

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTFORUM



Neil Jenney, *Acid Story* (detail), 1983-84, oil on wood, 34½ x 12'.

North American landscape of verdant forests, picturesque valleys, swollen rivers, and open skies. Recalling John Locke's proclamation that "in the beginning all the world was America," Jenney's paintings conjure the unspoiled frontier of the New World and the transcendental visions it inspired.

Reminiscent of the works of the Hudson Valley and Luminist painters in particular, Jenny's paintings appropriate the epic proportions of sublime landscape painting, exaggerating the horizontal format in some works to such a degree that the painting's vertical dimension all but disappears. Framed in heavy-set, black moldings that lend them a museumlike gravity and titled in a blocky typeface that recalls 19th-century fire-engine or railroad-car numbers, Jenney's paintings reference the landscape tradition of the previous century in presentation as well as style.

For all their references to this idyllic tradition, there remains something unequivocally disturbing about these works. This is due in part to the coexistence of Modernist painting styles and more traditional passages. While trees and grass are illustrated with acute precision, other details are abstracted into rhythmic patterns and broad, flat bands of color that recall the early works of Arthur Dove or Georgia O'Keeffe. In two of the paintings from the "North America Divided" series, 1990-94, clouds are rendered in regular rectangular patterns that owe more to Rothko than to meteorology. These irregularities create a dissonance that becomes hallucinatory where Jenney's "natural rationalism" gives way to visions of paradise lost.

Something has gone awry in God's country. No humans are visible, yet Jenney's paintings are suffused with traces of human activity: the wide-open skies and broad vistas in such paintings as *Acid Story*, 1983-84, are not a vision of a vast un-

touched environment, but the result of defoliation from acid rain. In the modest-sized *North America Divided*, 1991, our view of the horizon at dusk is obstructed by a broken tree branch ensnared in a single strand of barbed wire and suspended in mid air. What first appears to be virgin wilderness is in effect a contemporary wasteland of crisscrossing barbed-wire fences and strip-mined valleys—a postindustrial graveyard. Using an idiom that has traditionally registered our awe, Jenney's "natural rationalism" is in the tradition of moral landscape painting, asking us to recognize ourselves and our follies in the forms and patterns of nature.

—Kirby Gookin

NEIL JENNEY

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The six paintings selected for "Neil Jenney: Natural Rationalism" depict that mythic