

A D A M S T R A U S

Introduction by Amei Wallach

Text by Adam Straus

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As far back as the 1940s, my parents were active in the civil rights movement in Richmond, Virginia, and they bred a social and political awareness into my siblings and me. My father even had an FBI file from that time, primarily for raising money for Israel. The FBI seemed to be watching his whole family, particularly my grandfather who was a prominent bacteriologist and also quite active in civil rights. In the file, the Straus family is characterized as “liberal Jews who advocate such things as free speech, open forum discussion, and additional opportunities for colored people.” During my teenage years in Miami, my whole immediate family protested the Vietnam War and marched in front of Nixon’s “winter White House” compound down the street from where we lived on Key Biscayne. My mother loved Caesar Chavez and his movement to unionize migrant farm workers. We boycotted grapes, and I don’t think I had iceberg lettuce until I went away to college. This social consciousness along with the adventure of a childhood immersed in exploring the swamps, woods, waters, and biology of South Florida, where I witnessed profound changes in the environment in a short period of time, have been the most important experiences affecting my work as an artist.

ADAM STRAUS: *SOS for the Sublime*

AMEI WALLACH

«The most important tool the artist fashions through constant practice is faith in his ability to produce miracles when they are needed. Pictures must be miraculous: the instant one is completed, the intimacy between the creation and the creator is ended. He is an outsider. The picture must be for him, as for anyone experiencing it later, a revelation, an unexpected and unprecedented resolution of an eternally familiar need.»

—Mark Rothko¹

Think of the sheer pigheaded guts it took for as serious and ambitious an artist as Adam Straus to become a landscape painter in the 1980s. A century had passed since Cézanne torqued his trees into astrigent meditations on the nature of painting; decades since the Abstract Expressionists swallowed the genre whole.

“I am nature,”² Jackson Pollock declared in 1942, leaving room only for Fairfield Porter, intimate interpreter of the Abstract Expressionist circle, to render lawns and shadows as swaths and strokes. If it hadn’t been for the art critic Clement Greenberg, blustering about how nowadays only abstraction counted, and asserting that “You can’t paint figuratively,” Porter once recalled, “I might have become an abstract painter.” But Porter, in a spirit Adam Straus would have recognized, thought “who the hell is he to say that?”

A handful of painters like Jane Freilicher, Jane Wilson, and Robert Dash transposed variations on Porter’s domestic cadences into inlets, dunes, and country roads. Alex Katz refreshed the beholding eye through subtraction and slabs of saturated hues. Rackstraw Downes searched out unlovely afterthoughts of urban sprawl. On the West Coast, Richard Diebenkorn distilled the saturated greens and blues of ocean and sky into reductive homages to Matisse. As for David Hockney—well, he did it all with élan and a virtuoso touch.

And that, with an exception or two, was pretty much where the art of landscape painting was stalled in this country when Straus took on the challenge. By then the contemporary landscape had been ceded to photography, while generations of would-be Courbet or Monet impersonators hijacked the paint-

ed scene with an embarrassment of corny third-and fifth-hand recaps of views that once, long ago, had been rooted in authenticity.

The tradition into which Straus dared to tread in the 1980s was sorely in need of reanimation. His disruptions in the years since have unsettled received assumptions as much through dark humor and bravura painting as through offering a reassessment of what it means to paint the beauty of nature in ugly times. It is important to him that his paintings are accessible, that any visiting fireman can enter them at some level. But that is only the first, skin-deep level, and it is animated by compound subterranean layers of passionate conviction, cosmic yearning, and comedy. As the writer Vladimir Nabokov once noted,³ “The difference between the comic side of things and their cosmic side relies on a single sibilant”—the sound of the letter *s*.

Straus’s eye and hand are informed by the metaphorical opportunities he finds in the ability of oil and brush on canvas, wood, or lead panel to transmit the grandeur, degeneration, and absurdity of the world in which he lives. That world is both subject and source of his art—not only the natural world, not only art history, but the myriad aspects of the culture in which he lives. He’s as willing to take a hint from a Coen brothers’ movie or the aftereffects of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill as from his own lived experience, lost in the fog or contemplating the sky over a Target store.

It didn’t take Homer for sailors to revel in the poet’s “rosy-fingered dawn” or J.M. Turner for just about anyone to perceive a sunset as vaporous color, though what poets and artists see and how they see it has always affected our impressions. Then again,



UNTITLED, 1979
silver print
8 x 10 in. 20.3 x 25.4 cm.

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