REVIEW

“The View from Here: 100 Artists Mark the Centennial of Mt. Rainier National Park”

Seafirst Gallery Seattle, Washington November 12, 1998 - January 15, 1999
Mount Rainier National Park: One Hundred Years in Paradise and First Up!
“Historic Ascents of Mount Rainier” Allen Library,
University of Washington, Seattle January 22 - March 29, 1999

The frenzy in Seattle is mounting in the celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of Mount Rainier National Park, a somewhat arbitrary anniversary, since the mountain has been around a lot longer than the park, but Seattle is good at communal joy. In addition to the shows here reviewed, I was told of four others on the way, not to mention the official celebration. In Seattle, Mount Rainier is omnipresent as part of the view, in spite of the fact that it is covered by clouds most of the time. The contained volcanic energy is always there as a threat or a challenge, depending on your point of view.

The irrepressible Seafirst Gallery director Peggy Weiss, one of the most community-spirited curators in Seattle, was inspired to have a Mount Rainier show when she saw Super mall, a photograph by Seattle Times' Alan Berner of local boosters admiring a fireworks celebration above a plaster model of the mighty mountain. The exhibition exploded from there into an extravaganza of one hundred artists. More than half the works were made just last fall, providing an intriguing sample of contemporary landscape art. Weiss also commissioned poets and musicians to address the subject and even invited an Army marching band to perform a new work by avant-garde composer Wayne Horvitz called "March Up Rainier."

The Army band required the National Anthem as part of the performance which was more appropriate than most people realized since national parks like Mount Rainier are embedded in a government policy of wilderness preservation in which artists have participated for much more than one hundred years.

The art historian Gray Sweeney argues forcefully in a recent essay that landscape artists, often employed by the railroads, played a key role in seducing the white East coast power elite to preserve the "wilderness." Their carefully selected vistas, based on a Ruskinian aesthetic of realism (a Mt. Rainier version by Sanford Gifford is included in "View from Here"), often included diminutive, unthreatening Indians in the foreground in order to underscore the safety of the newly colonized West and encourage tourism.

Mount Rainier, as national parks go, is not as famous as Yosemite, Yellowstone or the Grand Canyon. That is partly because, from an Anglo-Saxon perspective, it is a one-liner in terms of visual drama-there is just one placated volcanic peak. Almost two decades

after Yellowstone, Mount Rainier was established by a combination of local recreational groups and politicians that sought to develop it as much as to preserve it.

The two small exhibitions at the University of Washington drew on vast archival resources to chart the history of that development, beginning with the earliest Anglo accounts and images by George Vancouver in 1792. Vancouver named the mountain Rainier after his friend, Rear Admiral Rainier, although it already had a Nisqually name Mt. Ta-co-bet, meaning "the place where the waters begin."

Asahel Curtis was amply represented with his photographs of the mountain. Brother of Edward Curtis who "preserved" Indians, Asahel was a key figure in both the creation of the park and the development of roads to make it accessible. Other parts of this exhibition included florid railroad brochures and dramatic photographs of hiking, skiing, and glacier climbing, but, tellingly, the photograph of the summit itself was just a vague smudge. The display also presented ongoing debates about the conflict of nature and commerce, preservation and development.

That debate forms the under girding of "View From Here" which informally divides into the same themes, the mountain itself, its development and sports, and the question of its survival. Imogen Cunningham's 1915 photographs of her husband frolicking in the nude on the slopes of Mt. Rainier provide an amusing alternative to the numerous re-presentations of the mountain itself treated by a wide range of Northwest artists including Ambrose Patterson, George Tsutakawa, Aki Sogabe, Richard Crozier, Alfredo Arreguin, Angie Dixon, and Joe Reno. Helen Lessick's chunk of the glacier placed in a refrigerator also goes with this group. Another sizable number of artists addressed commodities and kitsch, like Rainier Canscape (1974) by Charlie Jones, which extended the mountain into the gallery space with Rainier beer cans. Commodities include the paraphernalia of mountain sports. On this topic the most visually arresting pieces were Rachel Brumer's Fay Fuller's Boot, (1998) an homage to the first woman to reach the summit and Katherine Holzknecht's Vertical Challenge (1998) a delicate watercolor landscape brutally framed with clamps, axes and other climbing equipment.

These artists are not boosters like their nineteenth century counterparts; they are in a more ambiguous position that alternates between celebration and critique. "View from Here" was supported by a bank, and located in a food court at the bottom of a corporate office block. While some of the older artists produce works that could decorate a corporate office, most of the recent artists are more confrontational. They present nature as it now is, a corporate commodity invaded by the paraphernalia of consumerism

Alice Dubiel directly commented on "wilderness" designation itself as a mask for our destruction of the earth. Her Views and Reviews: A Wilderness Tale exposed the exploitation of nature with pithy quotes and kitsch images. Lou Cabeen played the part of court jester as she attached white stickers reading fog, rain, cloud, haze, etc. to one hundred Mt. Rainier postcards and asserted that as a transplanted Midwesterner she was actually happier when the mountain was invisible and she could pretend it was all flat out there.

But, for me, the voices that were the most profoundly confrontational were those of the two native artists and one native poet. Though an unfortunately tiny percentage of the exhibition (native myths were, of course, borrowed by several Anglo artists), these artists formed a quiet alternative to the dominant cacophony and materialistic clutter. Tanis M. S'eiltin contributed a subtle drawing on fish skin and rawhide called Tahoma: Honoring the People and Mike MacDonald made a Medicine Blanket with color xeroxes of individual flowers. S'eiltin's work was hung in a distant corner, perhaps as an acknowledgment of its distinctive voice.

Related to the understated intimacy of these two art works was the poetry of the Wishram Indian, Arthur Tulee. In the closing ceremony, right after the marching band, Tulee offered an alternative vision:

"My mountains are inward, they are not goals in themselves.
I do not outfit myself with anything other than patience, wisdom,
and a desire to leave things as I have found them.
I do not litter the achievement I strive for.
I accept local custom names.
I do not name wilderness feature or areas after urban creatures.
To my summits, there are no footsteps before or after mine.
More to the point, my thrill seeking is not in possibilities of death or injury,
but in inquiry and learning.
I defy death by living, not in flaunting danger or ignoring right thinking.
Most of all, I do not take only photos and leave only footprints.
I take only breaths and leave only shadows."
(excerpt from "The Ascension" ©Arthur Tulee)