ALMINE RECH

John McAllister
be delirious reveries ringing

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Almine Rech Brussels is pleased to present 'be delirious reveries ringing,' John McAllister's third exhibition with the gallery.

The exhibition brings together over 30 paintings in oil on canvas of visionary landscapes, inspired by the foothills of the Berkshire Mountains in Western Massachusetts where McAllister lives and works.

McAllister seeks to represent – or rather recreate – moments of rapture that he encounters in nature. He intends the exhibition's title as a command, as well as a testament to his own experience. His paintings offer abundant opportunities for delirious revery, even while exaggerating the conditions one might find in nature to unnatural extremes.

McAllister rarely, if ever, paints from reference photographs. This might be surprising to followers of his work familiar with the paintings for which he first became known: scenes that incorporated pictures within pictures; landscapes framed by doors and windows; interiors framed by decorative borders. Those works foregrounded their pictoriality, not as a means to preclude absorption or rapture, but to enhance it.

In these new paintings – and indeed most of his work made in the past three years – McAllister dispenses with the compositional quotation marks of his earlier pictures. They are vehicles for ecstatic absorption, no matter their scale (the smallest are just 12 by 9 inches) or their format. McAllister continues his exploration of tondos and cartouches, shaped canvases that replicate the human field of vision and which reveal the conventional rectangular picture plane to be as much – if not more of – a stylistic contrivance as a circle or an oval.

Frames persist, however, alongside other stylistic embellishments. In the majority of these paintings, we find ourselves looking through what McAllister has referred to as a "proscenium arch" of foliage, often with a body of water to indicate horizontal depth. Mountains sometimes rise in the distance, while a residual glow in the sky suggests the presence of the recently dipped sun below the horizon.

This enfilade of scalar cues – from the detailed depiction of leaves in the near foreground, through faraway mountains, to our solar system's central star, 92 million miles away – facilitates a consciousness of vastness that approaches the sublime. Those cues might not be evenly arranged (plants in the distance, for instance, are picked out with almost as much clarity as plants in the foreground) but McAllister's rigorous distribution of textural detail and flat planes, tonal contrast and affinities, voids and solids, all ultimately arrives at scenes that reach a perfect pictorial balance and harmony.

McAllister has long been influenced by modernist artists such as Bonnard, Vuillard and Matisse, who incorporated pattern and decoration into their paintings, as well as precedents such as the British Arts and Crafts movement, and the Transcendentalist writers and philosophers who established themselves in Massachusetts in the mid-19th century. None of those artists ever considered artifice and aesthetic contrivance to be incompatible with profound spiritual reflection or transcendence.

McAllister acknowledges that when immersed in even the most spectacular landscapes, it is impossible for him not also to be thinking about every landscape painting he's ever looked at, not to mention every landscape photograph he's seen, every film he's ever watched or book he's read. There is nothing inherently wondrous about a vista of land and sky; landscape is a cultural construction. For centuries, untamed wilderness was regarded as either threatening, foreboding, boring, unholy or just plain ugly. It is only really since the Romantic era that woodlands, lakes and sunsets have been so aesthetically revered. Wilderness has since been shaped by human intervention to encourage leisurely spectatorship; in Massachusetts, as with many densely inhabited areas, forests have been cleared, rivers dammed, picturesque lakes and ponds established, paths and viewpoints signposted.

Just as James Turrell has demonstrated that there is no qualitative difference between natural and artificial light, for McAllister (and many artists before him) there is no qualitative difference between feelings of ecstasy and transcendence induced by either so-called natural or unnatural phenomena. "I find it important, even though I'm painting landscapes, to divorce myself from nature," McAllister says. "I'm not a mirror to nature."

Instead, McAllister's paintings prompt us to reflect on our place in the world, a world that includes every work of art ever made just as it includes every tree, leaf and blade of grass.

- Jonathan Griffin, writer and art critic