

THINKING ALOFT

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An
essay
by
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Essay on Current work by Rachael McCampbell

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Despite her technique, emphasizing the substantiality indeed, the viscosity of her media, Rachael McCampbell's imagery takes to the air. When she depicts buildings she looks upward to the rooftops, as often as not looking no further down than the upper stories. (Besides, so many of these structures are houses of worship, places meant for the soul to soar.) When she depicts human figures, so

often they are winged ironically, as the depictions are not of living people, but of statuary, and in reality are immobile, incapable even of imagining flight. And the things found most often in McCampbell's canvases are birds not just far-off silhouettes dotting the space above the spires and minarets, but creatures seen close up, alit on boughs or simply rendered like Audobonian notations in areas pictorially adjacent to,

but on an entirely different plane of perception from, her landscape spaces.

McCampbell favors such disjuncture because her approach to painting is not naturalistic and quotidian, but ruminative and schematic. Her images are taken from reality indeed, from her actual experiences, her travels and habitations, from Tennessee to Tuscany. But she is not interested in

simply recapitulating views or incidents from her past, but in re-experiencing them in the present, effectively as the mind recaptures them. The mind does not simply regurgitate snapshots, after all, it replays experience as a roiling montage of things and spaces, events and expressions, and McCampbell wants her paintings to manifest this sensibility, moving beyond ordinary vision and ordinary things. The "where" of McCampbell's painted world is not "there" but "out over here;" she is in effect inviting us to enter her memories and her imagination.

With such an invitation come wings of our own. Flight provides us with one of our most powerful metaphors, and one of our most magical vantages. Psychologically associated with, among other things, sexuality (supposedly, flying in a dream indicates sexual arousal of the dreaming body), flight has traditionally been forbidden to us. It took us until the last century to realize da Vinci's dream. The aura of transgression, however, still adheres to flying. ("If God had meant us to fly, He would have given us airline tickets.") The dangers of parachuting and hang-gliding

indeed, of commercial air transportation tend to be fatal; Icarus' fate (or worse) awaits us all.

The dream state McCampbell's paintings imply maintains in those jumps in hue and tone that occur between panels. Such shifts suggest changes in weather, changes that normally occur in time rather than, as here, in space. But in dreams weather can reverse itself in an instant, storm turn to calm, overcast skies suddenly clear of all turbulence, even day turn to night on a dime. There are places in the world where this can happen occasionally (Los Angeles being one of them), but few of us live where it can be a daily occurrence the way it is in McCampbell's images. Indeed, her pictures seem to propose that one place can have two climates at once, and can be experienced at two temperatures simultaneously. Again, only in dreams, and in memory's compressive fugue.

