Two forms of judgement: forgiving and demanding
(The case of marine painting)

James Elkins

Abstract

I want to explore here the stark and unmendable gap between run-of-the-mill paintings like Mukho’s, Laurent’s, and Adams’s, on the one hand, and the paintings that have found places in textbooks of twentieth-century art on the other. I have chosen three marine painters, but the pattern I have in mind recurs in many kinds of painting throughout the world. Such painting is caught between two extremes. On the one hand, it is virtually certain to be ignored by academic art history. It will not be mentioned in classes in the local university, it won’t be the subject of scholarly articles written by art historians, it won’t be included in the next survey of twentieth-century art. The discipline of art history maintains strict silence about the mass of ordinary production. It can be challenging to look at a marine painting as the artist would have wanted, and it can be intellectually fascinating to compare such painting to other practices and understand exactly why it is marginal or belated. The difficult question is this: why only two modes of judgement, forgiving and demanding? Why do those two pull like magnets on any interpretation, making all compromises seem unstable?

Contributor details

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Consider a typical painting in a typical mid-twentieth century exhibition: let's say Nikolai Mukho's (1913–86) small painting on board, *In the Sea* (1964, Plate 1).² Mukho was a Leningrad Impressionist; it was a movement that began around 1900 and continued right through the twentieth century.³ This is one of his darker canvases: other pictures are light, like Alfred Sisley (1839–99). Mukho painted steel-hulled commercial vessels docked at the state-run Leningrad Admiralty shipyards, and he also liked to paint construction sites and dull city streets.

Or let's say John Laurent's (b. 1920) *Nubble Light-Northeast*, another wintry marine painting, but this time of the Maine sea-coast (Plate 2). The writer and painter Edward Betts describes *Nubble Light-Northeast* in his book *Creative Seascape Painting*; he says Laurent ‘has used a group of grayed blues and greens and stark contrasts of white sea foam against dark rocks to project the bleak, brooding quality of the Maine sea-coast before a storm’.⁴

In the fishing village of Port Aransas, Texas, for example, there are at least two art galleries that feature marine paintings.⁵ The smaller of the two is the Adams Gallery, run by Susan Adams, who paints landscapes and other themes in Port Aransas and in Guanacaste, Costa Rica, where she also lives. Her *Padre Island* is a typical south Texas beach scene (Plate 3). Port Aransas has a population of around 4,000, and it is home to a small fleet of ocean fishing boats for tourists - just enough to help support two galleries. The nearest museum, the Art Museum of South Texas in Corpus Christi, does not show that kind of work: its collection is regionalist and realist-oriented, but it excludes tourist-oriented marine painting.⁶ That is enough to open the question I want to explore here: the stark and unmendable gap between run-of-the-mill paintings like Mukho’s, Laurent’s, and Adams’s, on the one hand, and the paintings that have found places in textbooks of twentieth-century art on the other.

I have chosen three marine painters, but the pattern I have in mind recurs in many kinds of painting throughout the world. It is hard to get a sense of very local painting: I discovered the Leningrad marine painters on the Internet; I found Laurent in a how-to-paint book; and I found Adams’s gallery because my parents have a winter home in Port Aransas.

Such painting is caught between two extremes. On the one hand, it is virtually certain to be ignored by academic art history. It will not be mentioned in classes in the local university, it won't be the subject of scholarly articles written by art historians, it won't be included in the next survey of twentieth-century art. The discipline of art history maintains strict silence about the mass of ordinary production. Visual culture scholars, sociologists, and anthropologists might pick up on marine paintings as examples of popular culture, and there is always the odd artist - like Komar and Melamid, Irwin, or the Chicago artist Roger Brown - who is interested in marine painting as a source for campy high art.
Marine painting is fêted in the exhibition brochures and Internet pages that the galleries produce. If it gets reviewed in the local press, chances are that nothing serious will be said, and there will be enough encouraging words to make the review sound positive. Those reviews are then added to the gallery’s brochure on the painter. Some marine painters have commercially oriented websites, for example John Groves (b. 1937, a specialist in tall ships), Jeffrey Wilkie (who specializes in ‘dolphin art’), Wyland (b. 1956, the ‘Prince of Whales’), Paul Geatches (b. 1967, whose statement says he is inspired by Wyland and Maxfield Parrish), and Gordon Bauwens (creator of the ‘official artist’s impression of the Queen Mary II’, commissioned by the Cunard Line). It is difficult to gauge how many visitors such websites attract, but they have made marine painting more international than it had been. There are also Internet directories of marine artists. Marine painters can also enter their works in realist-painting contests and try to sell their work to marine-art museums and other speciality venues. Museums and collectors who buy such work are usually marginal in the art world. Shirley Bickel Evans, a Vancouver tall-ship painter, says her works are in the collection of Cutty Sark Distributors, ‘the Honorable W. Graham Clayton, Jr., Secretary of the Navy’, the Favell Museum of Western Art and Indian Artifacts in Klamath Falls, Oregon, and the Northern Illinois Gas Company. The majority of marine painters do not have their own websites, competition medals, or lists of collections, and they are only shown in local galleries - and that is not even counting the enormous number of marine painters who have not shown any work. The work is strongly local: it isn’t necessarily regionalist, because some marine painters specialize in tall ships, others in underwater scenes, and still others in surf-and-sunset pictures. In some cases even ‘local’ is too broad a term: many visitors to Port Aransas will have never seen the Adams gallery because the town is too small to have a local art scene. Marine painting is often essentially private, and that is the source of the subject I want to look into here: if there is a scale from global through national to regional, local, and finally private, then there is a world of difference between private painting and the global art market.

Plate 1: Nikolai Mukho, In the Sea, 1964.
Let’s say I am asked to write an exhibition catalogue for Mukho. I might begin by pointing out that In the Sea looks like one of Winslow Homer’s marine paintings. In doing so, I would be trying to link Mukho to one of the few painters who did marines and is also accepted as an important artist. Then I might try to put in a little art history. I could say that Mukho’s real points of comparison are his contemporaries, the Leningrad Impressionists Nikolai Timov (1912–93), Gavriil Malish (1907–98), Vladimir Ovchinnikov (1911–78), Vsevolod Bazhenov (1909–86), and perhaps especially Semion Rotnitsky (1915– ), who graduated from the I. Repin Institute in the same atelier, Boris Ioganson’s, as Mukho. It would help to set the context if I said that Ioganson (1893–1973) was one of the founders of Socialist Realism, and a sharp critic of Western modernism and especially abstraction. (The Ioganson Academy in St Petersburg is named after him.) The generation of pupils ten to twenty years younger than Ioganson, including Mukho and Rotnitsky, produced a recognizable kind of marine painting in the 1950s and 1960s, mainly comprised of heavy forms, set in a steady flat light, laid on with a thick Impressionist daub. In retrospect, I would add, they have the look of mid-century Soviet realism.

In doing all that I would be providing context and opening the way to wider comparisons. Was Mukho really any better than those other painters? Was he the best Soviet marine painter? The best mid-century Soviet marine
painter? The best mid-century Soviet marine painter in Leningrad? Actually, no, he wasn’t. He was just competent enough to be listed in the top 100 Leningrad Impressionists.

And what about the American marine painter, John Laurent? He was a member of a generation of American marine painters who practised a range of styles between nineteenth-century realism and what Betts calls ‘expressive abstraction’. Betts also reproduces a Laurent painting named Finisterre, which has rocks and a skyline but is closer to John Marin (1870–1953) than John Martin (1789–1854). Comparable painters include the watercolorist Frank Webb, the figurative works done by Balcomb Greene (1904–90), Don Stone, the stylish Stephen Etnier (1903–84), and Edward Betts himself (b. 1920), the author of Creative Seascape Painting, whose Night Mood - Monhegan (1953) is an early example of American marine palette-knife ‘expressive abstraction’. Etnier is perhaps the most inventive of the generation: his paintings are sometimes reminiscent of Dalí’s landscape, purged of surrealism and infused with a proletarian spirit that Daniel O’Leary, curator of an exhibition of Etnier’s work at the Portland Museum of Art, compares to the Steinbeck of Travels with Charley or Cannery Row. Stone is one of the most successful of the group, selling his ‘modern impressionist’ paintings through his website for prices up to $30,000.

This is the kind of catalogue essay I would write, but it is only part of the story. Laurent is known in the North American marine painting community, but outside it he is not better known than the painters who set up their easels on the wharves at Cape Cod, or Sanibel Island, Kennebunkport, St Petersburg, or anywhere else where retired people paint boats. The usual place for such painting is not in histories of marine painting (not to mention histories of modern painting), but in middle-class houses. My parents had two post-Impressionist marine paintings, and as a child I paid very little attention to them. One was a Florida scene done by an artist named Hurxthal, who I have not been able to trace, and the other was a gloomy arte povera-style marine painting of a single sailboat in a storm. Paintings like those are ubiquitous: they crowd living rooms, stairwells, dining rooms, and bathrooms (the Hurxthal was in a bathroom) of houses everywhere, and in coastal towns they are common in restaurants, hotels, shops, hairdressers, small businesses, and police stations. Marine painting is an activity entirely apart from art history: it is more like the air you breathe when you’re near the coast. It would be artificial to write catalogue essays of the kind I am imagining here, because it would not take account of the artists’ own sense of their relation to the local, the regional, the national, and the global.

I think that the kind of painting I am calling private poses a severe problem for both art history and criticism. The only way such painting can be taken into current conversations on art is by packaging it as kitsch. Even comparing Mukho to Rotnitsky or Ioganson, or measuring Laurent against Betts, is unfair because the work shows that they painted largely for their own pleasure, without measuring themselves against other marine painters outside their circle. There is no evidence that Mukho or Laurent thought
that painting beyond marines was pertinent to what they were doing. There are nameable regional styles of marine painting, and it would actually be possible to construct a global history of it. Mid-century Leningrad Impressionists were heavy-handed and dour, as if the light was flatter back then. I have recognized Hurxthal’s style in Florida: thick uninspired oil straight from the tube, bright flat Florida landscapes. Mid-century American marine painting also had a national character. Vernon Kerr’s (1938–82) *Engaging Presence* is unmistakably a post-war painting, with its stolid monumentalism (Plate 4). Kerr is represented in *Paintings of the Sea by Twenty Artists*, along with Charles Cochrane, Frederick Waugh, and Charles Evers: all their work glows with American optimism, tinted by references to Bierstadt, Church, and Moran. The book’s author, William Powell, is the most forward-looking: his intense purples and yellows look forward to marine painting of the 1980s and 1990s, in which everything gleams, and the ocean seems to be lit by disco lights. His work probably inspired artists like Wyland and Geatches who are expert at bubbly underwater aquarium light. There is a north-eastern mode which is bleaker and more empty; it derives from Hopper or Wyeth. (For example Jim Holland’s becalmed seas and abandoned rowboats.)

English marine painters can also follow the empty mode, as in Graham Fish’s work. Early twentieth-century Argentine marine painting is more a mixture of Cézanne and *arte povera*, as in the work of Benito Quinquela Martin (1890–1977) who painted the port of Buenos Aires in the 1920s with ‘sobriety’ and ‘high idealism’.

And so on. But it would all be wrong. What is needed, when it comes to painting that is done just for the painter and one or two others, is a kind of forgiveness. Seeing the work as kitsch doesn’t help to understand the artist’s intentions, and placing it in regional and national groups goes against the grain of its privacy. Such art - and here I mean all private painting, not just marine painting - is fundamentally predicated on an unwillingness to look beyond the nearest available models.

I assume that most Sunday marine painters will be curious about what’s being painted further down the wharf, or on the other side of the harbour. I assume, too, that even very isolated painters will show their work to their family and friends, and compare it to what they see in the local gallery. But imagine what would happen if a painter like John Laurent began to wonder about marine painting outside of Maine. He may want to know who the best Maine sea-coast painter is, and even who was the most interesting North American sea-coast painter of all time (is it Homer?). Once he has decided that he will - inevitably, I think - be curious about whether there were better sea-coast painters elsewhere in the world. Eventually he will find Eugène Boudin (1824–98) who got the wet sticky sand of the French Atlantic exactly right; and he’ll find Aelbert Cuyp...
(1620–91), Jacob van Ruisdael (1628–82), Jan van Goyen (1596–1656), and Ludolf Backhuysen (1631–1708) who invented rich foamy ocean waves. Eventually he may even find Alessandro Magnasco (1667–1749), a painter’s painter of waves.

At that point it will become clear that beach scenes are a backwater in the history of marine painting, and he will go on to study more compelling seascapes, those that put the sea to some thematic purpose, such as Tintoretto’s *Christ in the Sea of Galilee* (1575–80), or Homer’s *The Gulf Stream* (1899), or Albert Pinkham Ryder’s *With Sloping Mast and Dipping Prow* (1883). If marine painting can be part of a larger narrative purpose, then it stands to reason that it could be part of a wider history of landscape and narrative. He will then want to know how marine painting fits with the wider history of landscape painting. And even landscape painting is just one kind of painting, one genre in what was once called the hierarchy of genres. It will then become necessary to ask how landscape painting itself has fared in the five hundred or so years since it was developed.

Each question leads outward, from the nearly private experience of painting on a wharf in Maine, out to the question of painting itself. Eventually, the painter I am imagining will have to come to terms with the fact that landscape painting is a remnant of the past, requiring radical measures if it is to remain relevant in the contemporary art world. Arguably the best late twentieth-century landscape painting did not appear to be landscape painting at all - for example, Ross Bleckner’s work, or Ed Ruscha’s.

Eventually a painter like Laurent will begin asking questions so demanding - so frightening in relation to the practice he had established - that they will necessarily undermine his conviction and even his interest in painting as he had been. It won’t just be the painter who is set up further along the wharf, or across town, or in the museum in Bangor, or in New York, or Paris, or Buenos Aires: and it won’t just be a question of marine paintings, but of their place in landscape painting, and of the place of the landscape genre in art history. When those questions arise, and Ruscha seems directly pertinent, then I think it is unlikely the painter I am imagining will ever drag his easel out onto the wharf again.

One thing that prevents this from happening is the tendency most of us have to imagine that the world as we see it is the world. In an interview given in 2002, when Laurent was 82, he remembered a conversation with a former student of his.

‘He was a tough guy to get going, but I could tell he had talent,’ Laurent recalled. ‘He was painting mostly what I’d call motel room paintings, sunsets over the sea and that kind of stuff. I asked him to come into my office one day and I said, “Tom, when are you going to stop painting this (crap) and get going with the real stuff.” He was kind of shocked and said, “What do you mean?” I gave him a list of books to look at and read. Slowly and surely he started to come around. I just knew the guy was going to make it and he’s doing extremely well now.’

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From an art-world point of view, Laurent paints ‘sunsets over the sea and that kind of stuff,’ and there is no distinction between his work and ‘motel room paintings’. For many people in the art world, marine painting is part of landscape painting which is part of painting, all of which are lost causes. The odd thing about judging historically is that it compels historians to focus on the avant-garde, making the other 99.9 per cent of painting seem unrewarding or misguided. The challenge for someone interested in ordinary painting practices, and not just in the avant-garde, is to avoid the tendency to compare the work at hand more broadly than it asks to be compared. Broad and deep comparisons are a good historical practice, and they are also a reasonable course for an artist who wants to compete internationally, but such comparisons will not capture what it is like to stand out in the salty breeze on a deserted beach in Port Aransas, Texas, and make a painting of the ocean and the dunes that captures something of the feeling of the place.

It may seem that the sympathetic view I am describing is difficult, because it is impossible to erase the memory of the Ruschas or Bleckners in order to give serious consideration to a ‘minor’ and obviously unaccomplished marine painting. That is probably why it is so tempting for people in the art world to regard such paintings as kitsch: that way bad paintings can be fun, and the pleasure can be genuine even if it isn’t the same as a pleasure the maker and her friends got from the picture. I have almost no patience for collectors who buy paintings like the ones I am considering because they like a retro look or they enjoy the campy feel, and I am not interested in artists who buy such paintings because they want to use ‘outsider art’ in their own work. The camp mentality condescends to the people who make the objects, and lessens the burden on the viewer by removing the obligation to understand the painting.
On the other hand I know very well that judged by the standards of modernism, marine paintings are at least 150 years out of date. I recognize that most of these painters have a barely adequate technique, that their choices show they are naïve about art history, and that the images are sentimental and romantic beyond what serious painters since the Romantics could stomach. But I do not think that means they have to be seen as retro, camp, or kitsch.

All that is necessary to begin to understand paintings like these is to realize that they are made by thousands of people around the world, and that those people may often lead happy and fulfilled lives, and that they may find a kind of pleasure in these images that is not dependent on the art world or art history. From an art-world perspective, it can appear that the art galleries in small towns like Port Aransas cater cynically to the tourist trade, but in my experience the artists, gallerists, and customers all value the work without irony. It is not impossible to see the work as it was intended: to take pleasure in the feel of hot Texas dunes, or the cold ocean in the Gulf of Finland (in Mukho’s painting), or the slick black rocks around the Nubble Lighthouse in York, Maine (in Laurent’s painting). It isn’t impossible to indulge in the romantic fantasies of the nineteenth-century tall ships, or in the sensory overload of snorkeling (as in Wyland’s paintings). None of that is difficult, and in fact it can be more immersive, and more challenging than the pallid appreciation of these paintings as the campy products of retirement communities.

What is much more difficult, I find, is to understand why it is that there seem to be only two choices in this matter: either I forgive the paintings in order to see them as their makers and viewers intended, or else I send them mercilessly into the full interpretive machinery of the history of art. What is missing is a middle ground. I can construct local, regional, and national accounts of these paintings, and studying them is often a matter of doing just that, but those interpretive frames are not stable. They tend outward or collapse inward: either I compare the local to the regional, the regional to the national, and the national to the global; or else I abandon comparative judgements and look at what the painting means to show me. The inherent instability of the mid-range of comparisons is a common problem in much postcolonial theory, because it is the same as the problem of constructing a stable, closed definition of a nation. Postcolonial concepts such as hybridity, transnationality, and the subaltern are all attempts to address this question. The two end points of the scale are more stable: on one side is the private and the local, with its own circumscribed ‘world’; and on the other is the notion of a global art world that is built on full awareness of current practices and their histories.

From a painter’s point of view the terrain looks different, because the world of habitual comparisons will seem - as it does for Laurent - to be the whole world. From that perspective, themes such as the marginality of all landscape painting may seem either irrelevant or frightening. Global comparisons suit very few artists: after all, you cannot concentrate on your work if you are comparing yourself to Picasso: it’s both daunting and meaning-

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less. So from a painter’s point of view, the problem I am raising here looks different. For a painter it is more a matter of daring to compare as widely as possible, or else remaining content with a circumscribed set of comparisons. The quandary that I am proposing here is not for working artists, but for those concerned with art history and with the kinds of art works that historians have considered worth studying. It is not easy to give up the desire to weigh marine painting against the wider history of landscape painting, and against the even broader history of painting itself, and find it wanting. It is not easy to find a way to interpret the work that doesn’t reduce it to camp or see it as an ultimately uninteresting economy of bourgeois taste. But it is possible, as I have suggested, and once you find your way to a more forgiving stance, a genuinely difficult question becomes visible. It can be challenging to look at a marine painting as the artist would have wanted, and it can be intellectually fascinating to compare such painting to other practices and understand exactly why it is marginal or belated. The difficult question is this: why only two modes of judgement, forgiving and demanding? Why do those two pull like magnets on any interpretation, making all compromises seem unstable?

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