

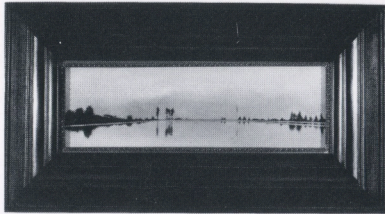
Mark Innerst: Landscape and Beyond



The Veil of the Soul

You know my house and the beautiful view around it. Today for the first time this otherwise so splendid landscape makes me think of transience and death when it normally smiles at me full of joy and life.¹

— Caspar David Friedrich



Mark Innerst, 1987. Oil and acrylic on board.



Caspar Friedrich, *Moonrise over the Sea with Two Men*, ca. 1817.

Mark Innerst is best known for his landscapes of low horizons which feature the tiny yet searing towers of technology challenging the vastness of Nature. While often compared to 19th century landscape artists, Innerst's circumspect acknowledgement of the tenets of Romantic painting, along with his acute observation of the "technological landscape," distances him a considerable body of his work, one discovers a conceptual framework that unites his approaches to landscape, still life and figural allegory. Two principal themes characterize the artist's work: the complexity of time, and the commemoration of loss portrayed as actual monuments, museum dioramas, *mementos mori*, or simply the passing of day over the industrial horizon.

I was raised modestly. I grew up thinking that if there was such a thing as sin, it was waste.²

— Mark Innerst

While they do not impose upon the viewer, there is a seduction going on in Innerst's paintings. Their small scale encourages the viewer to examine the paintings at a very intimate distance. The typical twenty second gallery glance, with its easy dismissal of content and style, is just not possible in an exhibition of Innerst's paintings. This viewing intimacy establishes a deceptive closeness with what is represented, a feeling which, in turn, is heightened by the artist's alluring technical abilities. The paintings' masterful detail and intense bursts of color within an otherwise restrained palette promotes our tendency to regard them as precious objects.

Frames were a temptation, an affectionate rather than a cynical device.³

The frame is a surrogate for art's original architectural context, as part of a palace wall or chapel ceiling, with individual scenes separated by rectangular or circular moldings. (It is interesting to note that Innerst has done several studies of coffered ceilings in the Doge's Palace in Venice [cat. nos. 26, 28]). Innerst's use of prominent frames to encase the work helps create a museum-like aura, a false sense of history about the paintings. The elaborate, often weathered frames are unusually large relative to the paintings themselves, creating the sense that the viewer is peering through a porthole at a distant scene. Through their declaration of passing time which cannot be recaptured, the frames entice us even further. Innerst paints on prepared wooden panels, rather than canvas, alluding to more archaic painting methods. The subjects, too, are historicized, with more than passing references to Dutch genre scenes and 19th century American landscape painting.

Once these elements of seduction are acknowledged, we may well ask what greater purpose they serve. The artist seems intent on pointing out that these days we visit nature the same way we visit a museum — as tourists. Lakes, national parks and reservoirs are institutionally supervised recreational zones. It is in the dioramas of natural history museums, with their realistic simulated habitats, that we receive our glimpses of the wild. Innerst's *Four Elk* [1984, cat. no. 6] is not based on a direct observation of nature or a photograph of a natural scene, but on a photograph he took of a diorama at the Museum of Natural History. This is *nature morte* in the most literal sense, a response to an American obsession for representation so real, that the subject must be killed so it may be included in the representation.

I was pulling things out of gladiator movies, but ultimately I couldn't hold that approach as my truth. I became infatuated with the aesthetic of making something visually believable. You know how media looks truthful because the technical side of it looks truthful. There is a certain aura of truth about something produced technically, and I wanted to have a little of that "How did they do it?" mystique.⁴

The veiled image was a concern of several artists emerging in the late seventies who re-represented photographically derived material. Troy Brauntuch and Michael Zwack did hazy, oneiric drawings from details of interiors or crowd scenes in photo magazines. Jack Goldstein produced large black paintings with tiny lit towers of buildings in the very center. Innerst's earliest work upon arriving in New York in 1980 from eastern Pennsylvania was influenced by the so-called "Pictures" school of artists.⁵

In *Cafeteria Scene* [1981, cat. no. 1], one of a suite of drawings exhibited at The Kitchen in 1982, the influence of Brauntuch and Zwack is apparent. Dozens of figures, recognizable only by the highlighting of their heads and torsos, are seated at rows of tables receding into perspective. A trapezoidal wall fragment echoes the rigid geometry of the grid of tables, suggesting, along with the overhead viewpoint of the source photograph, authoritarian overtones.

The figures look like viewers of a theatrical performance or film, but also could pass for occupants of some circle of Dante's Hell. There is a sense of bottled terror in this powerful scene of existential aloneness. The sepia tonality of *Cafeteria* and its faded photograph appearance serve an important function: they give the work an aura not only of memory and loss, but of the loss of a *representation* of loss. In this sense, the drawing prefigures themes in the artist's later trademark works.

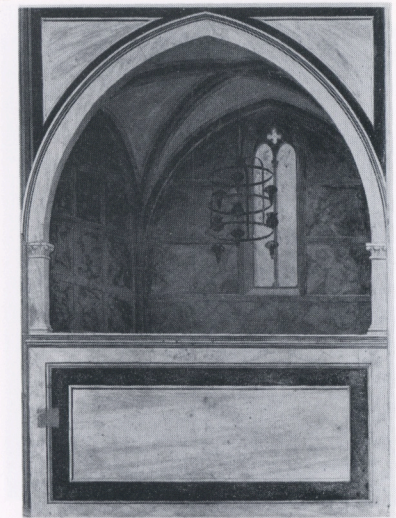
The theme of isolation appears later in *Used Feared Hated* [cat. no. 5], a composition painted in 1983. Here, thirteen people in frieze-like arrangement are stranded

on a platform in the water, as if condemned to spiritual quarantine. A theatrical atmosphere prevails and the figures, rendered in murky greys with deep blue highlights, seem already half-transformed into statues commemorating their nameless cause. As in *Cafeteria Scene*, Innerst takes an innocuous, potentially cheery event and weighs it with foreboding. Lunchrooms and lakes become areas of enforced recreation.

Innerst takes images to the verge of indecipherability in two paintings from 1984, *Tintoretto* and *An Ascension* [cat. nos. 8, 9]. Here, mythology, minimalist abstraction and TV banality are alchemically fused. Nearly opaque and heavily varnished, the paintings' images are barely indicated with faint highlights. *Tintoretto* presents a detail of the Italian master's *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, while *An Ascension's* imagery of a horse riding off into the sky derives from an Italian gladiator movie. Curiously enough, the horse could just as easily have come from a 16th century allegory, and the struggling figures in *Tintoretto* from a cheap TV movie. The idea of the television as an electronic portal into non-space is evoked especially in *Tintoretto*, whose topmost inner frame is arced like the familiar screen. At the same time, the deep blue color and submerged imagery in both works relate to the Zen emptiness and the vibratory thresholds of Ad Reinhardt's late paintings.

I didn't want to confuse the transformation from idea to paint, so I tried not to introduce anything other than my hand into the work. . . . I make a limited number of small things that cannot be mass-produced.⁶

Unlike many graduates of the media school, Innerst never tied himself to a strict aesthetic program that sublimated emotion to serve theory, or eschewed the artist's touch. He needed to explore a more personal expression of his outlook, and found inspiration in the landscape of his native Pennsylvania.



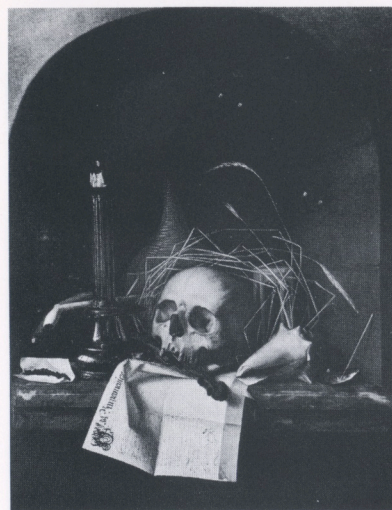
Giotto, *Cappella degli Scrovegni, Padua, 1305*.
Fresco.



Doge's Palace, Venice. The Collegio Chamber.



Bronzino, *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time*, ca. 1546.



Cornelis Norbertus Gijsbrechts, *Niche in Trompe-l'oeil*, 1669.

I have mentioned “the veil of the soul.” Something of the kind appears indispensable in Art. We can, at any time, double the true beauty of an actual landscape by half closing our eyes as we look at it. The naked Senses sometimes see too little — but then *always* they see too much.⁷

— Edgar Allan Poe

Their spectral hues shining through layers of muted paintstrokes and glazes, Innerst’s landscapes offer us a vision of nature and technology’s inextricable embrace: the Divine Light and the electronic sublime. The “half closed eye” of the camera or television tube, with its abstraction of detail and information, is a modern vehicle for the veil of the soul Poe described.

Indeed, we behold nature through a series of technologically veiled snapshots. That we can most easily comprehend a natural phenomenon in terms of a technological image comes as no surprise. How often do we catch ourselves comparing a particularly intense sunset to the reddish glow of neon? Standing under a tree lined with cicadas, the awesome din reminds us of the drone of a high-voltage power station. The structures and signposts of technology have become an integral part of the contemporary landscape. Power lines mimic the endless horizon, their vertical towers mediating distances, marking time. The electric glow of the city at dusk, that peculiar meeting of natural and artificial light, is an eerie sight. Even upon entering the heart of whatever primeval forest still remains, it is nearly impossible to relinquish the baggage of our mediated experience.

It is therefore only natural that a contemporary artist should record his perceptions of nature as significantly colored by encounters with photography, the depthless vistas of television, and other aspects of technology, much in the same way that Frederick Church or Albert Bierstadt painted the relatively unspoiled American landscape as metaphoric of Diety. Yet, it is ironic that technology, whose advance depends upon the severe alteration, if not virtual eradication of the natural landscape, should

inspire contemporary artists and poets alike with the same sense of the sublime that the Hudson River School sought to represent. Arcadia has been lost and cannot be regained, and it was the mortality of Nature that made it desirable from the first. Surely our acknowledged power to destroy the earth alters the way we look at landscape.

In America there is a certain disregard for things in the past. The horizontality of Luminist painting is a lot like the way highways are built now — that straight-through encompassment, the ability to see forever. The Luminists looked from one end of the earth to the other.⁸

The health of the eye seems to demand a horizon, but that horizon is the symbol of human ambition — material as well as spiritual.⁹

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

The horizon, the conceptual demarcation between heaven and earth, has from ancient times held mystical connotations. Innerst introduces yet another division, one that cannot be perceived by the “naked Senses.” In a painting entitled *Reservoir* [1982, cat. no. 7], we see a paradigm of man’s vaunted encompassment of the forces of nature. Two-thirds across the idealized quadrants of sky, land and sea, we witness an otherworldly occurrence: As if zapped by the ray of a low-flying UFO, an angled segment of the scene blazes with incandescent red light.

The color division of the painting suggests the time/space continuum — the coexistence of past, present and future in a world of instantaneous satellite communication. Leaning more heavily on the levers of Innerst’s Time Machine, we see a vision of the primordial flame that formed the original land masses and will inevitably destroy them. The color zone may also relate media’s prismatic veil to heightened states of the spirit, much in the way that sunlight transformed by stained glass window in Gothic cathedrals symbolized Divine illumination.

I am from the beginning, knowing no end, no aim. No sun illumines me, for I dissolve all lesser lights in my own intenser and steadier light.¹⁰

— Henry David Thoreau

There are neither suns nor moons in Mark Innerst's landscapes, only ambient radiance evoking the uncertainty of the minutes following dusk. Twilight reminds us of time's paradox: transience and continuity. Though it occurs daily, twilight's aura never ceases to dazzle us. Likewise, there is no such thing as the commonplace in Innerst's hands. His most obvious portrayal, whether a view of Brooklyn, a timepiece, or a grouping of framed paintings, is laden with purpose and mystery. Beneath the cloak of the mundane he finds the mystical.

In *Small Pocket Watch*, [1987, cat. no. 23], Innerst gives us a microcosm of the infinitely vast in a tiny painting of a timepiece hanging by its chain on a nail driven into a blank spotlit wall. The concept of time's relativity reverberates from this modest yet intricate work. Suspended like the pendulum of a larger clock, the watchface aligns with the highlighted disk of a fastening button with a symmetry similar to the mystical planetary lineup in Kubrick's *2001*. The diffused spotlighting suggests a larger ellipse embracing the borders of the composition, while also creating a silhouette of the watch and chain. Time casts a shadow: the illusory materiality of moments is a mere fleck of dust on the face of time future and time past.

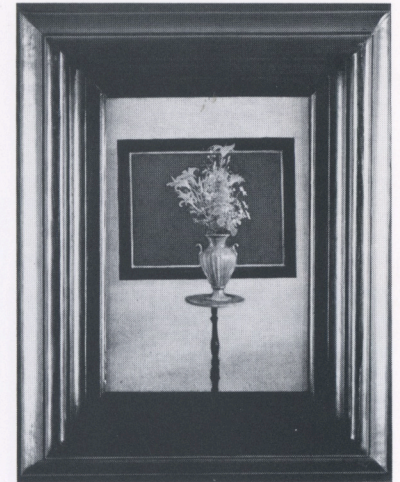
Innerst's attraction to the theme of time, as well as an early incarnation of his "frame within the frame" device, is evident in an exquisite series of four watercolors inspired by viewing Bronzino's *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time* in the National Gallery of London. In *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time (Wreath)*, [1985, cat. no. 15] a laurel that looks as though it were etched in dried blood functions as an organic frame, encircling a faint miniature study of the Bronzino painting. The figure of Time in the Bronzino painting draws back a curtain to expose Venus and her

son Cupid in an incestuous embrace, indicating the transience of earthly indulgences and perversions. In Innerst's composition, we see a faded memorial to a faint "projection" of an allegory. Our images, like ourselves are but passing shadows.

The barely visible form of a skeleton emerges from a dense green oblivion in the pocket-sized *Memento Mori* [cat. no. 17], another work from 1985. Along with the layers of varnish embalming the image, Innerst adds another layer of meaning to a motif popular to the point of trivialization in 17th century still life painting: representational reminders of our mortality will decay and fade into dust, as will their authors. With its somber ornamental frame, the painting has the look of a portable reliquary — a macabre twist on the over-the-bed crucifix, or perhaps even a casket — itself yet another wooden frame.

The landscapes became a real expectation in people's minds, and needed to rest for a while. I turned to things right in front of me, like frames, things on a wall.¹¹

The "frame within frame" motif is a salient theme in the arts, from Velaquez' *Las Meninas* to Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, to a scene in *Apocalypse Now* in which the Wagner music piped out of helicopter loudspeakers is both a parody of the "action scene" soundtrack and an "actual" sound in the film's context. *Flowers in Front of Framed Painting*, [1987, cat. no. 24] borrows both subject and format from Dutch *trompe l'oeil* still life painting, but only as a departure point for meditations on the complexity of time. Due to the symmetrical composition and an eerie backlighting effect that reduces the range of tonal values, the leaves and flowers nearly merge with the intense skies represented in the framed painting behind them. In a poetic sense, these flowers are pressed between the pages of Time. The flowers ostensibly came after the painting they are in front of and before the painting they are within. They are caught between two time "frames," yet they exist in neither.



Mark Innerst, *Wild Flowers and a Blue Painting*, 1987. Acrylic on board.



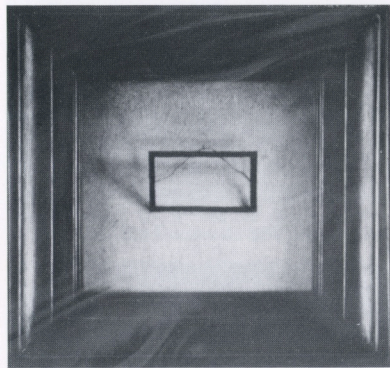
Francis van Myerop, *Still Life with Bird*, ca. 1670.

The artist explores realities that are constantly shifting or vanishing, capturing as concisely as possible the idea of the still life as a fragile moment in time. The ethereal, encaustic appearance of the area between the painted and the actual frames, the geometric severity of the composition, and the funereal tone in general lend a Pompeiian quality to the work. In fact, the flowers take on a memorial, iconic stature, as if cast upon a grave whose markings have worn away beyond recognition.

If someone tells you not to do something — that's a clue to do it.¹²

We live in a cynical aesthetic climate where an artist whose work embodies a concern for the spiritual is likely to be decreed to be at best, naive, at worst, a misguided romantic. There are, however, a few stubborn souls not content to view representation as merely a foil for semiotic rambling. While well aware of the implications of our travels through a hyperreal, hypermediated universe, these artists challenge taboos of hipness by creating art that acknowledges imagery as “signs” without sacrificing the transcendent power of subject that is art’s ancient purpose. Is it, indeed, possible to have it both ways — the “real thing” and The Real Thing? Mark Innerst imbues his work with an irony so subtle that it permits sincerity toward subject.

— Barry Blinderman



Mark Innerst, *Untitled*, 1987. Oil and acrylic on board.

Notes

¹Jacqueline and Maurice Guillard, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 1984.

²Curator's interview with artist, August, 1988.

³interview, cited above.

⁴interview, cited above.

⁵Through Helene Winer, who was then Director of Artists Space, he met many of the artists who would later exhibit at Metro Pictures. Innerst served as an assistant to Robert Longo for two years.

⁶interview, cited above.

⁷Edgar Allan Poe, “The Veil of the Soul,” *The Unknown Poe*, City Lights Editions.

⁸interview, cited above.

⁹Donald Kuspit, “19th Century Landscape: Poetry and Property,” *Art in America*, January/February, 1976.

¹⁰Henry David Thoreau, *Selected Journals*, ed. Carl Bode, 1967.

¹¹interview, cited above.

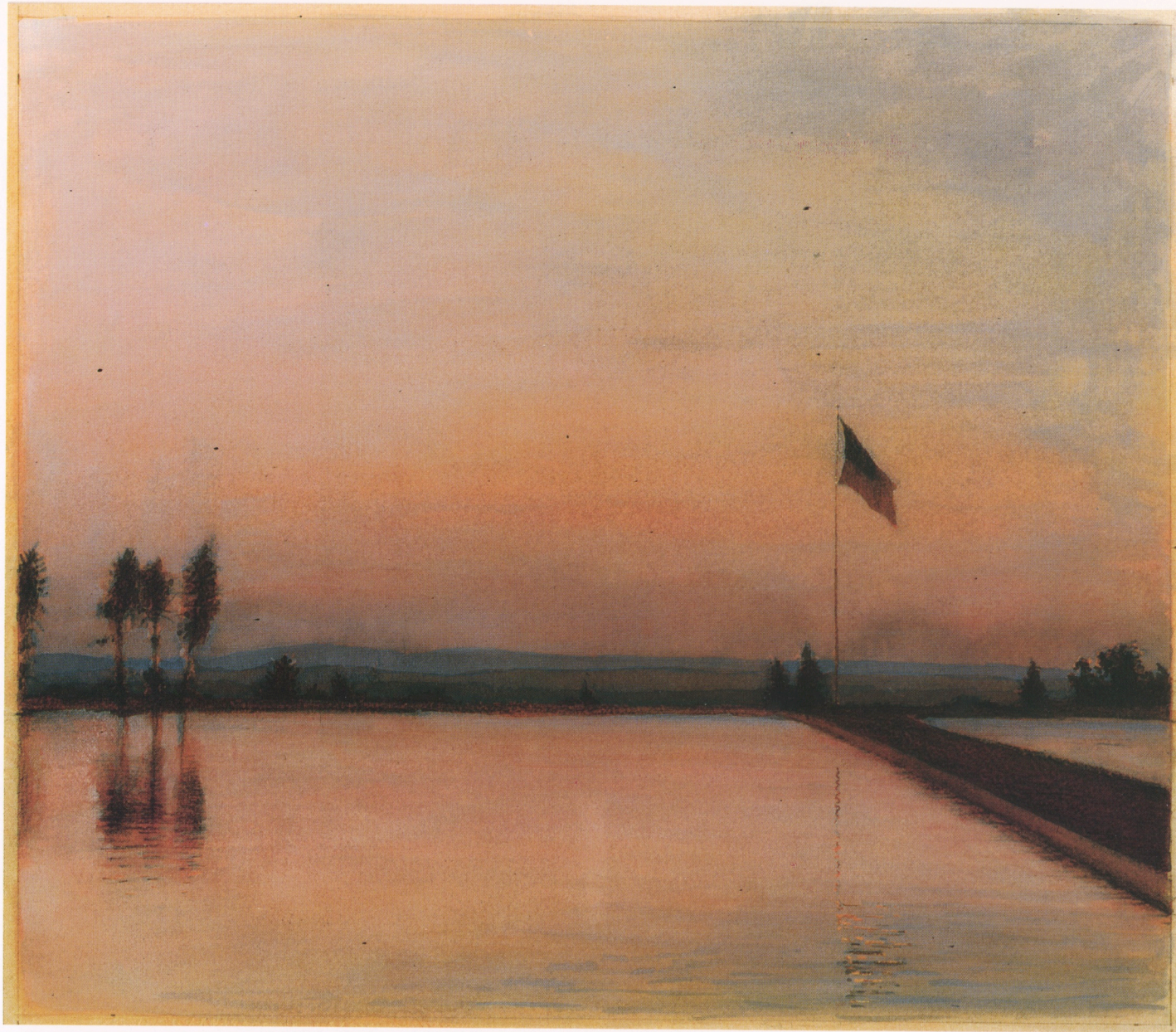
¹²interview, cited above.



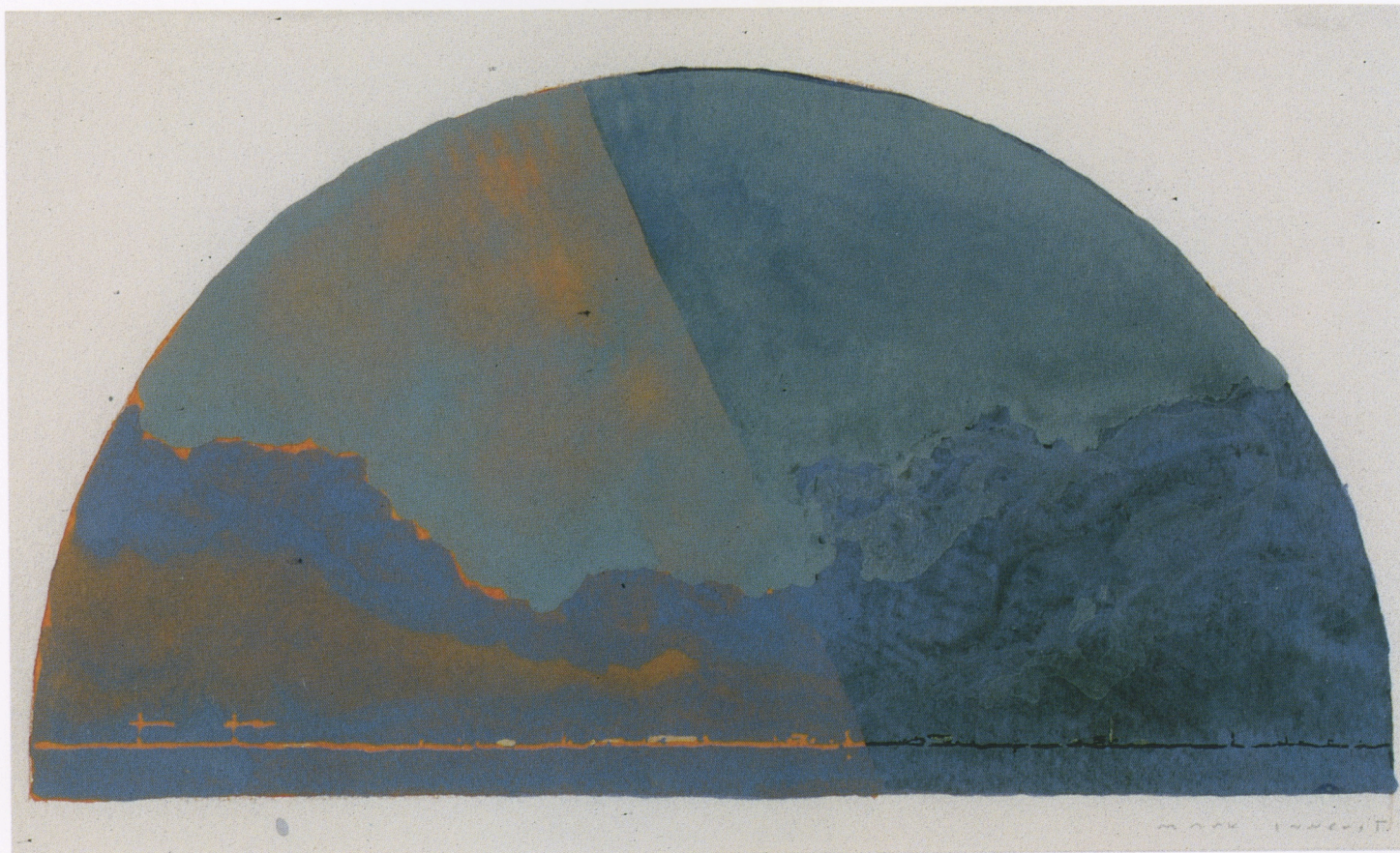
7. **Reservoir**, 1982
oil and acrylic on board
16 x 28¾ inches
collection of David Deutsch



13. **Industry Along the Mississippi**, 1985
oil and acrylic on board
17½ x 32 inches
collection of Martin Sklar



18. **Reservoir Hill Study (large version)**, 1986
watercolor on paper
15½ x 18 inches
collection of Herbert and Lenore Schorr



19. **View of Brooklyn**, 1986
gouache and acrylic on paper
4 x 7¼ inches
collection of Emily Fisher Landau

Exhibition Tour

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September 27-November 13, 1988.

University Art Galleries, Wright State University, Dayton,
Ohio, January 10-February 10, 1989.

Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Texas, March 25-May
28, 1989.

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Illinois, July 1-
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Freedman Gallery, Albright College, Reading, Pennsylvania,
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Cover: *Industry Along the Mississippi*, (detail), 1985. Collection of
Martin Sklar.