

Robert Michener

FLY FISHING MID MAY & GENTLE ON MY MIND

Robert Michener: Natural Harmonies

ROBIN LAURENCE

Introduction to Robert Michener's Recent Paintings: Gorgeous Gorges

LIANE DAVISON

Landscape as Metaphor

CHRISTINE LAWRENCE

Artist's Statement (1977)

ROBERT MICHENER

Artist's Statement (1997)

ROBERT MICHENER

Artist's Statement (1997)

ROBERT MICHENER



***Robert Michener: Natural Harmonies* Robin Laurence, 2014**

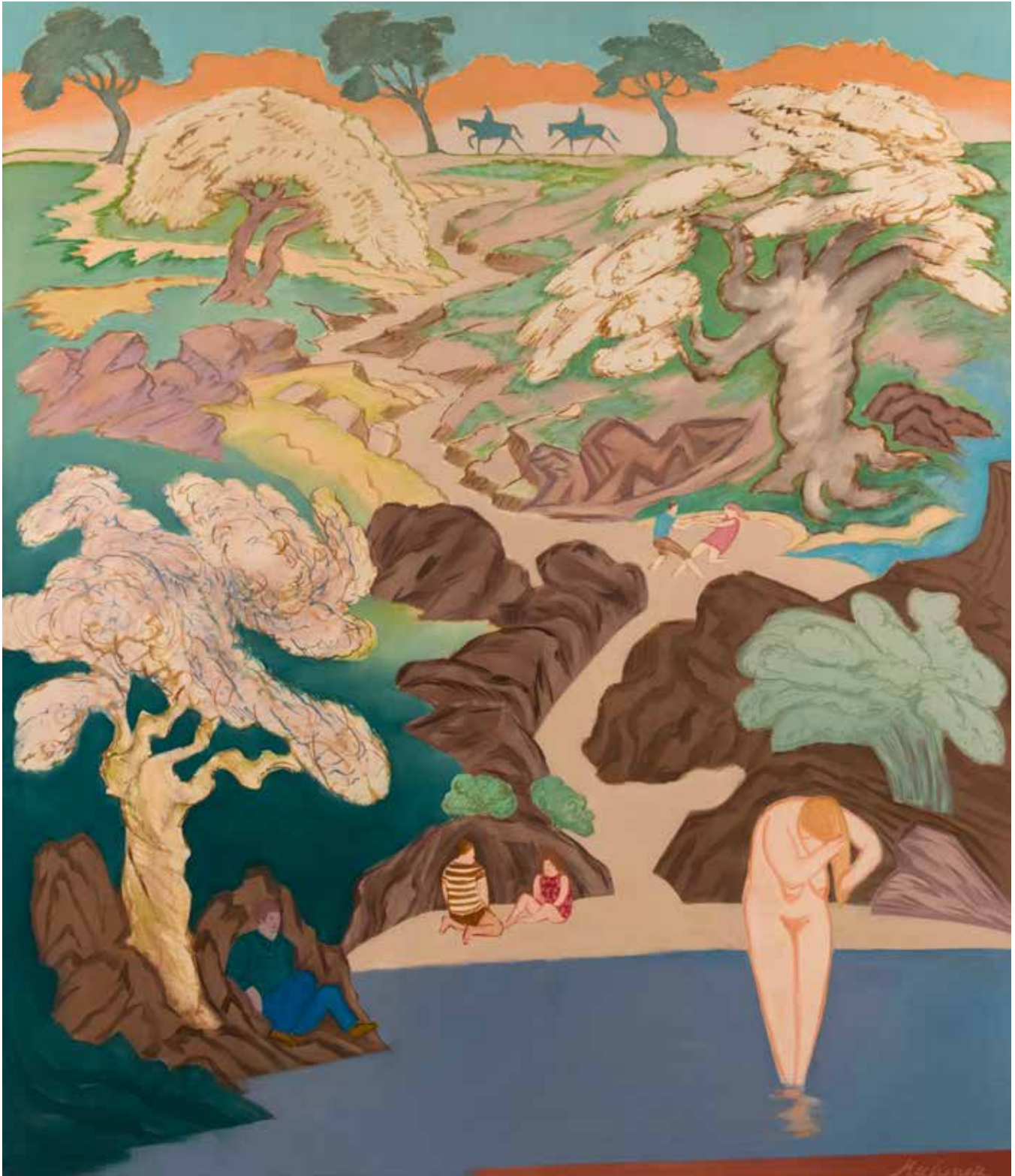
Introduction

Robert Michener is a distinguished senior British Columbia artist whose work has focused on the complex interface between nature and culture, or, more precisely, on the attitudes and ethics of human beings in relation to the natural environment. Through his highly detailed and complexly patterned landscape paintings, which synthesize a multitude of art historical references and personal experiences,

Robert Michener
Fly Fishing Mid May, 1996 (detail)

oil paint on linen
SAG 2012.04.01
Gift of the Artist

Photograph by Scott Massey



Robert Michener, *Gentle on My Mind*, 1970, oil paint on linen (223.6 x 193.1 cm) SAG 2012.04.02, Gift of the Artist.
Photograph by Scott Massey.

he advocates “a gentler, more reciprocal relationship with nature.”¹ At the same time, he investigates the illusion of space on the flat picture plane, combining different formal and perspectival traditions from the two-dimensional art of Asia, Europe and the Middle East. By introducing human figures into the landscape, he has also consistently invoked the Arcadian theme in Western painting, alluding to an idealized rural place in which human beings exist in harmony with nature. The diminutive size of many of his figures also invokes traditional Chinese landscape painting, in which the scholarly painter-poet lives in meditative seclusion in the countryside, far from the noisy demands and stifling politics of urban life. As in the Chinese tradition, the disproportion of tiny figure to immense landscape in many of Michener’s works proposes both the grandeur of nature and the human being’s complete immersion in (rather than separation from) the natural world.

Michener is best known for his thematically linked series of large-scale, lyrical landscape paintings, including the “Howe Sound” series and the “Badlands” series of the 1970s, and the “Farm Paintings” of the 1980s and early 90s. The latter works, among his most successful, are inflected with elements of folk realism while communicating both our dependence upon the land and the possibilities of our fruitful and peaceful stewardship of it. More recently, Michener has created idyllic landscapes that allude to the specific topographical features of his childhood, but that also incorporate aspects of other rural places he has travelled through and studied in his adult life. In the playfully named “Gorgeous Gorges” series, these landscapes are peopled by tiny figures standing in the middle of streams and rivers, fly-fishing – a recurring metaphor for peaceful co-existence with the natural world.

Biography

Robert Michener was born in 1935 in rural Minnesota, and as a young boy, pursued the solitary pleasures of hiking, fishing and bird-watching among the winding waterways, towering limestone cliffs, and deep gorges near his hometown. That childhood sense of tranquil immersion in nature has informed much of his later practice. Again, the abiding wish expressed in his art is that human beings might find a “gentle” way of being in the world, one that respects and sustains the natural environment rather than plundering and destroying it. In a 2002 artist statement, Michener wrote, “I choose to paint landscape because of my boyhood intimacy with nature and because I believe that the most urgent challenge facing humanity is to discover a viable way to live with nature.”²

Michener studied art at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota, graduating with a BA in 1957, and earned an MFA at The University of Minnesota in 1962. An important influence during his undergraduate years was the book *The Meeting of East and West* by the philosopher F.S.C. Northrop, who was one of the first American writers to bridge Eastern and Western philosophies and to describe for a Western audience the view that the world is an “undifferentiated aesthetic continuum”³ in which all things are connected. During Michener’s time at graduate school, he was also deeply affected by the theories of his advisor, the surrealist and later abstractionist Walter Quirt, who advocated relinquishing what he saw as the aggressive and masculine attitudes that dominated society and embracing instead a cooperative and feminine paradigm.⁴ Through Quirt, Michener became aware of the artist’s social responsibilities and a belief in art’s capacity to enact change.

Folded into Michener's university years was a period of extensive travel through Europe and the Middle East, during which he took in as much historical art as he could. It was at this time that he first encountered Persian miniature paintings and was influenced by their compression of expression, their stylized motifs, and their up-tilted perspectives. Initially, the experience of viewing the best of Western and Middle Eastern art overwhelmed Michener's sense of what he himself could produce; ultimately, it deeply enriched his art making. Through the early years of his practice, he experimented with abstract expressionism, figurative expressionism and realism.

By 1970, he had begun to consolidate his experience and beliefs into a distinctive style, often employing a flattened perspective and areas of patterning and recurring details and motifs. From this point, he embraced the landscape subject, again incorporating allusions to European Arcadian themes and Chinese literati traditions and conveying his environmental concerns.

Having taught at the Universities of Minnesota, Western Washington, and Cincinnati, Michener immigrated to Canada in 1973 to take up a position at the Vancouver School of Art (now the Emily Carr



Robert Michener, *Fly Fishing Mid May*, 1996, oil paint on linen (178 x 233.7 cm) SAG 2012.04.01. Gift of the Artist.
Photograph by Scott Massey.

University of Art & Design). Choosing to stay in Canada, he became a citizen of this country in 1978. He has exhibited extensively in Canada, the United States and Europe, and his works can be found in more than 200 public, private and corporate collections, including those of the Department of External Affairs, Canada, the Province of British Columbia, the Canada Council Art Bank, the Vancouver Art Gallery, and The University of Cincinnati. Michener retired from teaching, a role for which he was greatly esteemed, in 1999.

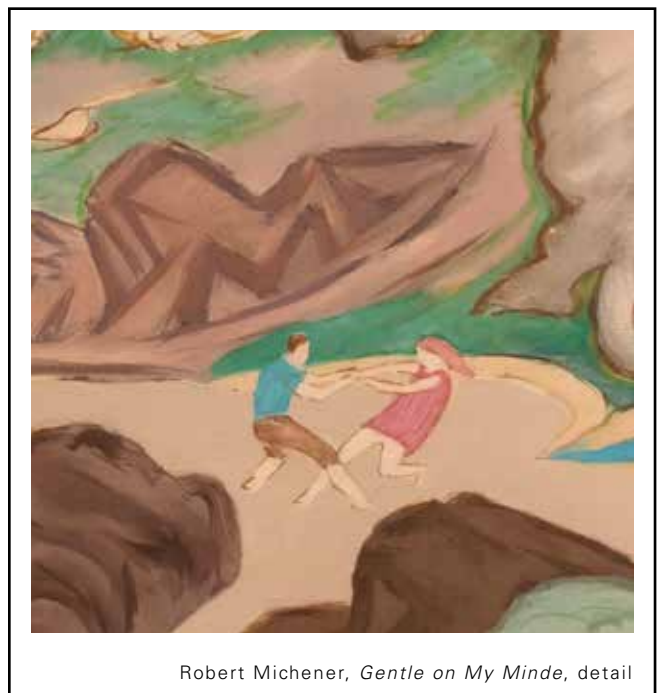
Gentle On My Mind, 1970

This richly hued and imposing painting stands as a “breakthrough” work for Michener. Created in 1970, after a period of experimenting with abstract figuration and other styles and subjects, it reveals the early articulation of his beliefs about living gently and harmoniously within the natural world. His reflection on Walter Quirt’s ideas about social cooperation and embracing the feminine, and his interest in melding Eastern and Western cultural traditions and formal devices, begin to assert themselves here. As well, Michener has been influenced by the idealistic premise of the Albert Camus essay, “The Rebel”, which posited the belief that art should not necessarily be “a direct reflection of the world, but rather...a model or blueprint of the artist’s desire for something more harmonious”.⁶ As a consequence, the painting is based on an idealized rather than an observed landscape. The imagery is representational but not realistic: the figures and landscape features are highly stylized, and the palette is exaggerated, its colours being both more intense and more acidic than those seen in nature.

“I want my paintings to be practical metaphors for a new way of feeling and living in the world.

To achieve this, I have set aside traditional ‘realistic’ representation in favor of an imaginative transformation of the landscape motif.”⁷

Gentle On My Mind employs an up-tilted and sometimes contradictory perspective, as found in historic Asian and Middle Eastern painting, and it also borrows motifs of gnarly trees and exaggerated rock formations from these same traditions. The nude figure in the bottom right-hand corner of the composition, however, is a direct allusion to bathers in the paintings of Impressionist and post-Impressionist artists such as Pierre Renoir and especially Paul Cézanne, and to the earlier Arcadian themes of Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorraine. With all the figures depicted – the couples riding horses, energetically cavorting and quietly conversing, as well as the bather – there is again a sense of an idealized relationship with the natural world, of an idyll that also speaks of harmony between men and women.



Robert Michener, *Gentle on My Mind*, detail

"As an artist I seek to transcend patterns of behaviour in myself, which result from what I perceive to be negative aspects of my conditioning. I try to discover and use potentialities within me, which I hope will offer opportunities for greater happiness. The primary areas I seek to investigate are the ones least utilized in our society – those of play, gregariousness, cooperation and love."⁸

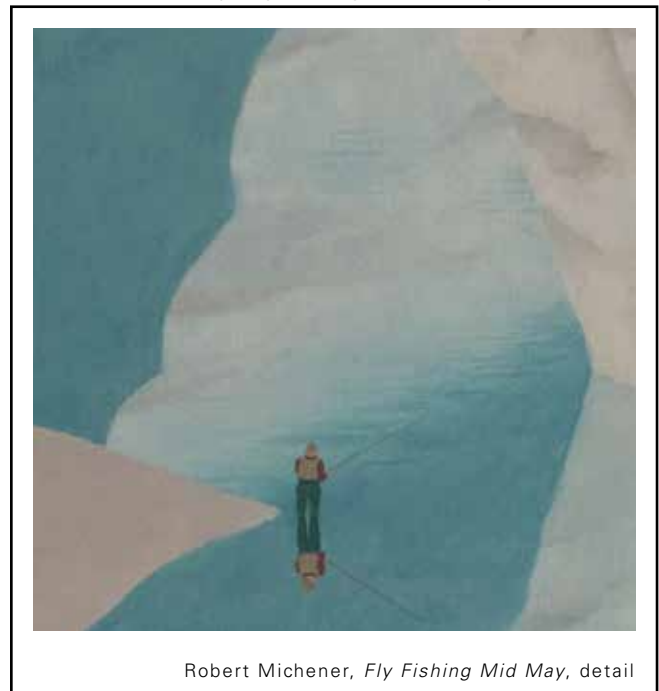
Fly Fishing Mid May, 1996

This important painting, executed in oil on linen, is part of Michener's "Gorgeous Gorges" series, which employs childhood memories of place and purpose to create dreamy, almost Edenic landscapes, viewed from above, as if by a bird or an omniscient being. Drawing from his boyhood experience of fly-fishing in the Root River Valley of southeastern Minnesota, an area whose distinctive topography of limestone cliffs and deep gorges was carved out by glacial action, Michener has again proposed a gentle and harmonious relationship between human beings and the natural world. His delicate and slightly misty palette of pale greens, buffs, blues, and taupes and his pointillist handling of foliage, rocks, and water suggest a kind of magic realism, one that enhances the meditative mood of the work. As with other paintings in this series, Michener flattens the imagery against the picture plane and manipulates the perspective, so that the overall aerial view is in some places playfully tipped and disjointed. Additionally confounding to our point-of-view are the reflections cast by the pale cliffs across the gently rippling water.

The only animals in this still and silent scene are three crows, sailing on air currents above the gorges, and the tiny figure of an angler, barely discernible among the immensity of landscape forms, standing knee-deep in water in the lower left corner of the

composition. Again, Michener uses fly-fishing as a metaphor of peaceful communion with nature, while the river in which the figure stands can be seen as "a source of healing"⁹ from the wounds of contemporary urban life. The late writer and publisher Paula Gustafson noted that "Michener takes the idea of nature-as-nurturer one step further by showing the wilderness as an almost feminine environment of delicate tracery and playful illusion."¹⁰

As discussed above, Michener has drawn on a number of formal traditions found in historical Chinese landscape painting, including that of the



Robert Michener, *Fly Fishing Mid May*, detail

tiny human figure within the immense natural environment. "I [have] often placed figures in vast wilderness landscapes to suggest a view of man living as part of nature, rather than the traditional Western view which asserts man's separateness from and supremacy over the rest of nature,"¹¹ Michener writes. Here, he proposes both a reverence for life and an understanding of the interconnectedness of all life. "The lone angler symbolizes a vanishing personal

and private experience with wilderness... Most fly fishers are true sportsman and practice catch and release. Unlike most other human activity in nature, this sport is not destructive to the environment."¹²

The sombreness of Michener's environmental message – that we urgently need to heal our planet or witness its complete destruction – is countered in this painting by the exquisite sense of peacefulness it exudes.

Notes

1. Robert Michener, "Artist Statement," *The Gorgeous Gorges* (Surrey: Surrey Art Gallery, 1998).
2. Robert Michener, unpublished artist statement, 2002.
3. F.S.C. Northrop, "The Meeting of East and West." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/F._S._C._Northrop (accessed July 9, 2013).
4. Adrian Livesley, "A Quiet Rebellion," *Robert Michener: Looking Back* (Vancouver: Ian Tan Gallery, 2010).
5. Michener, in conversation with the author, September 12, 2012.
6. Livesley, *op.cit.*
7. Robert Michener, unpublished artist statement, 2002.
8. Robert Michener, "Cover Story/Robert Michener," *Playboard* (Vancouver: The Playhouse Theatre, December 1974), 13.
9. Paula Gustafson, "Robert Michener: The Gorgeous Gorges," *Artichoke* (Summer 1998, v. 10, no. 2), 36.
10. Gustafson, *op.cit.*, 36.
11. Robert Michener, "Artist's Statement," *Robert Michener: Recent Farm Paintings* (Burnaby: Burnaby Art Gallery, 1983).
12. Robert Michener, "Artist Statement," *The Gorgeous Gorges*, *op.cit.*

***Introduction to Robert Michener's
Recent Paintings: Gorgeous Gorges***
Liane Davison, 1998

There are moments from our childhood that we carry with us throughout our lives. How we see the present is often coloured by how we remember our past.

When I remember my own childhood's perfect moments, among them are times spent in a bird sanctuary at the lakeshore, under willow trees and far away from the city and its confusing pressures. I've realized that I keep a picture in my mind's eye of that particular place, together with its particular sound and smell, with surprising clarity. It is because of this memory, of feeling safe and intimate with nature, that I appreciate the intentions of Robert Michener's paintings of a remembered place from his boyhood.

City living can quickly distance us from an intimacy with nature. Familiarity with wilderness can easily become limited to what we might see on the TV or on ads for four wheel drive vehicles. Weekend drives in the country don't offer the deep experience that we might long for, but rather brief, voyeuristic, and distanced views. A deep, intimate experience, of being "in the moment" with nature, is usually only achieved during a sustained, quiet activity, such as hiking, canoeing, or fishing – particularly fly fishing.

Michener's own childhood was spent in a small town in Minnesota. After school he often hopped on his bike with his fishing rod to visit a favorite creek. There he would spend time, deep in the dramatic limestone gorges and ravines, until dark or supertime- whichever came first. Fly fishing has been a passion of many men (and more often now, women) for generations. Movies such as Robert Redford's, *A River Runs Through It* capture

both the artistry and peace that fly fishing offers. Writers such as Hemingway, particularly in the "Nick Adams" short stories, remember fly fishing as a way of healing oneself from the wounds of living, of love and war.

For Michener, his recent paintings are both a means of recapturing the experience of being a young man, and acting out an ageless ritual of engaging with the land and wildness. In all his landscapes, the fisher (and sometimes bather) is made minute within the grandeur of the cliffs and river banks. The planes of colour Michener fashions to create the land and the dappled patterns of vegetation envelope the figure. Although the landscapes are, in the end, inventions of Michener's imagination, they are made to represent both the difficulty of accessing nature and the healing, supportive environment that it offers

William Wordsworth, known for his poems about pastoral scenes and the joy of living, created a poem, *The River Duddon* in 1820 which used a stream as its narrative thread. Part XXVI captures some of the romanticism expressed within Michener's paintings¹:

RETURN, Contented! For fondly I pursued,
Even when a child, the Streams - unheard, unseen;
Through tangled woods, impending rocks, between;
Or, free as air, with flying inquest viewed
The sullen reservoirs whence their bold brood -
Pure as the morning, fretful, boisterous, keen,
Green as the salt-sea billows, white and green -
Poured down the hills, a choral multitude!
Nor have I tracked their course for scanty gains;
They taught me random cares and truant joys,
That shield from mischief and preserve from stains
Vague minds, while men are growing out of boys;
Mature Fancy owes to their rough noise
Impetuous thoughts that brook not servile reins.

Michener has written about the inspiration for his paintings: "This was the environment I loved as a boy... Through the years of my adolescence; much of my happiest time was spent roaming that world - hiking, fishing, hunting and bird watching. Memories of those wooded hills, valleys, streams and cliffs form the basis of my present series of painting." The gorges paintings, like his earlier landscape series, aspire towards more than mere representation of a boyhood memory. He writes, "My intention is to create visual symbols that articulate a viable relationship between humanity and to avoid what is clearly the greatest danger to civilization - destruction of the environment."²

Michener's words, and his art encourage us to see and feel nature and humanity, and value a harmony in their relationship.

Notes

1. Mark Van Doren, editor, *William Wordsworth; Selected Poetry*. (New York: Random House, Modern Library College Edition. 1950), 657
2. Robert Michener, excerpt from a letter to author, January 12, 1997

Landscape as Metaphor Chirstine Lawrance, 1998

It is in vain to dream of a wilderness distant from ourselves. There is none such. It is the bog in our brains and bowls, the primitive vigor of Nature in us, that inspires that dream.

Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, August 30, 1856¹

One of the founding fathers of modern environmentalism, Thoreau touched on sentiments which contemporary society still struggles with today - man's relationship with nature; our search to find ways in which to interact with the natural world.

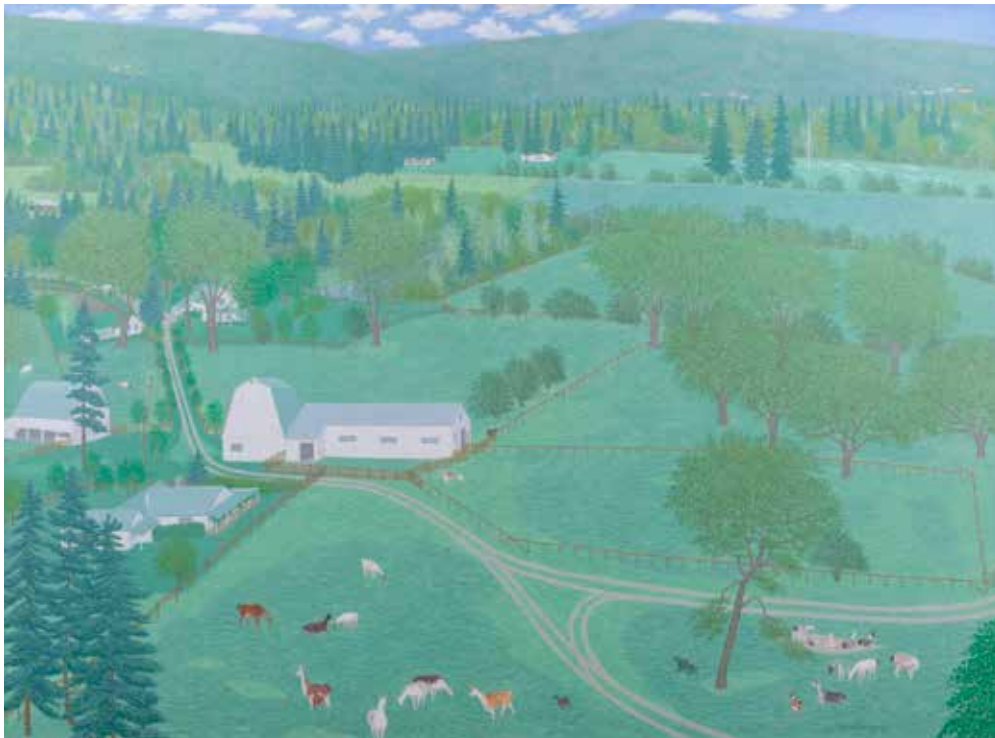
Over the course of history artists have worked at communicating the richness and complexity of the landscape tradition. Painters such as van Gogh, Matisse and Cezanne among others tried in their paintings to give form to a different possibility of man within nature, in a dynamic and reciprocal relationship. It was Cezanne, more than any other who sought to paint nature from within. He referred to himself as the "primitive of his age". Few artists who came after pursued the same intent - the search for a vision, a visual metaphor for a life affirming future, in which mankind lives in harmony with nature.

The Gorgeous Gorges series by Robert Michener portrays serpentine rivers and deep canyon pools embraced by cliffs, scaling rock formations and wild foliage. These oil on linen and canvas works mark a new direction for this Surrey-based artist. Following his farm paintings of the 1980s and early 90s these works are born out of his struggle to find a new motif in which to release his creative energies. Consistent with his long-standing values and expressive intentions, Michener returned to his past, to experiences from his childhood growing up in a rural

community in the southeastern corner of Minnesota, an area that is geographically unique to that region. This visitation to his youth sparked memories of that area: remembrances of roaming around in the wilderness hiking, fishing, hunting and bird watching. Memories of those hills, valleys, streams and cliffs form the basis for this series.

The interplay between wild nature and nature shaped by man has been a dominant metaphor in his art for the past thirty years. Michener's roots are in Abstract Expressionism, a movement which developed out of New York in the 1940s and 50s. Rather than seeing paintings as representations of the world outside the artwork, Abstract Expressionists looked at painting in terms of essential elements of form such as line, colour, texture, light and dark and scale. These elements were a basic vocabulary used to express ideas, emotions, and spirituality. Form and content were acknowledged as joined and interdependent. Jackson Pollack and William de Kooning's emphasis on spontaneity influenced Michener's work.

Over the last three decades, he has evolved from an initially non-representational action painter, then moved into realism with the figure in the landscape as the dominant motif. Over the years, both the figure and landscape have shifted in their prominence and stylistic rendering. In his beach scenes of the 1960s, the figure was dominant, although often set against a foil of wild nature. The Howe Sound paintings of the 1970s saw the human presence become diminutive against the grandeur of the mountain scapes. In the mid-70s with his beach, park and city scenes the balance tipped the other way. By the late 70s, with his series of paintings of the Badlands of South Dakota, the wilderness again prevailed. The 80s and early 90s again saw a shift in his work with his farm paintings. Domesticated nature was central, although



Robert Michener, *Springfield Llama Farm #5, Spring Morning*, oil paint on linen (139 x 190.5 cm)
SAG 1996.15.01.04.01. Gift of the Artist. Photograph by Scott Massey.

generally set within or intertwined with wilderness. With this current series of work, Michener has again turned to the wilderness. Yet, this work is not typical of the previous vistas of mountains or the Badlands. He has chosen to reflect a more intimate experience using images of the cliffs and streams of his youth. Informed and influenced by traditional Chinese landscape paintings theme of spirit and nature, Michener believes “the presences of the fishermen symbolize an intimate human bond with nature.”

Fly-Fishing 7, 1995-96, the first work in this series, Michener schematizes rock forms and makes the water into parallel ripples, so that each becomes a specific linear area of rhythmic pattern. By focusing not on specific details but more on the use of colour, shape and line, Michener has created his own individual idiom. He employs a subtle control of light and shade to create the clear, crisp brightness present in nature, as well as having the full range of

blues and greens to accompany it. The work itself, takes on an eternal verity; the picture of an earthly paradise. The composition of this work shows the wild, rugged majesty of landscape.

Michener’s landscapes take on a lyrical and almost decorative quality. His paintings are characterized by careful finishing, subtle use of colour, pattern, design and spatial clarity. His masterful colour sense and ability to simplify forms have created a recognizable and distinctive style. The calm, flattened, images balanced with soft tones and almost grid-like patterns of imagery are strategies utilized consistently by Michener in this collection of work.

In *Fishing at First Light*, 1997 dominant trees are bursting forth out of the confines which are holding it in illustrating the immense unruliness of nature. This work delights in rich foliage and the wild rush of great canyon falls into deep calm pools. Using this imagery as his main source of subject matter, he is

showing the viewer a unique perspective of viewing nature and the wilderness. His work illustrates the sublime aspects of nature. The tall, thick, dense trees and scaling cliffs emphasize the majestic qualities of nature and how they dwarf the figures within their midst.

These invented landscapes communicate the total and solid presence of nature. Design elements hold the work together. Never a realist, Michener has endeavored to impose an order of logic and playful formalism into his images. Each painting in this series illustrates a different vista that suggests a sense of continuity in his work. He feels that spatial illusion is a major expressive means available to painters. The sense of scale being achieved through the illusion of space and the tension between the actual and the illusion. Employing a technique of traditional Chinese landscape painting, he creates the illusion of distance by decreasing the clarity as well as by decreasing size. The aesthetic appeal of the images resides in the relationship between the mood evoked by color and formal elements. The results of this technique can be seen in renderings of the trees and cliffs in *Spring, Wind, Cliffs and Crows*, 1997. His use of aerial views, distorted perspective and close-up elements such as rocks and foliage interrupt the spatial clarity of his scenes. The viewer is never regulated to one point of view through typical techniques of perspectives but rather is shown all of the scene. Viewing the work, one never knows quite where they stand within the landscape.

As an artist, Michener endeavours to create a world in which he would like to exist. He affirms aspects of life which he sees as life enhancing and denies those which appear destructive. Although they frequently derive from specific locations or combinations of several sites, the structures of the painting in this

series are imaginative. His work combats feelings of aggressiveness and masculinity which typically occur in contemporary Western art. He is influenced by the gentle, feminine and playfulness found in traditions of Oriental art. Michener feels that these ideals are needed today if we are to learn to relate to nature in a positive way. His work challenges the perception of viewing. To create an illusion by arranging elements found in landscape - the land, water and sky, trees and rocks in a way which the viewer is led to play within these elements and interact with them on an emotive and intellectual level. The viewer is to be a participant in the process and interact with nature's dance.

Gorgeous Gorges creates visual symbols that articulate the gentle and reciprocal relationship that is possible between humanity and the rest of nature. Michener sees his work as practical metaphors for a new way of feeling and living with the world, to suggest a reverence for all life, yet not religious. "If my paintings seem to harken back to a bygone era - to a reality not open to most people living in an ever-increasing urban environment and social world, can only say that it is so. I project an ideal symbol."

Note:

1. Robert L. Rothwell, *Henry David Thoreau: An American Landscape* (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 126-27.

References:

- Chipp, B. Herschel. *Theories of Modern Art*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968.
- Adams, Laurie Schnieder. *The Methodologies of Art*. New York: HarperCollins, 1996.
- Schama, Simon. *Landscape and Memory*. Toronto: Random House. 1995

Artist's Statement, 1977

The most important characteristic of all successful works of art is that they are expressive of feeling. Every work of art represents a choice of certain feelings over others. It is a value choice.

In traditional cultures a large measure of the choice of feeling is made for the artist through the mode of artistic conventions. In societies such as our own, where traditions have broken down, the choice falls largely on each individual artist. Often the artist's own choice of feeling is made intuitively -- almost as if he were following instinct. Frequently the artist cannot articulate or intellectualize the process of selection even to himself. This is one major reason that the generally assumed connection between art and life remains so baffling and mysterious to most people.

A minority of artists (of which I am one) feel the need to establish a conceptual framework in which intuitive feelings can be connected to intellectual understanding of life problems.

Western civilisation has been shaped by conceptions which place man apart from and in opposition to the rest: of nature. These conceptions led to science and technology. They nurtured individualism and capitalism, and allowed Western man to enjoy an unprecedented degree of diversity and individual fulfillment.

Today we have come full circle. A growing minority of people around the world has perceived that mankind is on a disaster course unless it changes its basic conceptions and learns to live in harmony with nature rather than in opposition to nature. This is the fundamental life problem of our era. In the terms of art, I attempt to address my art to this life problem.

One can only speak in generalities about feeling and works of art which are symbols for feeling. Good works of art symbolize complexities of feeling which defy analysis and translation into language. Nevertheless, they always have some obvious characteristics which can be named and talked about. Western art has recurrent characteristics which result from the West's conception of nature. These are evident in the form of the works -- in their color, tone, texture, pattern and structure -- rather than in subject matter. The true content of art work is the feelings symbolized or expressed through the formal elements.

Feelings of aggressiveness strength, masculinity, control, coolness, restraint, passion, sensuousness, and drama commonly occur in Western art. This is a large range of feelings including some apparent opposites. Extensive as the list is, there are some aspects of feeling which rarely occur in Western art and then usually as minor notes or else relegated to the decorative arts. Western art is seldom overtly gentle, feminine, playful or gregarious. However, if we turn to the arts of the traditional cultures of the Orient, we find that the qualities largely missing from Western art predominate in Eastern art.

I believe that those felt qualities which predominate in Eastern art are needed by us today. If we are to learn to relate to nature and to each other in positive ways which will prove to be liberating for the human psyche. We must balance our aggressiveness with gentleness. Instead of attempting to dominate the world outside the self, we must learn to empathize with entities outside the self. Instead of defending the self, we must teach ourselves to be receptive. Rather than imposing order on reality, we must learn to play with our world -- to enter into cooperative, reciprocal relationships with it.

In my painting I am trying to create symbols for feelings of playfulness, gregariousness, gentleness and femininity without the loss of assertiveness. As a child of my culture, for me to achieve this requires imagination and self-transcendence.

Landscape is a recurrent motif in art history because it is the motif which symbolizes man's abiding need to comprehend nature and his relationship with the rest of nature. In the art of painting, differing feelings in relation to nature can adequately be symbolized only through landscape painting. I paint landscapes for this reason.

The abstract expressionist painter Jackson Pollock, along with others of that art movement, symbolized in his paintings feelings of gregariousness and spontaneity – but in the abstract, that is, apart from any specific relationship to the world outside his paintings. His important insight – the isolation of some of the abstract forms which symbolize gregariousness and spontaneity – was a major step in the development of a gregarious art in the West. Pollock's action painting method was too limited to permit his knowledge of gregarious feeling to be extended into representational painting. I believe that the introjection of gregarious feeling into relationship with the world outside the self in representational painting is the next necessary step which the abstract expressionists were unable to take. It was because I wanted to take that step that I moved away from nonrepresentational painting many years ago. For most of my artistic life my goal has been to create paintings which symbolize feelings of gregariousness in a cooperative, give-and-take relationship with nature.

Landscape differs from the other basic motifs through its primary concern for space – close, middle, and distant. Experience of landscape is primarily a visual spatial experience as opposed to the more

tactile and kinetic experience of interior and still-life space. Objects in landscape do not generally have the importance they have in still-life painting, nor is solidity as major a concern as it is in figure painting.

When we are in the midst of nature, landscape is all around us, not just in front of us. When we are indoors looking out a window, the landscape appears to be only in front of us and to recede from the foreground, middle ground to the distance. Yet even when experiencing landscape through the proscenium of a window, we have a very strong counter tendency not to attend to it in a logical sequence from near to far, but rather to let our attention shift randomly and playfully between elements that occur at different distances.

The Renaissance convention of perspective is a way of representing landscape as if looking from a window, but also ordering the experience of space so that it proceeds logically from near to middle to far. The space begins just behind the picture frame at a point already outside the observer, and continues into the distance as a reality apart from him. A separation between man – the subject and the observer – and nature – the object and the observed – is thus created and maintained. This orderly detachment evokes feelings of confidence and security and appears as a protection of the self or the subject by maintaining the other-than-self in a position of controlled distance. However, feelings of detachment may intensify into feelings of loneliness and alienation. The Renaissance formula for pictorial space masks both a fear of nature and a hostility towards her. Perhaps this is a carry over of the Christian view which equated the worldly or material with evil. As I suggested earlier, antagonistic feelings toward nature are at the root of the life problems of our time.

When one sets out to paint a landscape, one starts with a rectangular flat surface in front of one, which is not unlike standing before a window. The hardest thing is to avoid falling into the Renaissance convention and the creation of an illusion, a symbol or representation of landscape, which starts just behind the edge of the canvas and recedes into the distance away from oneself. If this is done, feelings of separation and detachment will result.

If one is trying to convey feelings of interaction, of being part of things, of empathy with nature, one has to arrange the elements of landscape – the land, water, sky, trees, rocks, etc., the near, middle, far – in such a way that the viewer is led to play with these same elements and to interact with them with his intellect and his feelings. In short, the viewer must become a participant in natural processes and interact with the other actors nature's dance.

The challenge to me in painting, then, has been to find the means to symbolize gregarious feelings in relation to landscape imagery without losing the representational elements of landscape, and without losing what I consider to be essential in our interplay with landscape – that is, its space.

In the course of my efforts I raised horizons. I used aerial views, I warped perspectives and interjected close-up elements such as rock forms and foliage at the top of the picture. I compressed the space. I interrupted spacial continuity with arbitrary bands of cloud forms. A few of the earlier pictures in this exhibition still contain many such devices.

Recently I have moved farther away from representations which look like the elements of landscape, toward more symbolic representations which stand for landscape elements. There is no sharp divider between the two. The movement toward the

use of symbols for mountains, rocks, trees, etc., has made it easier for me to play with the elements – to move them around arbitrarily and to be more playful in my use of colour. Sometimes I have portrayed more than one scene in the same picture so that penetration of the space at one point is contradicted by a return to the picture plane at another. I have made use of narrative in my subject matter to introject an illusion of time. I have played jokes with scale. Mountains and figures bear no relation to their actual sizes in respect to one another. Objects which read as farther away may appear larger than similar ones which are closer. Birds may appear as large as people. In my most recent pictures, I have used bands of abstract patterns to interrupt the scenes and to establish contradictory relationships on the picture plane. Throughout, two dimensional patterns and linear movements re-assert the picture plane in a kind of counterpoint opposition to the elements which create movements into and out of the picture. I have tried to avoid the literal appearance and the logic of perception which results when nature is kept at a distance, in favor of the playful perception we have of nature when we are actually in it. I have tried to identify with nature and to participate in the exuberance of natural processes. I hope my paintings invite others to do the same.

Artist's Statement, 1997

The south eastern corner of Minnesota, where I grew up, and north eastern Iowa and an adjacent part of Wisconsin is geographically different from the surrounding, essentially prairie topography. When much of North America was covered with ice during the last glacial period, for reasons which remain unclear, the glacier split and left this small pocket untouched. As the glacier melted and withdrew huge rivers cut through this area. These forces shaped the unique features of this locale. The broad, flat valleys of those ancient rivers are flanked by limestone cliffs and steep hills. Above the cliffs, between the valleys, stretch relatively level plateaus. The region was part of the central hardwood forest and covered with numerous kinds of deciduous trees from oak, maple, and elm to chestnut and walnut. Evergreen trees were limited to isolated stands of pine and on the sunny, more arid high hills to a dwarf species of cedar. With the coming of white settlers in the first half of the 19th century, the plateaus and bottomlands became farmland. The smaller valleys and the cliffs and hills remained, in large measure, hardwood forest. It is a very special and beautiful corner of the world.

This was the environment I loved as a boy. Much of my happiest time was spent roaming that world-hiking, fishing, hunting and bird watching. Memories of those wooded hills, valleys, streams and cliffs connect with my long standing admiration for and influence from the great traditions of Chinese and Japanese landscape painting to provide the inspiration for my present series of paintings.

The interplay between wild nature and humanly shaped nature, which characterized my childhood environment, has been the dominant metaphor in my art for three decades. There is nearly always a

human presence within my landscapes, but the balance between wilderness and humanized nature has shifted back and forth. In my beach scenes of the 60s the human presence was dominant, although most often set against a foil of wild nature. In my Howe Sound paintings of the early 1970s the human presence became diminutive compared to the grandeur of mountains. In the mid 70s with beach and park scenes and city scapes, the balance tipped the other way. With the badlands paintings of the late 70s the wilderness again prevailed. With the farm paintings of the 80s and early 90s, domesticated nature was central, although generally set within or intertwined with wilderness. In the new series I have returned to wild nature, but rather than the grand vistas of my mountain and badlands paintings, to the more intimate streams and cliffs of my youth. As before, most often a solitary figure—a fisherman, walker or bather symbolizes an intimate human bond with nature.

My intention in my paintings is to create visual symbols that articulate a gentler and, I believe, viable relationship between humanity and the rest of nature. A new cultural paradigm is needed if humanity is to avoid what is clearly the greatest danger to civilization—destruction of the environment. Such a world view must become universal in order to have significant impact in a globalized, corporatist economic structure. Free from effective governmental control, huge multinational corporations are assaulting untrammelled nature the world over in the name of short term profits. Burgeoning, third world populations, struggling to feed themselves, further degrade our natural heritage.

It is not likely that any work of art can have much effect on this situation. I think of W. H. Auden's terse comment that "Poetry never changed anything." I

also suspect that Herbert Marcuse had it right when he wrote in his preface to *The Aesthetic Dimension* that “The political potential of art lies only in its own aesthetic dimension. Its relation to praxis is inexorably indirect, mediated, and frustrating. The more immediately political the work of art, the more it reduces the power of estrangement and the radical, transcendent goals of change.”

My paintings may perhaps be viewed by some as romantic escapism or a New Age fantasy. They are neither. It is my hope that they are practical metaphors for a new way of feeling and living in the world. This way suggests reverence for all life. It arises primarily from the discoveries of science ranging from our new knowledge of the vastness of the universe, to the interconnectedness of our being here at all. If my paintings seem to harken back to a bygone era—to a reality not open to most people living in an ever increasing urban and social world, I can only say that it is so. I project an ideal symbol.

In the 17th century painters like Poussin, Lorrain and Rubens pictured a rational, antique Golden Age as a metaphor for an emerging cultural ideal which we now call The Age of Reason. In my own way, and appropriate to the realities of our time, I am striving to do something similar.

Artist's Statement, 1997 **From *Gorgeous Gorges* Catalogue**

Like most artists of my generation my artistic beginnings are in abstract expressionism. Next came a period of abstract figurative work. About thirty years ago I focused on the landscape motif. I believe the greatest issue facing humanity is our relationship with nature. Throughout the history of art the landscape motif has symbolized the beliefs and attitudes towards the natural world.

My wish is to create paintings which manifest a gentler, more reciprocal relationship with nature. I disavowed traditional perspective as a formula imposed on nature which maintains a distance—between the viewer and nature. Yet spatial illusion is a primary characteristic of landscape painting. In my paintings I playfully manipulate three dimensional spaces. The viewer is drawn into an interactive relationship with the motif. Realism too is abandoned. It too often represents a crude materialism in which nature is regarded as “stuff” - an object without spirit. I am interested in nature as living process. I want the inner quality or feeling of my motif rather than its materiality.

About a year and a half ago I commenced a series of paintings my wife Ann calls my “gorgeous gorges” paintings. Like my farm series of the 80s and early 90s, these paintings began with recollections from my boyhood years in Minnesota. Just as the farms evolved to become Surrey, Langley and Vancouver Island farms, the canyon paintings have taken their own life and little resemble the limestone cliffs and woodlands of the Root River valley in southeastern Minnesota. On an auto trip this past summer my imagination was seized by The Rocky Mountains.

Their wildly stratified geological structures and varied colours have inspired my newest paintings.

The gorges have become a metaphor, a close up vision of wild nature. The lone angler symbolizes a vanishing personal and private experience with wilderness - a symbol of how humans have flourished in nature with intelligence, skill and technology. Most fly fishers are true sportsman and practice catch and release. Unlike most other human activity in nature, this sport is not destructive to the environment.

Terms and Conditions

The images, texts, documentation, illustrations, designs, icons and all other content are protected by Canadian and international copyright laws. The content may be covered by other restrictions as well, including copyright and other proprietary rights held by third parties. The Surrey Art Gallery retains all rights, including copyright, in data, images, text and any other information. The Gallery expressly forbids the copying of any protected content, except for purposes of fair dealing, as defined by Canadian copyright law. © Surrey Art Gallery, artists and authors.



An Open Book

a catalogue of artworks from the Surrey Art Gallery's Permanent Collection

ISSN 1910-1392 ISBN 978-1-926573-19-9 Published 2015



13750 88 Avenue
Surrey, BC V3W 3L1
Phone: 604-501-5566
artgallery@surrey.ca
www.surrey.ca/artgallery



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada



BRITISH COLUMBIA
ARTS COUNCIL
An Agency of the Province of British Columbia