

Enjoying The View

Appreciating The Finely Worked Canvases of a Superb Naturalist

By **Deborah McLeod** | Posted 12/5/2007

Lisa Egeli: Recent Landscapes At Diliberto Gallery through Dec. 31

LISA EGELI IS A METICULOUS connoisseur of nature. This third-generation Maryland painter travels the world sampling it for its unique characteristics and translating its spectacles in paint. Perhaps because she grew up at the heels of her artist father, Peter Egeli, learning how to see through a medium, her works appear to distinguish the nuances of light, space, and humidity intuitively. She uses this information to capture all the subtle qualities that identify one spot on the globe from another. Traditional realism is enjoyed universally for that effect, and Egeli has learned to do it better than many.

In her current exhibition, Recent Landscapes at Diliberto Gallery in Fells Point, she presents a series of works from three locations where she has spent recent time- Maryland, Florida, and Africa-engaged in both plein-air and subsequent studio painting. It's an opportunity to sense how reactive her atmospheres and choices of pigmentation are, how effectively she was compelled by and resonated with the sites.

Inasmuch as her work is concept-driven, it is to be fully attuned to nature's differentiation and to let that sensory intelligence guide the qualities of the image. There is not much ego in these works, no string theory, no deus ex machina, pathos, or ethos, and maybe only a smidgen of political commentary. While the white-knuckleness of creating art might appeal to, stimulate, and nurture many minds-including this writer's-it's a relief to relax the tension in that hand and lay it palm up once in a while, simply to receive what God or nature invented for our contemplation. As art that concerns itself with that concept, these paintings truly intercede, perhaps because of their respect for grandeur and deferential brand of delicacy. Egeli paints

living things with such a feather brushstroke against the ever abiding cerulean sky, and a body of water that often reflects it, that it is almost a supplication to her subject.

A chaste quality attends these scenes because she always chooses untainted sites, such as the Eastern Shore's Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge or her family's Chesapeake Bay estate. There might be a house or other structure amid Egeli's natural setting, but its proclivity is to modesty, as if built by another kind of man than what we know as today's builder. As simple shelters, they protect against an excess of nature's idea in much the same way as her method of painting and her choice of weather. In saying this, I don't mean to suggest that these are timid works; they are definitely not. Not even the tiny ones. They are clement.

In "Breakfast With Bunny Again," Egeli's fey brushstrokes are particularly evident. The scene's arrangement, which features a plinthlike structure, a lighthouse, maybe, on a knoll with a barely noticeable bunny, provides its name as the artist's recollection. An acknowledgement of the bunny is too much information in the title, and I kind of shudder to quote it as a first example, but as an elusive spirit the small skittish presence is a muse by which Egeli might render her canvases, and in so doing demonstrate the barest bones of her painting technique.

"Low Tide Zanzibar" is one of the most wonderful of the smaller works in the show. It has a thoroughly modern feel in its clarity and emancipation from romanticism. But it also harks back to Dutch painting, maybe because of the tipping beached boat in the middle distance set as an indicator of human scale in the continuum of nature, or a Calvinist sense of the aesthetic reward of a labored life at sea, or the sea-clay foreground with the dune outcrop. But this isn't the Netherlands; it is Africa, where anyone of those terms, except Calvinism, are shared. Perhaps it is specifically the atmosphere of Africa that gives the painting its searing modern clarity.

As dry and wind-swept as the Africa paintings might be, the Florida ones breathe heavy pink clamminess and eccentric, claustrophobic

vegetation into the rear gallery of Diliberto. Theirs is a different kind of impulse altogether, and account for the representative geography that upturns Egeli's general traditions regarding foreground and horizon. That only further recommends the argument for this landscape painter's ability to naturalize her senses in the places she plants her easel. ★

Baltimore City Paper