ALMINE RECH

Looking at Horizons

Jun 5 — Sep 19, 2025 | Monaco

To see oneself beyond the landscape: contemporary gazes

'Looking at Horizons,' held at Almine Rech Monaco from June 2025, explores contemporary manifestations of landscape painting. It hosts works by Joël Andrianomearisoa, Miquel Barceló, Petra Cortright, Johan Creten, Genieve Figgis, Daniel Gibson, Youngju Joung, Minjung Kim, John McAllister, Anthony Miler, César Piette, Salvo, Gert & Uwe Tobias, and Jess Valice. Through the diversity of their inspiration and research, they celebrate landscape as a complex pictorial genre that questions the material aspects of a territory as much as the way we look at it.

At a time of great climatic challenges, these artists invite us to observe living things and spaces with curiosity, delicacy, and care. Investigating landscape today is giving a form to our collective concerns, questioning our perception of nature, and the condition of painting itself. Whether they pay homage to the history of the genre or they inaugurate a new relationship with the land, whether they address technological concerns or metaphysical intuitions, the works presented here embody the challenges of their epoch. A tribute to the celebrated landscapes of the Côte d'Azur, and a panorama of contemporary painting, “Looking at Horizons” is much more than an ode to nature: it is an invitation to look at it with more care.

To engage in the practice of landscape is to continue a long-standing inquiry that originates in the mimetic ideal of painting and gradually distances itself from it, as Western modernity establishes a division between nature and culture.[1] This ambiguity is reflected in the very term “landscape,” which refers both to the physical features of a site as perceived by an observer and to its pictorial representation. Is landscape an objective physical reality in which our gaze plays no part? Or is it, conversely, a mental construction, an aesthetic ideal confined to the observer’s eye? It is most likely a meeting point where the physical reality of a space and the viewer’s aesthetic criteria intertwine.

It is difficult to pinpoint the first appearance of landscape in painting, as representations of territory are ubiquitous across cultures and eras. In Chinese art, *shanshui*—paintings of mountains and water—appears in the 4th century. As the first explicit expression of interest in nature as the main subject of a work of art, *shanshui* is less about geological curiosity than about conveying spiritual principles manifested in the relationships between mountain and water, emptiness and fullness.[2] This spiritual—or symbolic—dimension is also present in European landscape representation up to the end of the Middle Ages. One can note, for instance, the highly allegoric depiction of natural settings in 15th-century French books of Hours. The depiction of the Garden of Eden in *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* is not merely a naturalistic intention but also a way to root biblical action in a familiar environment. While landscapes are depicted naturalistically by Patinir, Dürer, or Lorenzetti, they are not justified in and of themselves, but rather in reference to religious or moral values. In this context, the introduction of perspective—which enables more realistic depictions of nature—does not fundamentally change the status of landscape: it remains a backdrop for religious scenes or portraits during the Renaissance.

It is commonly accepted that landscape painting as an independent motif emerged in the Netherlands in the 17th century. Its emergence followed a period during which land reclamation through poldering reshaped Dutch territory. Only when these lands, reclaimed from the sea, were cultivated or used for livestock did an aesthetic appreciation of them arise. Landscape painting was not about wild terrains but cultivated spaces: What was admired was not nature itself, but what culture had made of it. Even as an independent pictorial motif, landscape remained the visual expression of an external discourse. Whether that discourse was economic—as in 17th-century Dutch painting—or moral—as in 19th-century Romantic painting—landscape painting has never been entirely silent.

Its history reveals a fundamental ambiguity: while it celebrates nature as worthy of representation, it also makes it a vehicle for an ideological system. Indeed, landscape is never just an innocent depiction of a physical place. Painting, as an additional mediation, implies a decision: the artist is responsible for what they choose to represent—or not—and how they do it. Their aesthetic choices reflect the influence of their era and cultural environment. More importantly, landscape painting manifests a way of thinking about the landscape. It reflects a set of tastes, beliefs, and opinions that shape a collective view of the territory:

"Landscape is not merely the world we see, it is a construction, a composition of that world. Landscape is a way of seeing the world, a particular way, which has its own history, its own traditions and its own interpretative frameworks. [...] Landscape is a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolizing surroundings."[3]

One must also acknowledge the historical use of landscape painting as a tool of symbolic domination. In the 19th-century American West, landscape painting and its fantasy of the "wilderness" were part of a system that erased the presence of Indigenous peoples, thereby justifying the gradual conquest of the land. The aestheticization of the territory as a patriotic emblem was also a means of dissimulating mechanisms of economic and social domination, or the ecological upheavals affecting the land and its inhabitants.[4]

Landscape painting carries significant symbolic responsibility: It is one manifestation of our collective view of nature. This also means it can invent new relationships with the landscape. This is the aim of 'Looking at Horizons,' which, through a rich overview of contemporary artistic propositions related to landscape, invites us to rethink our relationship with territory and with the medium. The artists featured in this exhibition inherit the landscape as a hybrid object—between physical reality and ideological construct—but also as part of a historical context marked by climate urgency. Through their diverse cultural backgrounds and artistic practices, they invent new ways of looking at the landscape.

In Genieve Figgis' s work, historical reference is omnipresent. Drawing on 18th-century court painting compositions—originally meant to glorify noble and royal power—she subverts them through the generosity of her pictorial material. Swirls and drips, simplified forms, and the carnivalesque stupor of the characters all highlight the grotesque masquerade of power, while elevating the natural setting to the same level as the figures. The role of chance in Figgis's practice opens a reflection on the mysteries of matter, human existence, and social relations. The latter also emerges in Johan Creten's *Observation Points*: Somewhere between pedestal and stool, they invite viewers to adopt a dual posture—as both artwork and spectator. Scattered throughout the exhibition, they form relational networks, explore social dynamics, and urge us to question our "way of seeing."[5]

The dreamy, blue-tinged horizons of Minjung Kim—contemporary echoes of Korean *sansuhwa*, halfway between calligraphy and painting—are rooted in an organic relationship with the landscape. *Blue Mountain* (2025) retains traces of the materials used in its creation: mulberry paper, natural pigments, and water, forming alchemical links among these elements. Through a meditative stance, attentive to the rhythms of nature, Minjung Kim invites us to adopt contemplation as a way of bonding with nature. A symbolic relationship with the land also permeates Daniel Gibson's work, through the interweaving of landscapes and spiritual visions— such as the black tree in *Trees howl* (2025), which is at once a natural and supernatural element.

In *Landscape with Moon* (2024) and *Landscape with Mountain* (2024) by César Piette, the illusion of depth and materiality underscores the artificial dimension of landscape. Similarly, Petra Cortright's practice questions both our ultra-technological relationship to nature and the separation the artistic medium creates between the viewer and the physical reality of the territory. Representing a landscape artificially—through painterly effects or digital collage—reminds us that the artwork always acts as a filter between the eye and the land.

Mysterious landscape, relational landscape, meditative landscape, symbolic landscape, technological landscape—the variety of these concerns highlight the power of the genre. Throughout history, landscape painting has been a tool for symbolic domination over nature, a fuel for hoarding. But new collective challenges, mainly related to climate change and overproduction, demand a reaction. Is the landscape paradigm subject to change? Through their varied practices, the artists in 'Looking at Horizons' remind us that landscape may say less about the place it depicts than about the gaze we cast upon it. In this way, it is both window and mirror.

— Armand Camphuis, Art critic and independent curator

1. Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture,* Gallimard, 2005.
2. Nicole Vandier-Nicolas, *Esthétique et peinture de paysage en Chine*, Klincksieck, 1982.
3. Denis E. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1984.
4. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, University of Chicago Press, 1994.
5. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin, 1972.