

Carol Peek

By Alfred Harrison

I always used to look forward to Carol Peek exhibitions at The North Point Gallery. The walls came alive with views of California scenery depicted at all seasons of the year. There were paintings of green springtime meadows seen through a gauzy layer of fog and hillsides cast in the rich ochre tints of the dry season. Animal paintings were a big feature of each show, with sheep, cows and horses grazing in pastures or standing mutely in barnyard settings.

Occasionally a visitor would confess that he or she disliked “cow paintings” and, as often as not, would go ahead and buy one of Carol’s anyway. Carol’s cows are no ordinary animals. They are transformed by her knowledge and inspiration into beautiful objects that harmonize with the background landscape and sky.

Other visitors found themselves perplexed at liking the paintings at all, whether or not they have cows in them. “I’m not supposed to like this kind of art!” they would exclaim.

Most people have been taught since first grade that art has to be “challenging” to have any validity. They do find themselves “challenged” at museums of modern art, trying to guess at the meaning of paintings with no readily discernible order or purpose. If they turn to newspaper reviews for enlightenment, they often find themselves challenged once again in deciphering the abstract prose that seems just as incomprehensible as the images themselves. Pictures of natural beauty as interpreted by a superior artistic intelligence need no such exegesis, which is just as well, as no art critic has ever bothered to visit any of Carol’s shows, much less review them. Paintings of well-drawn cows and horses portrayed in lovely California landscapes are not “challenging” to believers in the orthodoxy of modernism.

And yet landscapes and animal paintings have been a mainstay of world art since the seventeenth century. Over the years, hundreds of artists from Paulus Potter to California’s own Thaddeus Welch produced works that delighted the connoisseurs of their own time and continue to enrich our spirits today. Some of these works are now out-of-fashion; when people say they dislike “cow paintings,” they are probably thinking of the dark, often melancholy works of the nineteenth-century Barbizon painters. Carol Peek and a few other living painters have been able to reinvent the genre in a way that evokes a strong emotional response from today’s public.

Animals are not easy to paint. Before modernism swept away standards of draftsmanship, the ability to create convincing and lively images of cattle and horses was what separated the great painters from the journeymen. Painting animals requires skillful modeling of three-dimensional objects in a two-dimensional medium. To acquire the skills necessary to become a first class animal painter, an artist has to be born with talent, and that talent has to be developed over the years of training in the use of materials and artistic techniques. One further attribute is necessary: a deep-seated emotional connection to the

beauty inherent in humble beasts.

Most art schools encourage their students to be “creative” before they learn to draw or use paint correctly. That is why there are few good animal painters working today. From early childhood Carol Peek took pleasure in drawing pictures of animals, and at age twelve was given a horse that she paid for by babysitting neighbors’ children. “It’s all my life was,” she remembers of her adolescence, “horses and art. I majored in art in high school.”

Her talent was recognized at an early age and encouraged by her family. She was in a class by herself in high school, because she was so much more talented than her fellow students. She attended the University of California, Santa Barbara, for two years and University of California, Berkeley for one semester, before transferring to the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, where the development of traditional skills in art is emphasized. Her prowess was then sharpened by a job designing greeting cards for the Hallmark Company in Kansas City. After a year and a half away from her beloved California, she moved back and became a full-time exhibiting painter, living first in rural Inverness and then in a makeshift apartment in a Petaluma horse barn. She continued to maintain her studio in a Petaluma barn after moving to suburban Mill Valley, north of San Francisco. Eventually, she married attorney William Griffin, had two children and moved to a country setting near Santa Rosa, next to a dairy farm with nine hundred cows.

As “avant-garde” artists, supported in large part by conservative corporate leaders, have taken over museums of modern art, a quiet movement back to traditional art is gaining momentum. Unfortunately, many present-day landscape painters lack the training and the vision to produce more than pleasant works of little lasting value. Some talented painters get seduced into producing melodramatic sunset scenes à la Bierstadt at his worst—what we call “schlock”— and others are overly influenced by the lingering prestige of French Post-Impressionist painters like Cézanne and van Gogh, producing works in which pronounced mannerism vitiates any sense of subject matter. But increasing numbers of fine artists, Carol Peek among them, are emerging to create what will be seen as a significant revival of landscape art and animal painting in our time.

We are still groping for a vocabulary to describe these painters. The French phrase *plein air* meaning “out of doors” is sometimes applied to them, although many of the painters, including Carol Peek, only take rough, quick studies in the open air, returning to the more congenial confines of their studios to do larger works. “Animals don’t stay in one place and light changes so quickly,” she says. Also, oil paintings can be built up slowly in layers of pigment, some of the under-painting showing through the top layers, giving a luminosity to the subject that would otherwise be absent. This process cannot be done in one outdoor sitting.

Often, the new landscape artists refer to themselves as “Impressionists,” because they usually embrace the high-keyed palette of the Impressionist movement. This term is not strictly accurate either, as many of the artists are not true Impressionists; they do not employ broken brushstrokes of different colors lying next to each other as a central part of their technique. Also, unlike the French Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, they

are not moving away from subject matter as the main way of communicating with the viewer. They are not distorting the content of their pictures in favor of some extreme aesthetic strategy or personal statement.

Carol Peek refers to herself as an “Impressionist/realist,” and though ungainly, the phrase is a somewhat accurate description of her work. What she does not want to be thought of is a “photo-realist.” Her works are not literal copies of the scenes portrayed but subtle interpretations that create harmonies of form and color out of nature’s raw materials. What Carol tries to invent is a picture that everyone can respond to—beautiful black and white Holstein cows, for example, in the warm raking light of late afternoon; and then bring into being the most intensely vivid image that her training and inspiration can create. This is done by eliminating all but essential detail and intensifying color contrasts, without introducing any sense of artificiality or stylization. Everything looks “real” even though many changes away from photographic copy have been made—warm earth tones are warmer in a Carol Peek painting and lavender shadows more lavender than they would be in a photograph. And, of course, photographs are not composed of brushstrokes. Each fine artist creates his or her style with brushstrokes and color strategies. That is why we can immediately distinguish a Heade haystack from one by Monet.

In nature, most of us respond to beautiful scenes, even without the mediation of art, but what Carol and all fine landscape painters can do is permeate the picture with their personalities, so that it gains a life of its own in addition to the inherent beauty of the subject. Carol’s paintings are intensely true to local characteristics, so much so that a woman who had grown up in California purchased a Carol Peek painting to take to her present residence in Hong Kong so that she could get up in the morning and be reminded of her homeland. The paintings also communicate their beauty to non-Californians, as attested to by numerous out-of-state collectors of her work.

When I started collecting nineteenth-century landscapes about forty years ago, I learned a lesson about how art can be “challenging” to one’s way of thinking about life. Nineteenth-century landscapes are not considered “challenging” or threatening to one’s sense of complacency, any more than Carol Peek’s are. But surrounded by objects of the highest quality, I started to see mediocrity in many aspects of my life that had seemed O.K. before. Great art of all kinds is challenging, not because its content is shocking, but because it administers a silent rebuke to low quality objects and ways of living. Sometimes out of a sense of duty, I go to museums of modern art, only to feel as though our culture has lost its bearings, exalting works that to my eye resemble kindergarten projects, while neglecting true artists like Carol Peek. I believe that the movement back to traditional art will grow to the point where modern concepts of art will be discredited. When that happens, Carol Peek will be regarded as a significant artist of her time.

Alfred Harrison, art historian and curator, has been the proprietor of North Point Gallery since 1985. This essay is included in his 2020 collection of writings, An Attack of the Heart.