



Harold Gregor Kenneth Holder

from the road from the river from the sky



Harold Gregor
Illinois Colorscape #64, 1998
Watercolor, 28 1/2 x 43 inches



Harold Gregor

Illinois Landscape #153, 1999

Oil and acrylic on canvas, 18 x 90 inches





H. GREGG
1995

West by Midwest

Timothy Porges

Preface The Land: God's Country

The Midwest is the flat part of America. Experts agree: it's flat, and there are other parts of America all around it. There are bits and pieces of Midwest to be found scattered as far away as New York and California, but the largest and flattest part of it is here in the Heartland of Central Illinois. It's so flat here, that before the vast artificial drainages which are its largest public works were in place, it was largely a malarial bog when most of the rest of the Midwest was already settled.

Like the Dutch landscape and Constable's Stour River Valley (and in fact like the Suburban subject of California photorealists such as Robert Bechtle and Ralph Goings), this flat, productive expanse is an artificial paradise. It has none of the fearful sublimity or souvenir curiosity that make other landscapes picturesque. There are no trackless deserts here, no haunted ruins, no blasted heaths, no crags, no cataracts, no bosky dells. The ocean of grass in which early visitors to the area could lose themselves between the villages of Springfield, Decatur and Urbana has long since been reduced to a grid of private properties. These properties produce a fantastic abundance of agricultural wealth. But the

more they do so, the more it confirms that the land itself is not significantly more romantic than any other factory floor.

We call it God's Country, but it's not: it's owned and worked by women and men, in routine and familiar ways, raising soy, corn, cattle and pigs. The earnest, owner-operated normality of it all is what we really find divine, as a matter of daily habit. Farms (like happy families) seen from without, are pretty much all the same. Harold Gregor's Flatscapes, each of which frames an aerial view of a farm's central building cluster, confirm this essential sameness. It's all business. So why, in particular, do we think of this as a land of virtue? Do we return when we look across these plains to a shared, unconscious memory of *Pilgrim's Progress*: of its protagonist, Christian, turning, weeping, from his home and family and fleeing the City of Destruction across just such an open plain, towards a near-invisibly distant gate? The virtue is, then, perhaps comparative. Fallible as we may be, we are not City Folk. Since Modernism is by general consensus a culture of cities, we are, at least in terms of our location, in the condition of never-having-been-modern that defines the postmodern most precisely. Since our ties to the land(scape) are the guarantee of both our presumptions of virtue and our privileged position relative to the collapse of Modernism, the stories we tell when we try to explain this landscape and our place in it are mostly about ourselves. They are stories of immigration and descent, of how we got here.

It would seem reasonable if, like the Dutch landscape, this gridwork of furrowed fields and relentlessly horizontal horizons inspired a local school of rigorously geometrical abstractionists, led by some Midwestern Mondrian—dark and austere in his signature work but softening into hints of representation in old age. What we have instead is a product of more recent history: of the post-pop revival of figurative painting which produced Photorealism, which then in turn diffused into genre painting, into subsidiary, academic schools of portrait, still life and landscape painters. As a school among schools, the Midwestern Landscape painters find their subject among the fields and farm animals here, the shrubby woodlands, barns and roads, and the great overhead expanse of sky. The sky, after all, is where, like Constable and the Dutch, we find both the particularly sublime and the generally divine.

Finding the particularly divine in a landscape requires the picturesque for a focus. For example, a reading of the map of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado, as inscribed by Bloomington-Normal's own John Wesley Powell, is like scanning a syllabus in comparative religions. It's a short passage on the north wall of the canyon from Confucius temple to Osiris temple and the Tower of Ra, and on to Wotan's Throne, Siegfried's Pyre, and more temples for Venus, Apollo, Sheba, Solomon and so on. The sheer spectacle of the canyon seems full of the particulars of divinity. But the generality of divinity is to be found elsewhere. In fact, in a way, it's here. We

name the picturesque with the thousand names of God, and all the minor gods and devils, but the essential namelessness of God remains, and this is what we remember in the nameless places, the empty stretches of nothing much that the Heartland offers in such an abundance.

You should love God non-mentally, that is to say, the soul should become non-mental and stripped of her mental nature. For as long as the soul is mental, she will produce images. As long as she has images, she will possess intermediaries, she will have no unity or simplicity. As long as she lacks simplicity, she does not truly love God, for true love depends on simplicity.

—Meister Eckhart

However we might locate landscape painting as a contemporary genre, with respect to history, locating it in a context of theology will always be even more vexatious. It wouldn't be worth the effort, except that we cling to the notion that being here brings us closer to God than we would otherwise be. However impatient mystics may be with the production of images, the image of the land seems intuitively simple, produced with the same earnest labor which gave us first the land itself and then its bounty. What we value in the depiction of this place, and the limits we place on that value, has to do more than anything with a pragmatics of faith. To paint what is divine (as opposed to merely sentimental) in the Midwestern landscape, which is itself most divine, closest to both its essence and its creator when fog-bound in midwinter, is a Zen exercise. It calls for action without purpose, thought without images, description without all of these words, words, words.

Kenneth Holder

Little Goose River Dam—Snake River, 1999

Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 96 inches



Kenneth Holder

View from Above Kipp's Landing—Montana, 1998

Acrylic on canvas, 68 x 99 inches



Kenneth Holder
Sandstone Cliffs and Natural Wall, 1998
Acrylic on canvas, 68 x 99 inches



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