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Richard Hambleton

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Richard Hambleton, *Untitled*, 2006
Courtesy Woodward Gallery, New York City

Richard Hambleton (b. 1954) made his reputation in the late 1970s with a series of edgy public art projects, including the ominous neo-noir *Shadow Men*, life-size silhouettes painted first on city street corners and then on paper and canvas. In the 1980s he was closely allied with Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring and Andy Warhol. But at the same period Hambleton was beginning to think about landscape as well, albeit through the filter of modernist abstraction. The full flowering of that interest was on view in “The Beautiful Paintings,” through November 3 at the Woodward Gallery. Hambleton stresses the imaginary quality of these gorgeous, Turnersque visions: “The Beautiful Paintings are not seascapes, rainscapes or landscapes—they are escapes.” The artist’s unusual materials suggest a species of alchemy: varnish, tinted enamel and gold or silver leaf on metal, board and canvas. Distancing the works from the particularities of specific landscapes, he called them all *Untitled*. In a 13-by-15-inch “seascape” (2006) the sky is a roiling mass of vermillion, while the gold-leaf water is as flat as the otherworldly backdrop of a medieval paradise. Yet the tableau is convincingly illusionistic, in a hyper-Romantic way, and the richness of the color is set off by the wide, slightly mottled black frame. The same format applies in another 2006 picture (19-by-22 inches), although the billowing red clouds are darker and more threatening; the silver leaf predella at the bottom seems more forward, a part of the mat rather than of the main pictorial space. Other 2006 works integrate silver leaf seamlessly into pigment. One vertical painting (28-by-16 inches) has a sunset-colored band at the bottom and a foaming thunderhead reaching into a dusky metallic sky. The most naturalistic of this group (48 -by-36^{1/2} inches) glows like a jewel, perhaps because varnish, enamel and silver leaf have been applied to a metal support. The sea and sky reflect each other, in patches of smoky shadow and warm, radiant light. We feel the recession, the pull towards the horizon, and the palette is vibrantly nuanced. The sleek, shiny patina of the surface is very different from painterly brushiness. At the same time, the approach to nature is far from realistic. The result is visionary, a meditation on clouds and water as fluid forms.

The paintings in this exhibition could be divided into two groups, warm and cool. The cool works seem less extraordinary. A narrow vertical (28-by-16-inches), an abstracted shorescape, has a foggy, Whistlerian quality, although the paint splatters on the black frame are self-consciously contemporary. Another, more striking image uses vibrant blue—cobalt, turquoise, inky—and silvery spaces to open up a stained-glass empyrean. The support for the picture (48-by-36^{1/2} inches) is again metal, and a wide silver-leaf predella anchors the composition. Hambleton’s paintings can be related to the Abstract Expressionists, Romantics such as Turner and Constable, conceptualism and medieval art, with its otherworldly richness. His way with medium is intriguingly original. The divisions between traditional art and the various avant-garde “isms” of the twentieth century are real, but this show suggests that artists need not be adversarial. Woodward Gallery, 133 Eldridge Street, New York, New York 10002. Telephone (212) 966-3411. On the web at www.woodwardgallery.net

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