

HYPERALLERGIC

Is It an Artificial Paradise or an Artificial Hell or Both?

By John Yau | 13 April 2022

Elliott Green seems to be espousing that landscapes are living forms governed by rules we cannot fathom—they appear to be welcoming us, but we might be wrong.



Elliott Green, *Breathe In, Breathe Out*, 2021, Oil on linen, 76 x 92 inches

Over the past 30-plus years, Elliott Green has defined a path in painting and drawing that is unlike any other. For that alone you might think that he would be better known, but this would mean the art world has turned its back on branding, signature styles, and dependability — capitalist mainstays — in favor of change, the unexpected, and the uncanny. Between 1989 and 2009, he depicted human and animal figures with rubbery, infinitely stretchable limbs engaged in unnamable interactions, at once sexual, scatological, inexplicable, and sinister. The fantasies were unsettling because they required viewers to complete them, thus partially exposing their own awareness of the links between insecurity and aggression. In these years, Green evoked an alternative world populated by humans and animals that possessed amazing contortionist powers. In retrospect, what is striking about this body of work is that he never developed a signature motif, alter ego, or caricature. He did not brand himself.

Whatever trajectory Green seemed to be defining changed when he stopped exhibiting for nearly a decade (2009-17). Among the events that precipitated this change were moving out of Manhattan and receiving

the 2011 Jules Guerin Rome Prize at the American Academy (strongly supported by Thomas Nozkowski, an independent artist who remains under-recognized). During this period of reevaluation, he changed both the methods he used to apply paint and his subject matter. He went from cartoonish imagery to landscape paintings, as well as made a series of tools that enabled him to apply moire patterns and other repetitive markings to his compositions. And yet, despite this radical shift, one constant connecting these two disparate bodies of work is that Green remains preoccupied with evoking an alternate world.



Elliott Green, *Friends of Friends*, 2021, Oil on linen, 76 x 126 inches

I became aware of Green's new direction when I saw his works in the *2015 Invitational Exhibition of Visual Arts* hosted by the American Academy of Arts and Letters (March 12–April 12, 2015), and in *Objecty*, a group show at Tibor de Nagy (June 22–July 29, 2016), in which I believe Green was included because of Trevor Winkfield, also an independent under-recognized artist. This is how I described the work in the Academy exhibition:

He combined ravishing brushwork with mysterious, Xanadu-like landscapes that emerged, radiant, out of the undulating applications of paint. Rainbows, clouds, jagged mountains, verdant hills, pastoral lakes, and, most importantly, changing light in a panoramic view — it was all there and it was just paint.

This is why I saw *Elliott Green*, his debut exhibition at Miles McEnery Gallery (March 17–April 23), on its first day and then returned after two trips took me out town; for many reasons I wanted to look again and more slowly. Green's paintings are not fast. You don't get the gist of them in one take, which is interesting because he adheres to the classical landscape format of dividing a horizontal picture plane into three stacked areas; this is how landscapes were transposed to two-dimensional surfaces starting early in oil painting's history.



Elliott Green, *Shout*, 2021, Oil on linen, 76 x 92 inches

In the recent work, Green has upped the stakes for himself in his color choices, incorporating pinks and violets, and his willingness to combine the decipherable and indecipherable, all while hewing to the classic tripartite division of a rectangle into foreground, middle ground, and background, a combination routinely given a stable framework — the earth we stand upon, the landscape in front of us, the sky above. As Green employs the three-part compositions, he subverts different aspects of them and their interrelationships. His trust in the viewer is implicit in this, which runs counter to many artists. Where are we when we look at *Shout* or *Friends of Friends* (both 2021)? Are we standing on a cloud or floating in the air or on water? And yet, even as that sense of instability comes into our experience, the large paintings pull us into a radiant world in which not everything can be named or understood. There is a fundamental difference between landscape artists who believe that seeing is ownership and those who recognize that they will always be strangers in this or any world they visit.

Working on both a bigger and smaller scale than previously, Green has become more adventuresome with his colors, while courting abstraction to the point that it is impossible to determine whether we are looking at a landscape, a landscape abstraction, or an amalgamation of paint marks. What about the swirling fields marked by parallel lines, which can evoke the Aurora Borealis or, in other circumstances, a scaly dragon? And even when he approaches what resembles the hills of Assisi, there is a dreamlike, visionary quality to the work that arises from the process of putting down the paint with tools that the artist seems to have designed and made.



Elliott Green, *Terrior*, 2021, Oil on linen, 76 x 92 inches

In *Shout* Green seems to have opened up a new avenue to explore. The elements elude definition. It is this elusiveness — a condition we don't prize enough in art — that holds my attention because it makes me aware of myself looking at the painting. Landscape painting generally transports the viewer to the place the artist has created; we are brought to the world that the artist shows us. Instead, Green makes us conscious of ourselves looking at this different reality.

The one clear antecedent for Green's paintings is Max Ernst's experiments with decalcomania, which minimize the artist's subjectivity. Green's tools function in a parallel manner. The difference is in the stillness. With Ernst's otherworldly landscapes, the viewer senses a calcified immobility, a place marked by ruin. The city-like aggregations in Green's painting feel remote and inaccessible. At the same time, the geology surrounding them is in a state of change and turmoil, with no sense of the outcome. The patterns and marks he makes with his invented tools cannot be characterized into good or bad, natural or unnatural. At times I thought I was looking at a Chinese-inflected Italian Renaissance landscape by a science-fiction fan. He seems to be espousing that landscapes are living forms governed by rules we cannot fathom — they appear to be welcoming us, but we might be wrong. They are going through relentless cataclysmic transformation. Whatever its culmination, the change is beautiful, even seductive, like a green and pink sunset shot through with poison.