The Glorious Wake of That Painter's Visual Joy

Often, the moment you're playing your last card and are ready to give up, another kind of awareness enters and you work with that moment. But you can't force that moment either. You truly have to have given up. And then something happens.

— Philip Guston, 1978

David Brewster is a contemporary painter whose visual temperament is characterized by a fierce and incisive attack, and whose brush is guided by the precise aggression with which medieval princes handled their swords in battle. Electrifying the conversation of forms across the canvas, from corner to corner and from side to side, his brush moves confidently around and through the wet paint, making split second tactical decisions without hiding behind the security of rendering the world in a conventional way. It reveals for us what his work is all about: drawing with paint and drawing with color. Even before our minds identify subject matter (for instance in *University of Pennsylvania: Logan Hall with Furness Library Looking East towards Center City, 1890*), we are struck head on by shapes of deliciously saturated color, the various pinks and reds and several blues sitting together in sensuous unity, an exquisitely organized composition that doesn't let go of our eyes. A deeply cultivated visual poet, David takes us into places of emotion and mood far beyond naturalistic representation and surface appearance, and he is in good company with other painters both living and dead who build space with color and whose paint is aware of itself as an evocative language.

Early in the 20th century T.S. Elliot said, "no poet, no artist of any art has his complete meaning alone." And so we can locate David's own sense of aesthetics deep within the furrows of western visual history. From the times of our earliest art making, like at the Chauvet Cave 30,000 years ago, many painters have used their materials without covering their tracks, allowing the gestural footprint of the brush or drawing tool, to remain quite visible. More recent are the painters of Roman fresco, Velásquez, El Greco, Turner, Monet, Van Gogh, Cézanne, Soutine and among contemporaries, David Park, Frank Auerbach, Willem de Kooning

University of Pennsylvania: Logan Hall with Furness Library Looking East towards Center City I, 1890 (detail), 35 x 70 inches, Oil on Gatorboard, 2012

and Stanley Lewis. All are very much looking toward the visible world, but not imitating or copying its appearance. Theirs are all poetries of interpretation, and as Cézanne famously clarified for us, it is not the appearance of "nature" we are talking about, but the "nature" of the artist.

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Regardless of the pervasive influence of Aristotle's theory about painting as an imitation of nature, for many of us the point is not to "imitate" nature, but rather to use it as a point of departure. The word art comes from the word artifice, and art and nature are two very different things, one not trying to be the other. David spent several decades painting outside, experiencing a multitude of sensations, but now in the studio, with his back to nature, he invents a parallel world, beyond nature and ultimately, as is often the case with art, much more interesting. Could an actual spot on the University of Pennsylvania campus provide us with a view as dazzling as *University of Pennsylvania: Logan Hall with Furness Library Looking East towards Center City, 1890* (detail above)?

Bethlehem Steel Nocturne with Clouds in March, 1909 (detail), 35 x 70 inches, Oil on Gatorboard, 2012

Or consider the abstract melodic structures of *Bethlehem Steel Nocturne with Clouds in March, 1909* (detail above) and the drawing, *Bethlehem Iron Company: Steam Powered Drop Hammer, Largest Forging Device in the World, 1891*. The major blocks of color are clean and solid notes contributing to gorgeous color chords, the compositions developed with a surgically precise short hand that feels as hot as a speeding bullet. Of course these exact scenes of the mills never existed in "real" life; this is visual lyric poetry, an invented reconstruction. Perhaps David consulted photographs of the Bethlehem mills and then fantasized about how they must have looked, before translating them into paint. In spirit, it is not so different from the painter J.M. Whistler who saw fireworks in London more than 135 years ago and then back in his studio, using abstract notations to describe a sensory impression of what he had witnessed, he made a painting from memory and perhaps from some drawing notes, a kind of distillation only possible with the benefit of distance from the original motif. Like Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold*, *The Falling Rocket* (mid 1870s), David's *Bethlehem Steel Nocturne* is not illustration; we cannot really see anything rendered, yet we know exactly where we are and what we are looking at, and the very specific color complexion of the painting washes over us with convincing eloquence.

But we are now in 2012, and David Brewster is a modern, a man of the 21st century. His *University of Pennsylvania: Panoramic View of Burgeoning Campus, Logan Hall with Southwest Schuylkill River and Trolley, 1890* and *Bethlehem Steel Nocturne along the Lehigh River, 1909* are so contemporary in mood and sound and speed, almost like collaged Google Earth images thrown into a Cuisinart and hurled out in the midst of being reassembled. Yet there is nothing arbitrary, accidental or hasty in these works. His painted world is composed of thick, large slabs of luscious color pushing in and out of the picture plane, feeling like a partially fractured set of visual events, yet also as an instantaneous and unified moment of impact. Not everyone chooses to or can paint like this; the heat from the fury of attack is something we are not all built to handle. But this climate of intense yet precarious concentration, while the paint is wet and flowing, on the tight rope of that calculated surge is where he feels totally at home.

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When I met David in the mid 1980s, here in Philadelphia, his passion and curiosity struck me as a kind of poetic cyclone, a man who lived and breathed history and urban industrial archeology. From birth he was raised in the countryside outside of Baltimore with a daily proximity to verdant earth and expansive sky, that healthy and lush cauldron of nature from which his love for painting germinated and grew. So very different from the grand architectural setting of our "Rome of the New World," as he once described his adopted city, this metropolitan palimpsest was still dressed 30 years ago in the clothing of decay: abandoned houses, empty lots and massive rotting industrial hulks, the shattered remains of an industrial dream. Those broken architectural forms became the visual nourishment for an artist fascinated by the appearance of this tortured urban landscape and who understood how to interpret those forms with unmitigated visual enthusiasm. Those formative painting campaigns in West Philadelphia fertilized the soil in which David's visual language grew and provided the source of energy and inspiration that he now brings to bear in undertaking this cycle of paintings examining the story of Joseph Wharton.

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For several millennia painters have been telling all sorts of stories about people, places and things, but to get into the painter's head, into the crux of what the visual

world is about, we have to take a step back and ask ourselves, how do we tell those stories? In Italy in the late Middle Ages/early Renaissance, painters used scenes from the Bible — the Annunciation, the Flagellation, the Crucifixion and the Deposition. So why, 600 years later, do we recognize certain specific paintings as masterpieces? Why do we stand frozen in wonder in front of Piero della Francesa's or Fra Angelico's *Flagellation of Christ*, regardless of whether we even know the narrative being recounted? Why do we recognize certain paintings as brilliant when there are hundreds of versions by other painters? Because their distinction is in the way the story is told graphically, and we have to remember that painting is a non-verbal conversation, a place in which words are not needed.

In literature we say, "once upon a time," but the painter does it very differently. What stops us in our tracks, what tears our hearts out, what strikes us as astonishingly beautiful in painting is the visual story, an arrangement of colors and shapes, and as Maurice Denis said more than a century ago, "Remember that a picture before being a battle horse, a nude, an anecdote or whatnot is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order." After decades of sustained engagement with paint, pushing pigment, solvent and oil across surfaces, David Brewster is now a master of the craft of visual story telling.

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A viewer captivated by the barrage of sensuous color and tonal contrasts in *Bethlehem Iron Company: Steam Powered Drop Hammer, Largest Forging Device in the World, 1891* (detail above right) might not even recognize or be able to verbalize why the image is so striking. Of course there are historical precedents; he is not the first to paint factory workers in vast recessional, interior spaces and yes he sometimes uses compositional references from Turner, Constable and Cézanne as working models for his own thoughts. But more important than understanding how other artists did it, or which ones his work echoes, is to slow down, standing before the painting long enough to engage with it closely, without haste, so that we can read it as a visual text, a window into the mind of the painter at work.

While looking at any one of these paintings or drawings we might ask ourselves a range of questions, like: what is its mood and how does it make us feel? What

Bethlehem Iron Company: Steam Powered Drop Hammer, Largest Forging Device in the World, 1891 (detail), 35 x 70 inches, Oil on Gatorboard, 2012

are the predominant structural elements and are they dark or light? Where is the brush moving fast and where is it moving slowly and where are the strokes large and broad and where are they small and dagger like? What is its overall structure of lights and darks and how do light shapes sit next to dark shapes to make strong, primary contrasts that pull our eye to that spot and where are they pulled by secondary contrasts? In particular, notice how each painting has a specific color mood or complexion that gives it the quality of a unique visual song. The color mood and composition of *Steam Powered Drop Hammer* is intentionally different in flavor from *Joseph Wharton at Marbella, Jamestown, Rhode Island, 1909*, and that difference is part of the painter's strategy, the way he makes an appeal to our eyes and senses.

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Despite his work's formidable size and compositional complexity, David is a painter who for decades has practiced the art of resolving each painting in one

fell swoop. He sits within a tradition the French call premier coup, meaning "all at once," an attitude toward work in which the graphic urgency of improvisational response underscores all decisions and informs the energy of the mark making. It requires that all one knows or ever knew be brought to bear in the moment of execution, and for the painter that moment of parenthetical compression is intense. Vincent van Gogh, Frank Auerbach and the American Edwin Dickinson are expert practitioners of this art form, and one builds muscles for this by way of extensive and sustained engagement with drawing, even before the brush is dipped in paint. Drawing really is the great engine behind painting, and without drawing there is no painting.

For David, both small and large-scale analytical drawing anticipates and determines how the final form might look. Drawing is not only the way he goes out for a look around, but also the way in which he makes plans and solidifies his intentions in the studio before using paint. Regardless of whether they are or are not "studies" for something else, his drawings carry the same authority as his paintings. The range of drawing language, be it in pencil, ink or pastels floated in water, is as seductive as his oils. Comparing two drawings, *View of Philadelphia Waterworks and Bellevue Wharton Residence, 1845* and *Bethlehem Iron Company: Workmen in No. 2 Machine Shop, 1882*, we see an immense range of variation in color and space, all animated by the probing curiosity of his hand holding a drawing tool. Historically it is not unusual to see the fullest display of a painter's inventiveness and talents revealed in the drawings, and this is the case with David. The intimacy of the medium allows for very direct and spontaneous expression and often the speed of working on paper bypasses all the attendant anxieties and distractions that come with painting and being "serious" with regard to the final product. Drawing is like being out in a field with a kite on a windy day; one doesn't hesitate to play the string against the wind.

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Having watched David's work unfold for over 25 years, perhaps this image of letting out the string slowly and carefully is also an apt way of describing the broader arc of his activity. The core of that activity, even before the ongoing struggle of learning how to see and feel, is learning to trust one's instincts, because the work at hand is basically the creation of a new world that doesn't yet exist and nothing other than self-trust can really pave that road. As the viewer of this suite of paintings for the Wharton School, *Joseph Wharton: Ironmaster, Innovator and Educator*, your encounter is with them and not with the long trajectory of ambition that is their larger context, the inevitable endless miles of canvas and paper that came first, through which the painter walked alone with no road maps.

The challenge is to invent images — ideas about places and moments translated into the hypnotic graphic flicker of paint — so that you will stop in front of them and enter into a suspended moment of dream space. Making a painting is no easy matter: behind each one of these pictures are many, many attempts that never survived, that were scraped off and lost in the fury of the battle. The tough visual game that David plays is one where everything is put onto the table and subjected to the heat of critical analysis in the frenzy of the moment. For every painting that may leave the studio there are any number of others that fall to the cutting floor. I remember years ago his description of what a day of painting was like. Going out, working on something, scraping it off, starting another, painting it through but then scraping it off because it didn't work, and finally on the third try, maybe very aggravated and tired but excited by the scent and the prospects, "ah-hah," something happens. This is what Philip Guston is talking about in the opening quote. One never knows when and how it is going to happen, but one must hang in there for a long time, searching, and putting down all the cards as if every moment matters. Then, after three tries and sore hands, in a moment of grace, color shape sits perfectly next to color shape and it is as if magic has occurred; and what we see revealed in the layering of paint before our eyes is the glorious wake of that painter's visual joy.

Stuart Shils, Philadelphia, 2012

Stuart Shils, a native of Philadelphia, has painted outside for 30 years. He teaches at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and at the Jerusalem Studio School. His paintings are represented by Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects in New York and his monotypes are represented by Davis and Langdale, New York. Between 1994 and 2006 he spent 13 summers painting on the northwest coast of Ireland, an extended painting campaign described in the PBS film documentary, *Ballycastle*.