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Mark Tansey's Vertigo



Photography by the Douglas M. Parker Studio / Courtesy Gagosian Gallery
Installation view of Mark Tansey at Gagosian L.A.

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Mark Tansey

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Mark Tansey came to prominence during the Reagan years, when along with trickle-down economics and a nostalgic cultural discourse, some version of painting still occupied a privileged space in the national conversation. Yet while rehashed modernism sold for millions, "serious" painters during this period searched outside the medium for strategies of subversion, creating pieces that were more photographic, textual, and theoretical. A contemporary of Neo-Expressionist and neo-geo artists, Tansey practices what could be termed neohistoricism. "Purity Test" (1982), a signature painting in sepia hues reminiscent of the photogravures of Edward S. Curtis, shows a party of Native Americans on horseback on a bluff overlooking a lake from the shore of which unfurls Robert Smithson's earthwork Spiral Jetty. The six large ultramarine canvases on view at Gagosian treat their subject, the current financial crisis, with a similar degree of irony, compressing a series of events — artistic, technological, philosophical, and national — into simultaneity within a single image.

By overlaying formulaic landscape paintings with seemingly divergent narratives, Tansey foregrounds the ambiguity of even well-established histories. In "EC 101" (2009), an improbable mountain with two peaks — one pointing up, its mirror image pointing down — is covered like Mount Rushmore with the faces of famous men: economists and politicians, from A.R.J. Turgot and Alan Greenspan to Ronald Reagan, on top; Virgil and Dante from the Divine Comedy at the bottom. The piece evokes Reaganomics — but what does this mean when the mountain is all peaks?

What lineage, not to say progression, can be determined from this achronological and all-over arrangement? As Virgil led Dante through the circles of Hell, traditional economics imagines a linear ascension from one theorist to the next. Ultimately, though, any attempt to guide the viewer over this imposing summit would be just another parable.

Tansey's monochromatic palette recalls the cyanotypes of early scientific illustration and the days of black and white. Yet through the metaphoric license inherent in illustrative painting, the artist presents a contradictory postmodern jumble of meaning. In "Recourse" (2011), a group of figures sits at a table in a cave lashed below by waves and crowded from above by foliage. The two textures transition into each other; at some point the brushstrokes could be either leaves or spray. Tansey has achieved a vertiginous overall effect matching the disquieting slight of hand of the details, in which even the direction of gravity is in question. Viewed from afar, the highlights and shadows of "Recourse" resemble a swirling human eye. In "Hedge" (2011), tiny paragliders deploying two opposing parachutes in anticipation of two possible falls are swallowed by the surreal and overwhelming background: a vacillating rhomboid mountain bordered both above and below by sharp ridges.

The exhibition prompts a certain nostalgia for the grand historical panorama and the landscape study but also for the witty deconstructionist painting that followed. The hand in "Invisible Hand" (2011) whose fingers emerge from a ski slope to shield a cavernous stock exchange, refers to economist Adam Smith's famous metaphor but also to the long tradition of hands in art — and to that of the artist himself, who guides the subjective economy of his paintings. Indeed, Tansey's latest works implicate themselves in the relationship of economics and art. For all their irony, they cannot avoid evoking what for painting was both crisis and boon: the Reagan/Thatcher era, when even for those defending the relevance of their medium, down was down, up was up.