

## Jeffrey Blondes: Meditations on Nature

Jeffrey Blondes (b. 1956) is an artist who has devoted his career to a patient and intense scrutiny of nature. With a conscientious and considered eye that is more akin to a still-life painter than a landscape artist, his *raison d'être* is to transpose as truthfully as possible the landscape he sees around him. Employing the traditional techniques of drawing, watercolour and oil painting, as well as the more contemporary medium of film, his work is both a continuation of the most traditional form of *en plein-air* painting as well as an innovative updating of the genre.

When Blondes, an American, moved to the Touraine in rural France with his family sixteen years ago, he was seeking isolation in order to immerse himself fully in the natural world he wanted to portray. His working methods remain integral to the work he produces. Like the pioneers of the landscape tradition in the late eighteenth-century, painters such as Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes (1750-1819) and Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796-1875) in France and John Constable (1776-1837) in England, Blondes takes his inspiration directly from nature itself, drawing and painting on the spot. However, unlike these earlier artists who painted oil sketches out in the open air as quick records, preparatory works to be worked up later in the studio, Blondes is resolute that he never completes his work indoors. As such, his working practice is closer to the Impressionists, those revolutionary nineteenth-century artists who for the first time made the open-air oil sketch a finished painting in itself.

Blondes' early landscapes are pure meditations on the rural French countryside. Executed in oil on wood, he chooses scenes that are commonplace - a group of trees, the point at which two fields meet - views that we might easily pass by, and yet his insistence on transposing exactly the scene before him and his refusal to romanticize it means that we are presented with images of great immediacy and naturalness.

Often he paints the same subject at different points of the day and at different points throughout the year. A tree set on the edge of a riverbank is the subject of a series entitled *La Grande Noue* from 2004. He painted this view every week for 90 weeks, charting the slow but insistent changing of the seasons so that we see the tree in the

benevolent light of summer, its branches leafy and verdant and its reflection in the water soft and we see how it is transformed as autumn closes in, its branches skeletal with only a few amber coloured leaves remaining but still reflecting russet in the water below.

There is something almost monastic in Blondes' desire to rethink the same subject over and over again, like an often repeated prayer or mantra in which the faithful seeks to discover something new every time. Blondes has almost an obsessive regard for nature and as a result we observe what we might not normally have seen— in *La Grande Noue* series we notice the silhouette of the tree against the skyline, we contemplate the spaces in between the branches of a tree, in between the leaves on the branches themselves. The paintings also offer a sense of the physical act of *plein-air* painting, the long hours spent outdoors, alone, often in inhospitable conditions. By revisiting the same subject in different lights, Blondes' series paintings recall the practice of an artist like Claude Monet (1840-1926), who himself executed sequences of paintings - a haystack in a field, the façade of Rouen Cathedral - at different points of the day. Both artists seek to depict the subtleties of nature, the way in which it can transform itself utterly over time and the emotional response this can ignite in the viewer: as John Constable once wrote, 'Painting is with me but another word for feeling'.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Blondes is able to take this one stage further through the medium of film. While still painting his *Grand Noue* series in 2005, Blondes began experimenting with digital film. He set up his tripod at the same time as his easel, filming as well as painting his chosen view for an hour a week over a period of 52 weeks. Each time, he selected the day of the week and the hour of the day he preferred, for aesthetic reasons, depending on weather conditions and time of day. The resulting piece of film- which he correspondingly entitled *52 Weeks – 52 Hour Film* - is played in real-time inside what looks like a backlit photograph and the work is then framed like a painting, though the image within it is constantly changing.

Part of what motivated Blondes to begin filming landscape was his awareness that he could, in his own words, 'use technology to share the simplest things...nature in its purest form'. The effect of these films is quite extraordinary; initially one thinks that

one is standing before a fixed image when suddenly a breath of wind moves the top branches of the tree, or a bird flies overhead and we realise that we are standing before the real movements of nature. Film allows Blondes to convey an ever-changing natural landscape, something that even series painting can only hint at. And it brings the viewer closer to nature itself, in a way that is both startling and spiritual. Although Blondes is still a mediator between the two, film provides us with such direct exposure to his subject that it is as though a veil has been lifted. Nature has essentially been brought inside our domestic space and because we see landscape out of its normal context, the viewer is even more acutely aware of it. Watching the films, time seems to pass inexorably slowly with the effect that one is transfixed when at last we see some movement in the landscape.

Like a poet who finds the haiku more evocative than the sonnet, Blondes has complimented this all-encompassing vision of landscape by turning, recently, to abstract painting. Since 2005, Blondes has also been producing abstract landscape paintings, in both watercolour and oil, which he terms 'Optics'. In these, he tries to match exactly the colour he sees before him in nature. So precise is he that each work is annotated not only with a date and title but also with an exact time of day, a technique used by many of the early *plein-air* landscapists, perhaps most famously J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851). Meticulous and Zen-like, the resulting paintings are composed of a series of small, coloured squares, like a mosaic, that are Blondes' abstracted vision of the landscape he has scrutinised so closely. There is a hypnotic beauty in these works, in seeing nature distilled in such a way.

Interestingly, one of the projects Blondes is working on at the present moment is the production of a run of small photographs, extracted from his films, that when arranged in a grid-like pattern (60 rows across and 52 down) strongly resemble, in their overall composition, the Optics. Each small photograph is a 'still' from his film, recording, in the 60 columns across, his landscape view each minute and, in the 52 rows down, the scene week by week. The photographs are not digitally adjusted in any way but the grids, when viewed as a whole, contains waves of colour that sweep through them that are in fact simply nature at work. In *Field Oak*, bands of yellow indicate the moment when the rape-seed was in season and deep orange indicates the setting of the sun.

The leitmotif that runs through all Blondes' work is a strong sense of the artist's immediate contact with nature. Blondes' acute sensitivity to his subject may in part be due to the fact that the vast majority of the time he is depicting landscapes that are outside his native country; for it is often true that the outsider's view is the most perceptive one. Recently, Blondes has journeyed much further afield, to the Arctic Circle - a landscape that is unknown to most of us - to film the Summer and Winter Solstices. The 24-hour days and nights that one experiences there provide an entirely new challenge to an artist who is fascinated by ever-changing natural phenomena. Though the act of creating a *plein-air* landscape is, in itself, an entirely private one, all Blondes' landscapes invite us to share in his own emotional engagement with his subject. Whether apocalyptic or everyday, Blondes' vision of nature makes us stop and contemplate and then meditate.

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