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# Alice Stepanek & Steven Maslin

## How much CO2 with the next artfair? September 8 – 29, 2007

Alice Stepanek and Steven Maslin have been working together for over twenty years, painting studies and comments on the subject of Nature. It is their second solo show in France at Galerie Jean-Luc & Takako Richard.

Their work in the latter part of the 1980's thematised humanity and nature. Figurative elements and human artefacts appeared within naturalistic scenes, culminating in a series of self-portraits in nature. The paintings of the 90's were characterised by a decreasing human presence. Nature moved to the foreground. A series of carefully crafted naturalistic works, refer to photographic cropping and detail, but were in fact painted "en plein air", not from photographs. Later humanity was hinted at by the use of the artificial lighting of trees in a series of night works, or by the unseen observer whose gaze speeds by the greenery in the "drive-by" paintings. Human activity was never far away.

The paintings of the first half of this decade pulled away the ground from beneath the viewer's feet. A horizon had often been missing in their work (by which the artists state a break with traditional landscape composition), but in many of these works it became difficult to assess where a horizon was to be found, or if it was to be found at all. When present, it upset a sense of balance. The world had gone topsy-turvy. Spatial relationships were shifted almost malevolently, and the familiar and harmless assumed a new, slightly menacing, identity. The paintings, like humankind, pushed at the boundaries and the parameters of the environment in which they exist.

Stepanek and Maslin's most recent work continues to explore these themes and addresses the subject of humankind's paradoxical relationship to its natural environment. In the moment when climate change denial has finally crumbled, the paintings have gained a still greater poignancy. Since the 1980's scientific research has left no doubt about the consequences of human carbon dioxide output upon the environment. Stepanek and Maslin have followed this research with keen interest and it has found expression in their images in a variety of forms.

Last year the horizon line returned to Stepanek and Maslin's work. A passing glimpse might register the paintings as conventional landscapes, but when the viewer lingers a moment longer they are quickly caught up in a mass of visual subterfuge. This is not a horizon line stretching serenely from one edge of the canvas to another, confirming the human's place in the world. Instead the viewer is confronted with segmented landscapes, divided by bold verticals of tree trunks, which invade the foreground and split the canvas into a series of "frames", each containing disparate scenes of nature. At times the segments are nominally linked, at others they disregard visual sense and convention, the horizon jumping from one level to another as the length of the painting is traversed.

The nature portrayed is still beautiful in its individual elements, nothing is ugly or shocking. The images are not "catastrophic".Yet the paintings are disturbing because of their quirkiness and restlessness. They remain an uninhabitated stage. Indeed it is from the absence of humanity that they derive part of their tension. It is the viewer who must create the story, the artists have simply provided the set. There are different paths and ways within the new works, which enable a variety of scenarios and outcomes. The observer is left to decide on the direction, to face the choice of which path to follow and risk taking the wrong track.

The compositions appear photographic or computer manipulated, "cut and paste" comes to mind, but while the paintings are constructed from an array of images, which Stepanek and Maslin have photographed themselves, the computer doesn't play a role. The paintings are composed on the canvas, built up from individual elements to create a complete image. Each element finds it's place in an ongoing process of decision making between the artists in front of the canvas. They reiterate that the reworking of images is an artistic process with hundreds of years of history, not the result of the recent development of computer software.The artists create a painted space where it is difficult to judge in which moment, or state, we stand. It is neither the ideal paradise nor the post-human order. Using simple compositional devices they create a familiar yet chaotic world, a vision simultaneously utopic and dystopic, manouevering between culture and nature, asking to what degree these opposites are mutually dependent.

Stepanek & Maslin conclude that "we live in a world in which natural beauty is idealised and revered, and concurrently neglected and extinguished. The consequence of our actions, of our indifference, is becoming forever more foreseeable and unpredictable. Our paintings are a reminder of all that we should strive to keep when we find ourselves in a process of rapid loss".