

Essay by Jaime Manrique

When I first knew Adele Alsop in the 1970s, she was painting New York City (where she lived in the financial district), the Berkshire forests (her ancestral home), and Utah (where she summered with her husband, the painter Michael Eisenman, who died in 1984).

I was instantly drawn to her work. Of the artists working in the painterly realist tradition of Fairfield Porter, Neil Welliver, and Jane Freilicher, Alsop stood out for her burning engagement with her subject matter and a throbbing physicality in her brush strokes that reminded me of de Kooning. Her paintings had the power to exalt and unsettle at the same time. But it was in her Berkshire woodscapes that her voice and her vision were most distinctive. Her canvases of twilights went beyond realism to create a stage of enchanted woods which could well have served as the setting for Hawthorne's stories about witches, or Washington Irving's tales about ghosts. It was as though Alsop were not painting just what she saw, but what coursed through her Yankee blood.

When Adele Alsop announced she was moving to Utah to live there full-time, a painter I know expressed reservations about the impact her move might have on her work. Was it a wise decision to leave behind the intimacy of the New England landscape for the epic grandeur of Utah and the western landscape? Wasn't Alsop's work in risk of becoming monumental and sentimental like the paintings of Bierstadt?

Alsop's risky break with the past has paid off handsomely. Since she made Utah her muse, she has embraced that state's vast landscape and rendered it as intimate and personal, without taming it. Several things of note have happened in Alsop's paintings in the last decade in the West. Her sense of composition has come to feel unerringly right and inevitable. This is nowhere more apparent than in the four still lifes she has included in the current show. In the three set outdoors we find some of the classic elements of still life tradition—vases filled with flowers—set against a landscape in the background. These still lifes are, however, still lifes with a twist.

In *Zinnias in a Passing Thunder Shower*, the puddle of water in which the vase stands reflects a blue sky busy with bustling clouds. The turbulent sky reflected in the amorphous puddle is much more exciting to look at than the modest floral arrangement. In *The Titan Air, Spring Blossoms, Mirrored Clouds*, a painting of stunning formal beauty, the theme of reflections achieves a mannerist quality reminiscent of Velázquez. Leaning against a wall, propped between two vases filled with pear and quince blossoms, is a mirror on which we see reflected snow-capped mountains and a shower falling on the landscape which, figuratively, spills beyond the frame of the mirror to water the blossoms in the vases. In front of the mirror a mortar collects water that mirrors the sky. Viewing this painting, I almost expected a reflection of Alsop to appear somewhere in the canvas, as if this was her Utah-inspired rendition of *Las Meninas*.

The other still life in the show is a more traditional work, set indoors. This painting, vibrant with large dark areas, has a Dutch feeling to it—in its elegance and its masterly contrast of colors—but, more important, Dutch-influenced in the way Alsop handles its sources of light. It is Alsop's lovely homage to Vermeer.

Two other paintings in the show, *Irises with Shadows Near and Far* and *Arabesque*, stand midway between still life and landscape, serving as a transition between the untamed and the cultivated. In *Arabesque* Alsop has placed a vase with flowers in front of the garden. This motif, which has reappeared in several of her paintings in recent years, achieves a brilliant metaphor. The vases are offerings from the artist to the landscape she paints, a way to let us know she is painting a “sacred” place.

In the more traditional landscapes, Alsop’s many gifts come together and sing: she creates a symphony of enraptured colors that one could not have predicted from her earlier work. Yet these paintings are not merely beautiful. In the strongest of the landscapes, Alsop’s depth of emotion, her use of tone, atmosphere and mood create a powerful psychological tension. In the paintings that depict dusk—*Quicksilver Pond* and *A Good Story Told by Snake and Animal Tracks*—her work comes closest to the landscapes of Marsden Hartley, as well as echo the deracinated vision of Blake. The brushwork here is borrowed from Abstract Expressionism, the paint seemingly applied with the entire body, the canvas serving as the point of engagement between the landscape and Alsop’s psyche. Hence the erotic charge of the paintings, and that’s perhaps why they stand not only in the tradition of Titian but also in the tradition of pantheistic writers like Thomas Hardy and D. H. Lawrence. These works do not appear to have been painted on an easel, but on a rock, a tree, something a part of nature itself.

In the other landscapes Alsop approaches the fantastic; these Utah vistas have the transcendental feel of her Berkshire paintings of twenty years ago. In a painting like *Big Pine Sunset* we get, through the frame of glowing trees, a glimpse of the supernal and eternal. Indeed, in the paintings that depict apertures to the infinity of the sky, Alsop stops altogether being a realist and becomes—in the tradition of Caspar David Friedrich—a romantic visionary.

It is in this painting that the elements that Alsop has so slyly presented come together for me: the looseness of the brush stroke, the force, and total abandonment, with which the paint is applied on the canvas. Alsop is no longer painting the real world, but the birth of the real, that instant when things are half-formed, when anything is possible and the sky could become a pond, water could turn to rock, and a tree into a bolt of lightning. It is up to the viewer as much as to the painter to complete the work. These paintings are an invitation to surrender ourselves to the wonder of creation. Ultimately, we have to bring ourselves into the work, and what we see in it is what these wondrous paintings stir and awaken in our souls.