

# ‘This Land’ is small land

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John Dilg's "Tattoo" part of his "This Land Is Your Land" exhibit.

“This Land Is Your Land,” the title of John Dilg’s superb painting show at Steven Zevitas Gallery, implies the scope and grandeur of Woody Guthrie’s ode to democracy and the American landscape. But there’s nothing sweeping about Dilg’s small canvases, which depict animals and land formations with almost pictographic simplicity. They pull you into an intimate, low-key exchange, quiet and deeply felt.

We can attribute their incantatory energy to their size (most are 11 inches by 14 inches), their simplified, folk-art style, and their modest palette. Dilg paints in thin layers, often starting with warm, sandy reds and finishing with chill blues and greens. The red seeps through, imbuing images with a soft glow, like embers in a foggy dawn.

In “Marquette and Bigfoot Discover the Mississippi – 17 June 1673,” that red outlines the silhouettes of two oarsmen in a boat. They are likely the Jesuit missionary Jacques Marquette, who helped chart the Mississippi River, and, we must assume, the elusive and mysterious Sasquatch. That’s half of what Dilg is getting at in his paintings – some wild part of ourselves we can’t quite capture. A pale moon hovers over the two figures. Enveloped in pale, stony green, it’s a stilling scene, almost iconographic.

Dilg has spoken about symbols in his paintings as regenerative and spiritual. That’s clearly how his pared down landscapes function. They rise like monoliths and course with life-giving waterfalls. The landmass in “Headdress” juts high out of still water. Spiny pine trees stand around the rim, and an icy pool fills the top and spills in a waterfall over the side in a great blue curtain. It’s a landscape with majesty, but its cartoonish lines give it humility, and that blush along the contours suggests hidden heat.

My favorite painting, “Tattoo,” depicts an ocelot lurking on tree limb under another full moon. Its leopard-patterned coat is the most strident image in the show, but the cat holds its head low and wary – a picture of power and restraint. The red undercoat bleeds through even more here; it almost looks as if the painting has rust spots. The aura around the cat looks darker and more foreboding than those in other works.

It’s as if Dilg is painting not a big cat, but a fleeting dream of one, a quivering vision filled with resonance, on the verge of dissolving. That’s how his paintings register: not quite real, yet potent with meaning.

**John Dilg: This Land Is Your Land**

Steven Zevitas Gallery, 450 Harrison Ave., 617-778-5265.

<http://www.stevenzevitagallery.com> Closing date: Feb. 1.