, administrator,

father, husband and arts aficionado was spent in Sedalia, Missouri.

Both landscapes, Kansas and Missouri, give a sense of infinite flatness covered with a massive canopy of sky. Depending on your disposition and your response to the subtleties of time and space, landscapes such as those that spread out of Western Missouri into Kansas can either bore you silly or inspire you. My guess is that Doug Freed fits into the latter category. I am there with him.

The reliably brilliant art historian E. H. Gombrich wrote in “Art and Illusion – A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation” that artists do not initiate works of art with a representation of what he or she has observed, rather things begin to grow from an idea.

Only after the idea is contained, tacked-down technically or materially – similar, in theological terms, to the word’s the word’s being made flesh -- only then does the process of aesthetic reckoning and manifestation begin.

Gombrich called the idea the *schema*, and the process of assembling and meshing schema and the actually observed, “making and matching.”

An amateur, technically proficient as he or she may be, begins the process not so much consumed by the

abstraction of the idea but by the simpler desire to realize a picture. By such looking and reporting what has been seen may produce verisimilitude or drama or beauty, but only accidentally does art emerge from this process.

On the other hand, from the complex intellectual, technical and visual process Gombrich describes, the generative seed is planted. What may grow from it is a work of art, if, indeed, all the other essentials, such as talent and intelligence are dynamically present. In making and matching, the schema generates the artistic process and what the artist observes then is worked together with it.

This is not, of course, as simple as it is put forward here, and although many are drawn to attempt to understand and work through the process, only a few succeed. For those of us who make it our business to try to make sense out of all this, the qualities that work together to make art are enormously complicated and often inscrutable. What stands out clearly, however, are results.

After a while, after the critic or historian or connoisseur has earned his or her chops, what is good and what really isn't is readily discernable. This sort of informed, authoritative judgment is about as far away from "I don't know what is good, but I know what I like" as it can get. Indeed, the trained eye often knows it doesn't

particularly like something, but realizes clearly that it is quite good.

I'm not an expert on the work of Sedalia's pre-eminent artist, Douglass Freed. I do know his influence as an artist, a museum creator and administrator is incalculable to the town and the region. The town is celebrated for its marvelous state fair and for having been home to Scott Joplin. Here's to making a heroic triumvirate of that duo, with Doug Freed as hero number three.

But back in the days when I was writing art reviews regularly I was always happy to hear that Douglass Freed's work was in town. I was interested in seeing it and perhaps writing about it, simply because it is so satisfying, so consistent and competent and always, always endowed with a radiant, ineffable beauty and no small amount mystery as well. Throughout, a rich formal quality obtains, one tied irrevocably to rich traditions such as the assembling of parts into separate yet inseparable unity such as the triptych.

In one review, I observed that Freed "approaches painting analytically and precisely. Color choices are made scrupulously and are sometimes announced in the names of the pictures. Shape and form are given the same sort of attention. Freed calls his paintings and sculptures "structures"; they are, indeed, sort of like puzzles, where shapes are fitted together to create a

coherent whole. ...

“What Freed does is create his own order of things, his own artistic mini-cosmos, in which shapes, arrangements, colors and relationships all operate according to the rhythms that the artist establishes.”

I wrote that this creative process was “quite remarkable,” and added, “on top of it, the paintings are beautiful. In the midst of all this order and regularity and fitting together of parts, paint is applied in lyrical brush strokes that suggest leaves caressed by the wind or light reflecting off a brook - or a Monet under a microscope.”

Taken as a body, Douglass Fred’s work has a close, almost literal association with Gombrich’s notion of the *schema* and making and matching. If you look at the tightly constructed, intellectually rigorous and richly textured pictures from the early 1980s and 1990s, for example, you see the idea presented as idea, and while fully developed in that *schema* state, it could take on, were it pushed into a more representational realm, characteristics of still life or landscape, or, in the opalescent progression of tone and color and emotion evident in the haunting “Nina,” portraiture.

In 2002, the soon-to-be-famous photographer Ben Lowy and I drove out to Sedalia to see the new museum

building Freed had commissioned from a St. Louis firm. Freed told me the story many readers of this catalogue know. It bears repeating, nevertheless, in the context of this retrospective exhibition. That's because Freed, Freed's art and the Daum Museum are inextricably connected.

"Harold F. Daum," I wrote in the Post-Dispatch, "is a retired Sedalia radiologist and art collector who has poured a good-size fortune into the establishment of the Daum Museum of Contemporary Art at Sedalia's State Fair Community College. Along with the money, he gave his collection, which fills his namesake building ...

"... [T]he line between the museum's grand opening in January [2002] and its origins extends back 34 years, when a young artist and his wife moved into a duplex apartment in Sedalia and met their neighbor, Daum.

"Douglass Freed was the artist, and today he is director of the Daum Museum. But back then, at age 22, he was taking his very first job, teaching art at the State Fair Community College. A lasting friendship developed between the young couple and the doctor.

"Along with his teaching, Freed made art on his own. Daum became interested in that work and then in contemporary art in general, Freed said. What was merely an interest then grew into the kind of

acquisitiveness that has separated collectors from large amounts of their cash throughout history.

“As Freed began showing his work seriously in galleries in St. Louis and Kansas City and eventually in New York, Daum began to go along, first to look and then to buy.

“ ‘My function was to encourage and to suggest,’ Freed said. ‘But he made his own choices.’

“Seven years ago,” I wrote, “after acquiring a sizable collection, Daum decided to give his art to the college. ... Freed told Daum, ‘We have to build a museum.’ His idea was to serve students as well as residents of the region, which he described as underserved in terms of cultural resources. ...

“Freed said Daum offered to give \$500,000 to build a museum, along with his cache of art. When Freed was unable to raise enough money to supplement the money to build, Daum came through with more money. When all was said and done, it totaled \$2.25 million for the building, plus a \$500,000 grant matched by the State Fair Community College Foundation. The latter creates an endowment for the purchase of additional works of art.”

The result was a handsome building. But as I wrote nine years ago, beauty is only part of a building's complex mission. As a former student of the college, John-David

Schondelmeyer, told me back then, the museum was resource for the community and especially the artists who live in the community. "It's good to reflect on what I see, and to find things I can use in my work," he said.

Just as the so-called minimalist quality of Freed's work from 20 years ago had the quality of a put-together puzzle, so does his complex relationship with the school, its students, the museum, the community, its artists and the world beyond.

All of this is, of course, set firmly into the midst of a literal, social, academic and personal landscape, one that is visually rich and compelling and textured. When I look at these expansive, visually and intellectually resonant paintings by Douglass Freed, I am remember my own finite being and infinitesimal size in the landscape.

But in reckoning with all that, I am aware that art, at its most penetrating and potent, stalls the passage of time by capturing the cosmic moment, and conquers the vastness and apparent incomprehensibility of space in ways that permit us to comprehend it.

Such is the hard work of a good and dedicated artist, an artist such as Douglass Freed, who has put down his own roots in a complex landscape and has thrived in it, and while thriving personally, has also fulfilled an artist's obligation to realizing, for those of us who look

and learn, the enormous, glorious potential of the essential idea and the generous rewards devolving from its realization.