



**MEL PEKARSKY**  
**THINGS IN THE DESERT**

Paintings, Drawings, and Artist's Books  
1974 - 2009

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UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY, STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY



# BLOOMING DESERT: Mel Pekar's Inscapes

by Donald Kuspit

...we find by Experience, that there are several Modifications of Matter which the Mind, without any previous Consideration, pronounces at first Sight Beautiful or Deformed....There is something more bold and masterly in the rough careless Strokes of Nature, than in the nice Touches and Embellishments of Art....Yet we find the Works of Nature still more pleasant, the more they resemble those of art...

Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, 1712

To have aesthetic experiences we must first expose ourselves to ravishment by the external formal qualities of the object. Then we must grapple with our doubts and suspicions about its internal qualities. Since this conflict relates only to the mind of man and man's products, the great avenue of relief is to expose ourselves to the beauty of nature.

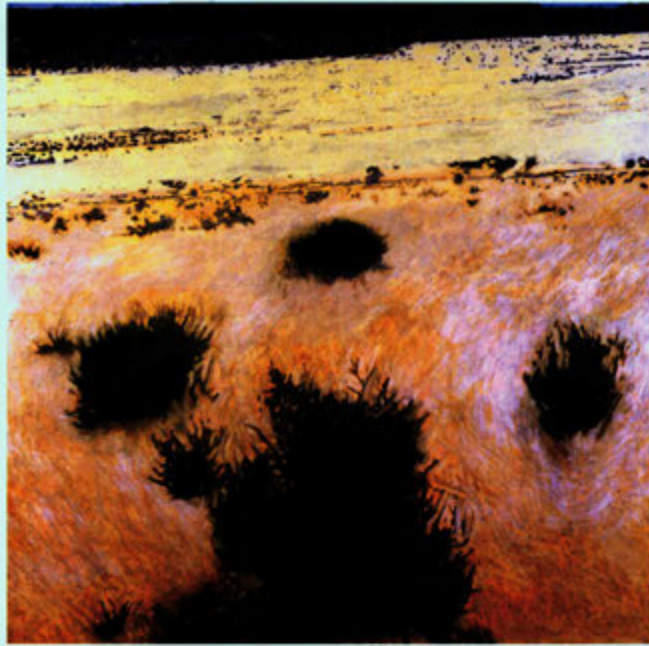
Donald Meltzer, *The Apprehension of Beauty* (1)

Turning the pages of Mel Pekar's sketchbooks, I was struck by the difference—conflict, I would say—between the abundance of desert imagery, all site-specific and meticulously intricate, and the seemingly loosely handled, free hand and spontaneous, gestural works, all more or less abstract expressionistic. "More or less," I say, because in some of them the desert landscape seemed to emerge, with a certain hallucinatory vigor—*Ghosts*, 1989 makes the point clearly—from the atmospheric matrix of painterly brushwork, reminding me of the surrealist embrace of what Breton famously called Leonardo's paranoid wall, re-realized in Dali's paranoic-critical activity and above all, for Breton, in Max Ernst's automatist frottages. Pekar's beautiful sketches—some seemingly quick, others laboriously worked—have the same irksome quality: inarticulate feelings suddenly become articulate images—a sort of representation of the unrepresentable—even as they remain peculiarly inarticulate, and thus elusive and auratic, ambiguously unconscious phantasies and self-conscious perceptions—the tension that is the gist of so-called "classical" modernism, whether it tends to abstract expression or objectifying observation.



*Triptych*, 1974  
Oil on canvas, 60 x 82"  
Courtesy of the artist





*High Country, 2002*  
Oil and oil stick on canvas, 60 x 60"  
Courtesy Renaissance Technologies LLC  
Photo credit: Gary Mamay

Flash-in-the-pan images, "surreally" beautiful, "automatically" appeared in the stream of gesturally "deformed" surfaces, as though by some perceptual miracle, suggesting a visionary experience rather than a routine appreciation of nature's beauty. Pekarsky's relatively rough-hewn sketches of nature seemed all the more uncanny because of their peculiar uncertainty, masked by their quickness, the air of immediacy hiding their "negative capability," as Keats called it, meaning "capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reach after fact and reasons"—even though the raw facts of nature were there, if elusively, which precluded their rationalization. Keats thought that without negative capability there was no "achievement," meaning the imaginative discovery of fresh possibilities of perception and unusual insights, corresponding to the unusualness of reality: negative capability involved a creative reconnoitering of reality in recognition that it was a peculiarly groundless terra incognita rather than an eternally fixed and "grounded" terrain. The desert is never unmistakably the case, but "known" through the imaginative mistakes that ground its changing terrain in groundless perception—perception that involves a willing suspension of belief in what it sees, the refusal to trust itself in order to gain the trust of the things it sees, without presupposing that they are the terra firma of perception. In negative capability one's self-doubt

and doubtful perceptions mingle to form a sort of internal landscape—what Gerard Manley Hopkins eloquently called an "inscape."

I am arguing that Pekarsky's desert landscapes are interior as well as exterior landscapes, subjective and objective at the same time, which is why they seem uncannily real rather than materially real, however much organic and inorganic material, living plants and dead sand, exist in them. The interior and exterior—the psychic and the physical—mingle yet bring each other into question—negate as well as support each other. That is, Pekarsky's desert conveys the unconscious uncertainties of his negative capability, which is why he experiences the desert as the greatest of Mysteries—it seems infinite and uncontainable, unstoppably extending into inhospitable space, a wasteland beyond the pale of civilization and waiting to consume it, and thus more sublime than beautiful (for beautiful things are self-contained, implying they are seamlessly integrated and thus not deformed, which is a good part of their beauty, and the reason they are experienced as emotionally agreeable and cognitively appealing, which is why it is paradoxical that Pekarsky experiences the desert as both, another indication of his creative apperception)—even as he consciously attends to the facts of its appearance, intuitively knowing they are not its reality, as his unconscious negative capability tells him. Thus Pekarsky's desert has "personality" and a "body ego"—a subliminally all-too-human meaning and presence—even though it is the age-old symbol of absence and loss, not to say death, living death perhaps, because of its growths, but finally the consuming blankness of death, paradoxically evident in the shining whiteness of Pekarsky's desert sand, light breathing pseudo-life into the corpse of nature.

Desert space is of course also sacred space, as the fact that saints go there—retreat from everyday life and busy society—to have their private, yet publicly influential visions. From Ezekiel to Christ the desert has been a place where one renounces the world to see or at least communicate with the divine. The desert is a place of self-communion and communion with "higher powers," asking for their advice and guidance. Far from the profane world, in the desert one can attune to the sacred in oneself and the cosmos, of which the vast desert is a microcosm. It is only in the void of the inner desert, projected into the outer desert, that one can aesthetically experience the best part of oneself. Far from the maddening world—including the



academic world in which he works—Pekarsky can come into his self-creative own, using the desert landscape as what has been called a dream screen on which he can envision his own freedom. It initially appears as the terrifying emptiness of the desert—anxiety-arousing because there are no human beings to relate and respond to it, because one is completely alone in it—but, if one doesn't flinch in the face of its emptiness, but confronts it with one's own response, it is suddenly discovered to be a wonderland of unexpected life, the *élan vital* forcing itself through the morbid sand in the form of random growths that proliferate to the horizon and beyond, suggesting that the desert is more full than empty. One can be happily rather than unhappily alone in it—alone with Mother Nature, in her strangest form, for she seems withholding and giving simultaneously, deserting one in the act of nourishing one, cold even as she is hot. The desert may seem dry, but it is wet under the surface, which is why all sorts of plants grow in it.

Mother Nature abhors a vacuum, and so does the desert which is her most conspicuous vacuum, a seemingly empty, withered breast which we fill with our feelings about life and death, giving our existence cosmic significance. For Pekarsky, the desert offers what Addison called a physically "rude kind of Magnificence" but also a refined kind of psychic Magnificence, all the more so because the desert has no pretensions to social Magnificence. They are utterly meaningless in its sacred emptiness—in its sublime space, which however terrifying ripens our consciousness so that it experiences its own limits by encountering

the idea of the limitless. Having shed the impure consciousness of the self imposed by social constraints and responsibilities—the limited sense of self they afford, the exterior instrumental self that society tells us is the only meaningful self, and the only self we can ever "really" be, social usefulness being the sum and substance of human existence and significance—the desert becomes the space where independent interiority and pure consciousness can come into their own.

There are fewer and fewer natural spaces that have not been corrupted by human presence, defiled and desecrated by the human ambition to conquer and enslave nature, have it do our bidding—master it without mastering ourselves. As Donald Meltzer writes, "we have to travel to the highest mountains, the open sea, the utter desert wastes to find nature untouched by the hand of man and his inventions and judgment. Some thousands of years of sylviculture, agriculture, horticulture and animal husbandry have surrounded us with modifications of nature, training her creatures to the will, use and taste of man. Even the virginity of the skies is deflowered by jet trails, when it is not obscured by smog. The bluest sky with the loveliest clouds may be tainted with radio-activity. There is no gainsaying it, we live our lives amidst man-shaped aesthetic and man-fashioned vulgarity." (2)

Determined to escape this fatal vulgarity, Pekarsky retreats from it to "the utter desert wastes" in search of unmodified nature, and to have the solitude in which he can explore his own unmodified



*Ghosts, 1989*  
Mixed media on unstretched  
canvas, 96 x 162"  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo credit: Gary Mamay





*Strange Light, 2008*  
Oil and pencil on canvas, 16 x 12"  
Courtesy of the artist

nature, that is, his inner nature. William James famously wrote that religion is what one does with one's solitude, and Pekarsky finds religion in the desert, where it has traditionally been found. In and through his desert art he recovers the sense of what Donald Winnicott called the true self, involving "spontaneous gesture and personalized idea," signs of natural or primary creativity, as Winnicott said, in contrast to the conformist false self, the self all too worldly and social for its own creative good and self-respect. Solitude is necessary for creativity, and Pekarsky finds solitude in the desert, which becomes his fountain of creative youth. I am saying that for Pekarsky making art means being true to one's creative self rather than conforming to social, not to say populist, expectations of what art and the self should be. The art world having become a desert of conceptual conformity, confirming that the so-called shock of the new has become the schlock of the neo—that so-called revolution, subversion, transgression, in-your-face irony, mud-in-your-eye farce, have become dead-ends, indicating that avant-garde attitudinizing is no longer the creative and critical truth it briefly was (it has become "advanced" entertainment, entropically falsifying art)—Pekarsky had to go into a very material desert to escape it and creatively survive the false consciousness of

art that avant-gardism has become. Thus the desert becomes Pekarsky's creative garden of paradise.

For all its apparent barrenness, it is far from sterile. It is fertile in fits and starts as the scattered growths that proliferate in Pekarsky's images make clear. The vegetation reaches to the horizon in *Cold Day in a Hot Place, 2005*, and seems to extend beyond it in *High Desert, 2001*. In *Waiting, 1999* it fills the ground, as though suggesting a horror vacui, and flourishes on the horizon line. In *Fading, 1995-96* vegetation all but overruns the terrain, suggesting that the desert is a cornucopia of life, however desolate some of its spaces and the mountains in the distance. The contrast between the incandescent, yellowish light of the foreground sand and the subtly white light in the background—areas of brilliant white mark the transition—show Pekarsky's mastery of gradations of light, as well as, more generally, his sensitivity to atmospheric changes. His eye is an alert mind, and his mind has sensibility. Pekarsky varies his material medium—crayon, chalk, pencil, oil—and touch to reflect the different densities and changing texture of the desert landscape, unconsciously scanning the scene to bring us to haptic as well as visual consciousness of it, even as its complexities and subtleties—memorable randomness—seem too slippery to take in with a single glance, suggesting that it can never be comprehended as a whole, and thus, however carefully observed, is felt to be enigmatic.

But the part often almost fills the space, becoming a whole unto itself, and the frequent lack of central focus—a sort of observational oasis, a place privileged by being seen in rationalizing perspective—turns the image into a kind of all-over abstraction, so that we become more conscious of the artist's hand than of the desert landscape, or at least as conscious. *Things in the Desert, 1990* and *Sierras, 2005* are telling examples, however more differentiated the details in the latter seem to be, at least at first glance. I am suggesting that Pekarsky's desert landscapes are indistinguishably abstract and representational—can be viewed with what has been called "reversible perspective," with neither point of view having priority over the other—which is why they are simultaneously "post-modern" and "post-traditional," and thus all the more creatively consequential and consummately beautiful.

Notes:

- (1) Donald Meltzer, *The Apprehension of Beauty* (Old Ballechin, Strath Tay, Scotland: Clunie Press, 1988), 157
- (2) *Ibid.*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This retrospective exhibition includes work produced by Mel Pekarsky during his 35 years at Stony Brook as a professor of painting, sometime Art Department Chairman, and MFA Director and Studio Programs Director for the undergraduate and graduate studio art programs he initiated. His years at Stony Brook (1974-2009) have been enormously productive ones for our students, for his own artistic endeavors, and for the University as a whole. We are delighted that he will continue to teach at Stony Brook as Professor Emeritus. The University Art Gallery takes great pleasure in presenting the superb work included in this retrospective.

I want to express my gratitude to Professor Donald Kuspit, Department of Art, for contributing his insightful essay to this catalogue. Special thanks are also extended to Renaissance Technologies LLC for generously lending a painting from their collection to this exhibition.

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Most of all, I want to thank Mel Pekarsky for sharing his work with the Stony Brook community.

Rhonda Cooper  
Gallery Director



*Mesa*, 1999-2000



*High Desert*, 2001



*Ariza Borrego Breakdown*, 2001-2002

The images above are from *Desert Book III*, 1998 - 2004, mixed media on handmade paper stitched in leather binder, each page is approximately 6-1/2" x 5-3/8". Courtesy of the artist. Photo credit: Max Yawney

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Cover Image:

*Fading*, 1995-96 (detail)  
Mixed media on unstretched  
canvas, 96 x 136"  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo credit: Max Yawney