

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Neil Jenney, *North America Divided*, 2004, oil on wood, 26 1/2" x 28 1/2" x 2 1/4".
Barbara Mathes.

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This, Neil Jenney's first gallery show in six years, was a kind of sequel. Of the ten paintings in the exhibition, four were included in last year's "Neil Jenney: North America" at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Connecticut. However, there has never been a full-scale retrospective of this great and vex-

ing artist, who made a splash in the late 1960s and early '70s with his clumsily figurative and jokey "bad" paintings. After that time, our sense of Jenney's work faded. This show gave a good indication of his pursuits over the last several years as he has continued his preoccupation with how to paint the

American landscape in an age of environmental spoil.

Jenney focuses on isolated fragments of nature—tree trunks, cloud formations, thin bands of cobalt, azure, and ambrosial blue sky—in large, boxy, black frames whose size suggests a stage or altar setting. The frames, which he fabricates himself before making the paintings, are often stamped with the title of the work they enclose. In this way, Jenney obtrusively narrows the viewer's perception of the size of his landscapes; they become "nature" in quotes. Similarly, the technical realism of his work invokes the rhetoric of 19th-century American landscape painting, such as that of the Hudson River School, while hitting a flat wall of no perspective.

In *North America Depicted (Canadian #2)*, 2003–7, the nature in question is compressed into a cold blast of arctic sky enveloping a pair of bare tree trunks. The paintings carry with them intimations of ruin. There are not many scenes in contemporary art as pervasively meager as that appearing in the two canvases *North America Divided*, from 2001–2 and 2004, depicting the border between the United States and Canada—which is, in fact, a truck-stop plot of dirt and grass with a strand of barbed wire running across it. The show also included five of the artist's "Aphorism" panels (laconically flat-footed texts silk-screened on canvas). One aphorism offered this rejoinder: "Art is nature adjusted."

—Alex Taylor