

LECTURE

“Tensions in the Land”

(Painting in the Palouse of Eastern Washington State)

© by Susan Platt Presented to the International Association of Art Critics, New York, Winter 1987 For a more complete discussion see "Paradigms and Paradoxes" *Art Journal* Summer 1992

Vicissitudes of weather, sub zero temperatures, unplowed roads made it difficult for me to prepare this talk and underlines my thesis: the art of the isolated inland area of Eastern Washington is formed by the harsh rigors of isolation, the oppression of the massively over cultivated land and the tense intimacy and melodrama of small town life where survival depends on traditional social structures such as marriage and churches. Also central to life in this region are animals and wild life in general, as friends, as foes, as hunted, as hunters. On the surface a paradise of clean air and rustic farmhouses punctuated by grain elevators that would have transported Le Corbusier, the harsh realities of life here are those of a frontier of the nineteenth century, socially and spiritually. From this tough, hostile country comes an art responding psychologically in particular ways to the land.

In no case is this area of landscape painters, who bucolically set an easel on a sloping hill. There are no ornaments here, little technology, little professional class, definitely no yuppies. The region hides its sores: poverty and violence behind the closed doors of trailers; invisible threats of chemicals in air and water from fertilizers and the Hanford Plutonium production which has spilled radioactive wastes into the ground and river. Nature is not friendly it is "scary as hell" as Patrick Siler put it.

The hills are steep slopes uncomfortable to climb and rutted with the scars of agriculture. Leaving a town means confronting hundreds of miles of this inhospitable terrain. We feel the fragility of our own existences immediately, we experience ourselves as insects scurrying in circles around tiny towns, where only a thin wall and sometimes a few trees, stands between us and the vast, harsh, emptiness of the land. In the towns, the houses and cars are aging: rusting, decaying, dirty. There is no place for chic, here, only what works and what survives. For women it is a strange anomaly: the political issues of feminist equality are hard to introduce in a region that depends on traditional systems, and yet at the same time women are, by necessity, strong and self-sufficient, in the tradition of the pioneers.

The artists all have a connection of some type to the major university in the area, Washington State University, ranging from retired faculty, to recent undergraduates. I have chosen a cross section of artists, both men and women, at various stages in their careers, whose works responds to the environment. These artists work in a variety of styles and mediums, but all share a sense of the elemental experience of life in terms of earth, time, and space, whether literal or metaphorical based on the nature of existence in the inland Northwest.