

John Dilg and Karsten Krejcarek

This two-person exhibition at Regina Rex brings together small-scale paintings by John Dilg and videos by Karsten Krejcarek. Together these works reflect an attention to landscape, the collective unconscious, exploration of place, and mystical storytelling. While the artists' respective approaches to medium and formal style vary widely, both are interested in what Krejcarek characterizes as "symbiotic relationships between nature and the unconscious". With this in mind, the exhibition can be seen as an exploration of how our interactions with and memories of place inform mental constructs through a combination of shared and private realities. In an artist statement from 2012, Dilg writes, "my chief pleasure is to make idiosyncratic constructs, personal souvenirs of something seen before; in this, they are allied to our virtual world, since all souvenirs take their life from that which no longer actually exists." Dilg strives to create a direct experience between the individual viewer and his intimately scaled paintings in order to spark unconscious, "virtual" associations with place. By contrast, Krejcarek inserts himself directly into landscapes to make new, coded narratives that combine existing and self-created myths. Through performance, video, and in-the-moment investigation of seen and unseen phenomena surrounding cultural histories and natural landscapes, Krejcarek learns as he goes, consciously sidestepping anthropological attitudes in favor of serendipity and the improvisations it brings.

Dilg and Krejcarek share a few specific strategies in making direct connections between nature and the unconscious, such as seeking out the unusual and incorporating ideas surrounding the tourist, including the souvenir. The artists are well aware of the amateur patina that often accompanies the objects available to and documents (photos, videos) made by travelers. This awareness creates a sense of wonder and vulnerability via enthusiastic, if not somewhat awkward, adaptation to new cultures and lands (Krejcarek) and making vaporously hued composite images that indicate memories of place (Dilg). For Krejcarek the unusual is often inherent to the places he travels and is expanded by the mythologies and characters he invents. His interactions with these locales involve playing the role of curious detective, integrated interloper, amateur actor, and video documentarian. This exhibition features vignettes from Krejcarek's longer, narrative videos, creating a connective tissue to the souvenir aspect of Dilg's paintings through the camera's fixed-point gaze and fleeting impressions of place. Since expanding his studio practice to include traveling and filming, Krejcarek has described much of his process as a learning curve that, in addition to acting, involves everything from video editing to singing. Like many artists Krejcarek began acting in his videos because he was available and free labor, but he has since embraced and expanded on his role as amateur actor. On the one hand it reflects his interest in accessing the unknown qualities and mythologies of unfamiliar locales, but it also serves as an allegory for his approach to understanding the otherworldly: "I believe that part of pursuing and engaging spirituality, or higher realms, is a process of othering yourself. It's a practice of stepping outside conscious reality, and observing yourself and the world from a far."

In Dilg's work, these ideas – the strategic embrace of the unknown and the traveler's souvenir collection - converge around a trained artist's understanding of how the directness of the amateur, the wrongness of the unskilled rendering, can inform a painting by lending it an iconic, familiar quality. Focusing on what he describes as the "markers" of area landscapes and using a flat surface painting style that forms a monochromatic mist over the composition's charcoal line drawing, Dilg makes objects that are at once naïve and sophisticated, familiar and enigmatic. The tension in the paintings between known and unknown, fine art and found art along with their small scale encourages a very intimate and personal viewing experience similar to revisiting a souvenir with fresh eyes -- as though it was rediscovered years later when cleaning out the garage or organizing a closet. This immediacy peels back any sense of preciousness, diminishing the emotional distance that viewers are often asked to keep from contemporary art. Born and raised in the Midwest and a frequent traveler to Oregon, Dilg's paintings are a hybrid of what critic Hamlett Dobbins described as the "myriad subtle shifts in the greens, blues and siennas found in the prairie," and what Dilg portrays as the veiled light that comes with the misty rains of

the Pacific Northwest. A collector of paintings by self-taught artists, Dilg sees such objects as a way to embrace “the immediacy you try to get back to after all of that art school training,” adding, “I value the self-taught because of the encounter with the ‘unusual’ – produced, in part, by what the maker doesn’t know about visual language. I understand that this is the disappointing part for the amateur, that it doesn’t look ‘right’. But a viewer with a learned language, a formal or syntactical sensibility uses that knowledge to ‘recover’ what has been lost.”

The word “recover” in Dilg’s quote is a direct reference to an essay that has influenced his thinking as an artist and is helpful in considering all of the works in this exhibition. The essay, *Loss of the Creature*, is by writer Walker Percy. In it Percy writes about how our expectations and the packaging of experience by the “symbolic complex” interfere with our direct experience of life. Using the natural wonder of the Grand Canyon as an example, he discusses someone on a tour of the Canyon, writing, “Why is it almost impossible to gaze directly at the Grand Canyon, under these circumstances and see it for what it is – as one picks up a strange object from one’s back yard and gazes directly at it? It is almost impossible because the Grand Canyon, the thing as it is, has been appropriated by the symbolic complex and has already been formed in the sightseer’s mind”. In Karsten Krejcarek’s videos, which include footage of slow moving, painterly, landscapes and narrative scenes that touch on mythologies and oral traditions, the artist successfully subverts the packaged experience through what he describes as a “sense of wanderlust,” adding, “I freely (but somewhat naïvely) interject myself into place. Travel, like spiritual conquest or psychedelic exploration is another way of reinventing yourself. The traveler adapts to person and place.” The formal qualities in John Dilg’s work challenge expectations of landscape painting itself, connecting the viewer more directly to an emotional response to nature. Through scale, simplified forms, limited palette, naïve renderings, strong lines, and unpainterly surfaces that defy his Abstract Expressionist training, Dilg fabricates souvenirs that touch on shared notions of the land. His paintings recover nature for the viewer and capture the intimacy of a traveler discovering new landscapes.

-- Terri C Smith