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Carlos Gutierrez-Solana
Artistic/Executive Director

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Photography: *Citadel* and *Second Nature*: Lee Varis Catalogue Design: Ratchethead Studios Catalogue Printing: Selco Graphics Inc.

ARTISTS SPACE
223 West Broadway
New York, NY 10013
(212) 226-3970

Margaret Nielsen *Idiosyncratic* Landscapes



June 3 through July 10, 1993 / Artists Space

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

(Height precedes width. Unless otherwise noted, works are lent by the artist, courtesy of AsherFaure Gallery, Los Angeles, California).

1. *Merced River, Yosemite Valley*, 1991
54" x 72", Oil on canvas

2. *Passing Storm Over the Sierra*, 1991
24" x 30", Oil on canvas, lent by Mike Finney, Topanga, California

3. *Citadel*, 1988
15" x 12", Oil on panel, lent by Rebecca & Jeffrey Berkus, Austin, Texas

4. *Correspondence*, 1988
10" x 8", Oil on panel

5. *Disguise*, 1988
7" x 5", Oil on panel, lent by Daniel Wheeler, Los Angeles, California

6. *Juncture*, 1988
15" x 12", Oil on panel

7. *Second Nature*, 1988
5" x 7", Oil on panel, lent by Denise Domergue, Los Angeles, California

8. *Lure*, 1987
5" x 7", Oil on panel

9. *Brink*, 1986
4" x 5", Oil on panel, lent by Pamela Leeds, Los Angeles, California

10. *Downstream* , 1986
4" x 5", Oil on panel

11. *Betrayal*, 1984
5" x 4", Oil on panel, lent by Jaqueline Stuart, Los Angeles, California

12. *The Hadlock Motel at the Gateway to Death Valley*, 1977, 16" x 20", Acrylic and gouache on paper

13. *Secrets of the Pyramids*, 1977
16" x 20", Acrylic and gouache on paper

SELECTED BIOGRAPHY

Solo Exhibitions

1991 AsherFaure, Los Angeles, CA.
1989 Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco, CA. 1988
1988 AsherFaure, Los Angeles, CA.
1984 East End Gallery, Provincetown, MA.

Group Exhibitions

1991 *Mind and Beast: Contemporary Artists and the Animal Kingdom*, Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, Wausau, Wisconsin (catalog).
Personal Mythologies, Marc Richards Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.
Edge of Night, Muckenthaler Cultural Center, Fullerton CA.
1990 Ginza Gallery Nakazawa, Tokyo, Japan.
1989 Ministry of Post and Telecommunications, Tokyo, Japan.
1987 *Under Currents: An Exhibition of West Coast Artists*, Portland, Center for the Visual Arts, Portland, OR.
Present Perspectives: 1975 - 85, Fresno Arts Center and Museum, Fresno, CA.
1986 *Artificial Paradise*, AsherFaure, Los Angeles, CA.
1983 *The 38th Corcoran Biennial Exhibition of American Painting*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

Education

B.F.A.,California Institute of the Arts
M.A., Loyola Marymount University

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and of Manifest Destiny. Nielsen's attention oscillates between these two polarities; in one instance, she participates in the romantic conception of nature where man is subsumed by natural forces. By contrast, she exhumes picture postcards and Bierstadt paintings which depict an idealized and imaginary landscape, a landscape shaped more by missionaries, land speculators and real estate agents. In Nielsen's rendering of these scenes, images of the landscape are coupled with malevolent elements which add an ironic or subversive note.

This survey of Nielsen's work covers a fifteen year interval and includes work that falls into four distinct periods. Two paintings from 1977, *Mystery of the Pyramid* and *The Hadlock Motel at the Gateway to Death Valley*, are characteristic of a body of work spanning the years from 1969 to 1981 which are modest in scale and compositionally spare with one or two elements precariously positioned in an otherwise empty space. Works from this period are most often drawings or sketches which Nielsen has borrowed from other sources, such as picture postcards. In effect, Nielsen's renderings of the cards are reproductions of reproductions—paintings of photographs of scenes exchanged between correspondents. In Nielsen's version, however, a sinister element has been introduced such as with the fires in *Hadlock Motel*, or the spurs on a larger-than-life cactus leaf in *Mystery of the Pyramid*. Nielsen interrogates these antique images of nostalgic settings with images that transgress their borders and upset the tranquility of the scene.

Beginning in 1982/83, Nielsen's work makes an abrupt shift as she turns her attention to oil painting. The pastel-like palette of her earlier work is now replaced by torrents of paint portraying menacing whirlpools, terror stricken animals and an antediluvian parade of helpless creatures. The canvases and works on wood are invariably monochromatic in tone and energetically rendered in quick bursts of paint where the gesture of the artist is always in evidence. Although most of the work from this time is not represented in this survey,



and is somewhat larger in scale than the work from the later 1980's, there are two inclusions which capture the spirit of this pivotal period. In *Betrayal* from 1984 and *Downstream* from 1987, both only 4" x 5" in dimension, Nielsen utilizes a vocabulary of images which are omnipresent in the work from 1984 to the end of the decade. Ladders and rope, swings and Greek columns, snakes and stags are set within a primordial landscape in which the human presence is only hinted at.

In the work from 1984 to 1989, Nielsen develops a series of mysterious small-scale paintings of wilderness scenes. A sense of passage is implied by the recurrent images of an empty canoe and campfire scenes without campers. Repeatedly, Nielsen draws upon a few stock images, which then become a part of a complex vocabulary of images alluding to magic, transformation and unconscious states. In Nielsen's world, the image of fire is an agent of change, a transformative medium that turns one thing into



Second Nature, 1988
5" x 7", Oil on panel
lent by Denise Domergue,
Los Angeles, California

psychological portrait which take on a transcendental intensity. In this work, she charts the mysteries of a psychic wilderness—a fantastic world of “material dreams and fearful symmetries.”³

Five paintings from 1988 are representative of this period and included in this exhibition. Each is relatively small in scale and carry discursive titles like *Disguise* (7" x 5"); *Correspondence* (10" x 8"); *Second Nature* (5" x 7"); *Citadel* (15" x 12") and *Juncture* (15" x 12"). In each there is a sense of impending doom or apocalypse. Ambiguity is also always present in this group of paintings, as in the case of *Juncture*, one of the few paintings from this period to utilize a human figure. It is unclear whether the individual is man or woman, is embracing or in combat with the upright tiger.

Nielsen's use of the human form in *Juncture* prefigures its increasing frequency in her paintings from the early 1990's in which she confronts the legacy of 19th Century landscape painters, specifically the grandiose achievements of Albert Bierstadt. Nielsen's appropriation of Bierstadt is not unlike her use of picture postcards in that she is recreating images twice removed from their natural source. Again, Nielsen uses a familiar strategy by superimposing advertising images over her recreation of these idealized Bierstadt landscapes. Here, the juxtaposition is even more jarring, however, than with the earlier picture postcards. Images of the clown in *Passing Storm over the Sierra* and the marriage portrait in *Merced River, Yosemite Valley*, are out-takes from advertising copy and epitomize both the deceit and tricksterism of Madison Avenue. In *Passing Storm*, the clown is the archetypal magician whose presence foregrounds the approach of storm clouds and an impending downpour. In *Merced River*, a photographer with a large box camera prepares to capture a young bride posed against a backdrop of the Merced River in Yosemite. As with her early picture postcard works, Nielsen attempts to capture nature, both in the physical and psychological sense, and makes it yield to the dictates of a culture that has long forgotten its primordial past.

Thomas Rhoads, 1993

1. Many of the ideas presented in this essay are based on the original research of William R. Hackman, an art historian and critic living in Los Angeles. Together with curator/teacher/artist James Starrett, Hackman is preparing an essay to accompany a forthcoming retrospective of Margaret Nielsen's work at the Santa Monica Museum of Art. 2. Ibid 3. Ibid.



(above)
Citadel, 1988
15" x 12", Oil on panel
lent by Rebecca & Jeffrey
Berkus, Austin, Texas

(on cover)
**Passing Storm Over the
Sierra**, 1991
24" x 30", Oil on canvas
lent by Mike Finney,
Topanga, California

In a career spanning the past twenty-five years, Los Angeles artist Margaret Nielsen has helped revitalize the genre of landscape painting. Operating outside the mainstream and in opposition to many of the conventions which have come to characterize contemporary Los Angeles art—the assemblages of Ed Kienholz; the fetish finish surfaces of John McCracken; and the light and space aesthetic of James Turrell—Nielsen has developed a highly idiosyncratic and personal vocabulary of symbols which underscore her interest in the idea of Nature, particularly from the vantage point of a transplanted Canadian living in the American West. While other more prominent Los Angeles artists have worked with similar subject matter (Ed Ruscha, Vija Celmin, Joe Goode and Lynn Foulkes), Nielsen invests her subject matter with a much greater emotional load.

Nielsen employs a variety of iconographic and stylistic means to confuse the relationship between image and object, fantasy and reality, and nature and culture. Waterfalls tumble out of one picture into another, canoes float in mid-air while a snake hovers overhead, and a wedding portrait is being taken against the backdrop of the Yosemite Valley while a cadaverous bride looks on. Though reminiscent of such divergent sensibilities as Rene Magritte, and Albert Bierstadt, Nielsen's work suggests nothing so much as a private realm where basic elemental forces—fire, water, earth and air—have become a source of fantasy and mystery. Objects defy not only the laws of gravity but the spatial limits imposed upon them by the artist and our own expectations of them.

Nature and its representations conspire to resist culture's efforts to control them and their meanings.¹

Nielsen's obsession with the landscape is rooted in her own personal history and nostalgia for a universe unmediated by human presence. Born in Western Canada (the daughter of a "Mountie") and raised in California, Nielsen has had a lifelong fascination with the landscape. From the outset of her career as a 1960's San Fernando Valley high-school student attending classes at the legendary Chouinard Art Institute—and later at the California Institute of the Arts from which she graduated in 1975, Nielsen has drawn her inspiration from the landscape, and from two vastly different images of the West—Canada and California.

Nielsen's memory of Canada is of an evanescent wilderness redolent of mystery, magic and of the unknown. Her associations with California are more ironic and steeped in a consideration of the mythology of the West

and of Manifest Destiny. Nielsen's attention oscillates between these two polarities; in one instance, she participates in the romantic conception of nature where man is subsumed by natural forces. By contrast, she exhumes picture postcards and Bierstadt paintings which depict an idealized and imaginary landscape, a landscape shaped more by missionaries, land speculators and real estate agents. In Nielsen's rendering of these scenes, images of the landscape are coupled with malevolent elements which add an ironic or subversive note.

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