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ART

INSIDE ART

BY D. ERIC BOOKHARDT



The Language of Trees

After he'd finally had it with painting portraits, John Singer Sargeant would hire a taxi and tell the driver to randomly stop anywhere, and that would be where he would paint his next landscape. Trees, of course, were often a factor. This was Britain, after all, and the Brits always had a thing for trees, going back to the Druids. One of the more mysterious epic poems in Druidic British prehistory was known as the *Battle of the Trees*, a title that made no sense until someone guessed that it might have referred to a poetry contest. It seems that the earliest recorded poems were written on bark. Trees and inspiration are linked.

Immediately after Katrina, flowers bloomed and trees sprouted new leaves, a phenomenon of renewal sometimes called "hurricane spring." Thousands of trees were downed all over town, and now a number of trees are popping up in local art galleries. At Palma, Adrian Deckbar gives us an almost photo-realist view of them in her oil paintings. *Wild Landscape* is a four by five foot view of a patch of Southern forest with the light-dappled trunks of small, gnarly trees setting off snarls of Spanish moss thickening the already dense undergrowth. Rendered in a sharply etched representational style, the net effect is almost mythic, the sort of primordial wilderness where children in fairy tales might vanish only to find themselves in a gingerbread house deep in the shadows.

In *Full Circle*, a slender, curved branch covered with brilliant green leaves catches the sun while a mossy boulder and a bare, dead branch complete the arc of the composition. Based on languorous curves, this is somewhat sparser and more Asian in its sense of space and balance. If *Wild Landscape* suggests the dark and convoluted recesses of the imagination, *Full Circle* is its calm, balanced, meditative antithesis. That counterpoise between Western complexity and Asian balance is a dynamic that appears to varying degrees in the rest of her paintings in this show.

Very different are the lush landscape paintings of Ron Bechet. While also based on trees, Bechet's landscapes are more impressionistic, with brushwork that looks looser and more spontaneous, perhaps no surprise coming from a member of the same local clan that gave us the great jazz clarinetist and sax man, Sidney Bechet. Filled with rich, drippy colors, Bechet's compositions are sometimes almost abstract. In *Conscious Mind Infiltrated* a mélange of twisted tendrils and roots conjures by representational means some of the same sensibilities that Jackson Pollock created with layers of drips and paint splatters. *Recognizing Empathy* is an ostensible depiction of the base of a tree trunk where the roots become pronounced, but here again fluid, pulsating colors lend a near bebop sensibility. But *Next Time*, a charcoal study of a similar tree trunk produced while in Houston, where he worked in a borrowed studio after his own here in town was flooded, is as realistic as a



Adrian Deckbar's *Wild Landscape* is realistic yet almost mythic, the sort of wilderness where children in a fairy tale might vanish only to find themselves in a gingerbread house.

Deckbar. Interesting, if very different in tone.

John Stanford's landscapes are unlike either of the above. Set in Florida and rendered in a style that recalls both the French Barbizon painters and the American masters of the Hudson River school, Stanford's canvases are very calm and lushly elaborated, so loyal in their homage to his predecessors that you have to look twice to realize they are not vintage works. *Evening on the Point* depicts a pair of little Florida palm trees perched on a bluff overlooking what might be a salt marsh, and it's possible that the original scene is nothing that anyone but a painter would have noticed. Like Sargent, Stanford took something ordinary and brought forth its subtle, underlying drama.

Some canvases such as *A Walk to the Gulf*, a pale rutted road traversing some vague greenery, are almost defiantly bland, but Stanford employs the painter's perspective to evoke a subtle epiphany from the scrub brush, in what must surely be a nod to the French; his Hudson River forebears would have probably passed on it. And Stanford's subtle verisimilitude is perhaps the greatest strength in this series of works in which the secret language of trees is spoken softly as a passing breeze. **GW**

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