

HYPERALLERGIC

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With an Eye to Our Common Future

Some painters — following in the footsteps of Arthur Dove — offer us received images of transcendence. John Dilg isn't one of them.

John Yau December 18, 2016



John Dilg, "Deep Freeze Mountain" (2016), oil on canvas, 18 x 14 inches (all images courtesy Taymour Grahne)

John Dilg, an artist who has lived and taught in Iowa City, Iowa, (a fly-over state) for many years, is finally starting to get the attention he has long deserved. Dilg is a painter who employs a pictographic vocabulary and a palette of pale greens, blues, oranges, and browns. His celadon greens range from grayish-green to jade-green, and sometimes extend into blue. In fact, the blues in Dilg's palette have a lot in common with the ones that Brice Marden used in his painting "Ru Ware Project" (2007-12). Ru ware, which is an extremely rare and highly sought-after type of Chinese pottery, of which fewer than 100 perfect examples are known to exist, is characterized by a distinctive pale "duck-egg" blue glaze. According to one medieval Chinese connoisseur, the glaze is "like the blue of the sky in a clearing among the clouds after rain."



Installation view of "John Dilg: Natural Memory" (2016), Taymour Grahne Gallery, New York

Rain seems remote in Dilg's paintings. He applies the paint dryly, allowing the weave of the canvas to show through. The paintings are modest in scale, and the recurring subject is a landscape — hills, rock

formations, spiny pines, a river and/or waterfalls — presided over by a full moon in a celadon green sky punctuated by faint, orange stars. At various moments, while looking at exhibition *John Dilg: Natural Memory* at Taymour Grahne (October 28 – December 21, 2016), I was reminded of classical Chinese landscapes as well as the those glimpsed in the background of Early Renaissance paintings, such as Giovanni di Paolo’s “Madonna of Humility” (ca. 1442), which is in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Dilg’s landscapes arise out of the collision of observation and memory, things seen and the history of painting remembered. The outlined pictographs encompassing his vocabulary of recurring motifs also share something with folk art. These associations enrich Dilg’s paintings, which define a domain all their own.



John Dilg, “Wahkeena” (2015), oil on canvas, 14 x 11 inches

There are nine paintings in the exhibition, with the largest measuring 22 by 28 inches and the smallest taking up 8 by 10 inches. All the paintings are dominated by a rock formation in the center of the composition, which pushes everything else to the margins. In seven of nine paintings, the rock is framed on either side by a spiny pine. The combination of full moon, muted light, celadon palette, spiny, sentinel-like pines, and solitary rock formation evokes an otherworldly hush and reverence. These are simple and strange paintings. They are moments from a journey that may point toward redemption, or, more importantly, they may not.

Some painters — following in the footsteps of Arthur Dove — offer us received images of transcendence. Dilg isn't one of them. His rocks speak of deep time, of erosion, water, and heat. Will this still verdant earth one day resemble the moon overhead — a barren place that humans brought to ruin? It is hard not to think that this is what lies ahead.

Dilg's landscapes are poised on the edge — from moments of harmony with the elements to visions of glimmering orbs of sterility floating in the sky. The branches extend from the pines like vertebrae. Their muted green is as specific to Dilg's landscapes as a dark green sky is to the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico. Future perfect or future bleak: it is all there, and what path we choose to go down — as individuals or members of a community — is left as a question.



John Dilg, "I Felt So Symbolic Yesterday (C.C.)" (2015), oil on canvas, 14 x 18 inches

In "I Felt So Symbolic Yesterday (C.C.)" (2015), a man in a cap is standing on top of the rock formation, hands in his pockets, looking at the full moon, which is far too large and therefore perfect for this painting. Is he feeling as if that infertile orb is our common destiny? Has he resigned himself to fate? Has the age of the symbolic passed? What actions could any one of us take? There is an atmosphere of solitude and isolation that seems natural and unavoidable — that's one thing the painting says to me. I don't disagree. At the same time, I am reminded of lines from William Wordsworth's poem, "Nutting."

I felt a sense of pain when I beheld
The silent trees, and saw the intruding sky.

The muted celadon light — where has Dilg transported us? This is the question viewers should begin with. For, as much as they seem to lead us into a dream, they speak of real places and elements that are nevertheless infused with an awareness of the way different cultures at

various historical moments have depicted the landscape — from the Early Renaissance to classical China. This is what Dilg does so well and, in some profound sense, modestly: he brings together every sort of precedent to make something that is uniquely his. He arrives at questions for which he has no answers, but he does not turn away. Like the man standing on the rock, he gazes at the moon, at once lifeless and glowing.

John Dilg: Natural Memory continues at Taymour Grahne (157 Hudson Street, Tribeca, Manhattan) through December 21.

Hyperallergic is a forum for serious, playful, and radical thinking about art in the world today. Founded in 2009, Hyperallergic is headquartered in Brooklyn, New York.