Art in America

Neil Raitt: The Cabin
Written by: Jennifer S. Li
October 24, 2016

Neil Raitt: Mountain Waterfall (Golden Purple), 2016, oil and acrylic on canvas, 39⅜ by 27½ inches; at The Cabin.

British artist Neil Raitt (b. 1986) has been a fan of Bob Ross since he was ten years old. In a recent conversation, he told me that he used to pretend to be sick so that he could stay home and watch the show on public television. Raitt also admires Richard Prince, Minimalism, and German Romanticists such as Caspar David Friedrich. While studying at the Royal College of Art, where he completed graduate work in painting in 2013, Raitt developed a style that brings together these seemingly incongruent influences.

His latest body of work, “Chasing Bridges,” was the result of a three-week residency in a West Hollywood studio space, during which he completed four of the six paintings on view (all 2016) at The Cabin—a quirky venue in collector and artist Danny First’s backyard that mimics, in size and shape, Unabomber Ted Kaczynski’s off-the-grid Montana shed. The unusual space heightened the kitsch of the paintings, which at their core are actually conceptual and appropriationist.

To create the works, Raitt picks a landscape to copy from an episode of “The Joy of Painting.” The lifted imagery takes on new meaning and purpose, however, with his treatment. In Black Mist Mountain (Topanga Swirl), Raitt repeats a typical easel-size idyllic landscape across an almost six-foot-tall canvas, blanketing the surface with an irregular pattern. The resulting painting approaches abstraction, an unlikely outcome for a traditional landscape. As Raitt puts it, the more the artist copies, or the viewer looks at, the same motif, the more it loses its meaning. For past exhibitions, Raitt has hand-painted entire walls with Ross’s motifs to achieve the appearance of wallpaper, upon which he has then installed his painted canvases, turning his painstaking murals into mere backdrops. Raitt’s cabins, mountains, trees, and other imagery become building blocks in an overall visual language. The effect recalls that of Sol LeWitt’s prescribed vocabulary of basic shapes, lines, and colors.

Ross’s already idealized colors—for which he licensed a commercially available line of paints and accompanying brushes that Raitt sometimes uses—are mutated by Raitt into a kaleidoscope of amplified, unnatural hues. A strange magenta haze glides over Mountain Waterfall (Chasing Bridges). In Birch Cabin, an inexplicable purple fog surrounds the rudimentary teal-roofed cabins. Brushy patches of cotton-candy pink and bursts of glowing yellow, evoking J.M.W. Turner’s seascapes, appear in, respectively, Black Mist Mountain (Topanga Swirl) and Mountain Waterfall (Golden Purple).

Through his television program, Ross sought to democratize the craft and skill of painting, touting the feel-good aspect of his “happy little trees” and clouds. Though an ardent, sincere admirer of Ross, Raitt uses Ross’s imagery, tools, and techniques for more cerebral ends.