



Clyde Aspevig, *Deep in the Rockies*, not dated, oil on board, 36 x 42 inches. Collection of the Booth Western Art Museum, Cartersville, Georgia; purchase made in part with contributions from Diana Dee Sakar, other friends of the Booth, and the artist.

The Stone's Story

"Landscape is not just everything visible to the eye. It also includes all the inner visions of the soul."¹

It is not necessary to adhere to an esoteric religion to hold the conviction that all things are animate, unfolding their own histories for those patient enough to observe. Montana landscape painter Clyde Aspevig knows this. He knows from long and close familiarity with mountains and shores, timbers and stones, and water and snow that every day of observation is like turning the page to discover more of the epic journey the land takes through the seasons and through time. His process is studied and contemplative, in step with the cadence of nature, and the resulting paintings also invite a slow, appreciative gaze.

Clyde Aspevig is occasionally described as self-taught. While he did not go to art school per se, Aspevig remembers with affection and respect his art instructor Ben Steele (1917-2016), who for many years taught painting at then Eastern Montana College in Billings, Montana (now Montana State University, Billings). Thus, it was in the course of gaining a general liberal arts education that Aspevig did indeed study art. While he might not go so far as those who ascribe no value to specialist art schools, Aspevig knew early on that the direction he wished to go as a painter would not be encouraged in the atmosphere prevailing at most art schools. He shares the view held by many artists—notably Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), who stated that "Nature is the best instructor"²—that an ever-evolving intimacy with his chosen subject matter was the most effective education. He ascribes the origin of his gift for perceiving subtleties and finding unexpected beauty in nature to his perceptive, inquisitive, and musical parents.³

¹ Norwegian painter Edvard Munch (1863–1944) quoted in *Lapham's Quarterly*, volume x, number 3 (summer 2017), p. 50

² http://www.art-quotes.com/auth_search.php?authid=92#.Wdt_9OWx9M. Accessed 9 October 2017.

³ Clyde Aspevig, *Visual Music: The Landscapes of Clyde Aspevig* (Billings, MT: Juniper Ridge Studios), p. 7.



Clyde Aspevig, *Cutbank on Timber Creek*, 2016, oil on linen, 16 x 20 inches. Private collection.

From his earliest years as a painter, Aspevig's decision to return always to nature has borne fruit. He was quick to master painting media and methods, employing these tools to meet larger aesthetic and emotional ends. As well-known as Clyde Aspevig's work is today, there are many who are unaware that as a young artist he worked as a watercolorist (Figure 1). In spite of the skill he quickly gained in this notoriously unforgiving medium, he abandoned watercolor for the more robust promise of the medium of oil. He rose rapidly to become a virtuoso in the medium, expressing the textures, substance, and atmosphere of land and sea, always circling back to the region encompassing the northern Plains and northern Rockies that is his home.



Figure 1. Clyde Aspevig, *Gone Fishing*, 1976, watercolor on paper, 5-1/2 x 10-5/8 inches, visible. Collection of Stockman Bank.

Aspevig often paints small sketches, some of which may later inform larger studio works. *Fire at Freezeout Lake* and *Porcupine Creek* (Figures 2 and 3) are just a couple of examples of such sketches, several of which are included in this exhibition. Painting a sketch *en plein air*, that is, in the open air, is popularly believed to have begun with the nineteenth-century French Barbizon and later French Impressionists, but sketching from nature in fact has a far deeper history. The English painters J.W.M.

Turner (1775–1851)⁴ and John Constable (1776–1837)⁵ both painted outdoors in the early nineteenth century, Francisco Goya (1746–1828) carried little notebooks with him so that he could sketch wherever he was,⁶ and the Italian Giovanni Antonio Canal (“Canaletto”) is supposed to have set up his easel outdoors in the eighteenth century. If one delves still farther back into the history of landscape painting, one soon finds evidence of faithfully observed landscapes from the Renaissance, ancient Greece, and pharaonic Egypt, among other cultures, landscapes that could only have resulted from direct, frequent observation of the natural world. French painter Eugène Boudin (1824–1898) made clear the benefits of working at first hand: “Everything that is painted directly on the spot has always a strength, a power, a vividness of touch that one doesn't find again in the studio.”⁷



Figure 2. Clyde Aspevig, *Fire at Freezeout Lake*, circa 2007, oil on board, 8 x 11-7/8 inches. Courtesy of the Aspevig Studio.



Figure 3. Clyde Aspevig, *Porcupine Creek, Montana*, circa 2000s, oil on linen on board, 8 x 12 inches. Private collection.

Many assume that the painter who sets up his easel up before a particular view does so with the goal of copying nature. Aspevig's work is deeply admired for its verisimilitude and his seemingly miraculous ability to make paint conjure nearly any substance but paint. His compositional process, however, is actually quite complex, far different from simply selecting and mimicking. The most thoughtful artists in all times and places paint more than they see, and even when they explicitly attempt to capture a single, apparently insignificant second from a particular time or place, that choice represents a larger cultural point of view about what is valuable, what is worthy of attention. As curator Kim Sichel has said, “all landscape is cultural geography.”⁸

⁴ Ian Warrell, editor, *J. M. W. Turner* (New York, NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art in association with Tate Publishing, 2007), p. 70.

⁵ Louis Hawes, *Presences of Nature: British Landscape 1780 – 1830* (New Haven, CT: Yale Center for British Art, 1982), p. 160.

⁶ Robert Hughes, *Goya* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), p. 172.

⁷ Eugène Boudin, “Notes from Sketchbooks,” quoted in G. Cahen, *Eugène Boudin, sa vie et son oeuvre* (Paris, 1900), p. 194, and cited in John Rewald, *The History of Impressionism* (New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 1973), p. 38.

⁸ Kim Sichel, *To Fly: Contemporary Aerial Photography* (Boston, MA: Boston University Art Gallery, 2007), p. 22.



Figure 4. Clyde Aspevig, *Winter Vibrations*, 2017, oil on linen, 48 x 48 inches. Tia Collection, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

As benignly reflective of an external reality as a landscape such as, for example, *Winter Vibrations* (Figure 4) may seem, it is in actuality a layered intellectual exercise. Aspevig notes, “If you think of the idea and try to execute it, you paint in a different way rather than just mixing and matching colors out in nature, [which is] pretty boring.”⁹ He acknowledges viewers’ affective responses to his work, fully aware that “people can appreciate it as a wonderful winter scene and say, yes, I’ve walked through areas like that,” and know that the painting is actively recalling a memory or an emotional experience, “but it’s all orchestrated according to ... different ideas”¹⁰ drawn from history, cognition, anthropology, natural rhythms, each viewer’s other senses, and myriad other sources. Aspevig’s paintings are intentionally designed to strike deep human chords, and to appeal to some of our most primal desires, and much of this is subconscious.

Aspevig’s process is one of highly deliberate selecting and composing, and it is informed by his voracious interest in art history and in how the brain apprehends visual experience. He is quick to note with regard to specific paintings that they are often not literal transcriptions of the scenes that were before his eyes, in spite of how they may seem. A branch is added here, a boulder moved there, and all for good and compelling reasons. As he stands before a new subject, the transformation begins right away in his mind. He draws from artistic influences, his explorations as a reader of history and science, and other personal experiences. Creating a memorable composition is often about finding internal structures and patterns. He states, “I think certain patterns are innate.”¹¹ Fractals come into play, those abstractions of symmetries and the laws governing the way a physical process occurs. He cites as influences artists as diverse and apparently unrelated to his own practice as Richard Diebenkorn (1922–1993), Paul Klee (1879–1940), and Gustav Klimt (1862–1918). In some cases, the link to these older masters is at the level of the “armature” of the painting; in others, a small corner of linear detail ... or something else entirely. High on his list of former masters who have influenced him is the Danish-American painter Emil Carlsen (1848–1932) (Figure 5). Carlsen’s work affects Aspevig on the levels of both content and technique. Carlsen was renowned as a teacher and wrote a number of tracts about the craft of painting that continue to be

⁹ Discussion with Robyn G. Peterson, 10 March 2017.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

lodestars to oil painters today. He describes his technical approach: “I build up the layers, and I learned a lot of that from looking at Carlsen.”¹² Perhaps most important to note is that, as “real” as his paintings can appear, they are in fact nothing of the sort. They are abstractions in the truest sense. Focus closely, and you will not see pine needles, water droplets, blades of grass, or pebbles, or even details that resemble those small elements of nature. What you will find, as he stresses, are symbols of those things.¹³



Figure 5. Emil Carlsen, *Afternoon Sunlight*, circa 1911, oil on canvas mounted on board, 29 x 23 inches. Collection of Clyde Aspevig and Carol Guzman.

The paradox faced by (or revealed in, depending upon the painter) the representational painter is that it is impossible to attain realism, impossible to achieve genuine equivalence. The material remains, after all, paint, and if no other legacy has been left by the artistic revolutions of the twentieth century, it is our consciousness of the “thingness” embodied by a painting. It is not a window onto another world except by suggestion. A painting—any painting—is always an abstraction. Even the re-enchantment with realism and with concrete subject matter that emerged in the 1970s (and remains forcefully with us today) does not change that.

To compare a painting by Aspevig with the view it purports to depict is to experience the delightful dissonance between and image and its source—certainly there are formal correspondences, but these paintings are not illusionistic. There is never any doubt that what you see is paint, but a mental chatter ensues during viewing as the likeness to concrete reality and the consciousness of brushstrokes jockey for simultaneous space in the mind. How can the image appear so rock-like or so snow-like while being so obviously neither? There are always differences between source and image, and we have all experienced this throughout our entire lives. Whether we consider the experiences to be disconcerting or an enrichment of our understanding of seeing depends much upon each viewer. Think of moments when you have seen a photograph of yourself or another person well known to you and been struck by a lack of

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Aspevig, *Visual Music*, p. 15.

resemblance. Consider times you have discovered previously unnoticed details of a familiar environment, once you see it photographed or hear it described by another person. Indeed, there is a great deal about representational painting today that could not have occurred prior to the invention of photography in the 1830s and the subsequent recalibration of the act of seeing that it engendered.



Clyde Aspevig, *The Dipping Pool*, 2016, oil on linen, 18 x 24 inches. Private collection.

Aspevig has an appreciation for the earliest generations of photographers, including those who experimented with techniques designed to emulate painting. Today's digital camera "sees" differently from the way earlier analog cameras did. Consequently, he notes, "people are reproducing the way digital cameras see in their art work today."¹⁴ Every generation starts with what it knows best. It's a commonplace to observe that photography changed the world of painting, but it isn't always so simple to explain how. Digital photography continues to shift our ways of seeing, although in a less revolutionary way than the initial invention of photography did in the 1830s. Aspevig states, "digital puts every last detail in its place, in a rigid way." On the other hand, painting affords descriptive options: building up in layers, dry brushing, tool marks ... by using these techniques, he reminds us, "you can create symbols."¹⁵ Aspevig is very interested in symbols and the workings of the human brain in creating and using symbols. "So what does it mean that the universe is made up of lines, curved lines, straight lines, curved lines in enclosed spaces?"¹⁶ He pulls a few books out, full of drawings by artists from different times and places. In just one example of the kinds of interconnections he explores, he puts sheet music next to them, and formal resemblances leap off the pages. In a painting, he may set up a perception in the viewer's mind of motion. Regarding branches moving in the wind, he may ask himself, "Where would the branches be, [the spot] that would be the echo ... so I build scratches into the gesso."¹⁷ The goal is to create an impression of movement within the essentially static nature of an oil painting. Movement in images is often conveyed by linear means ... ripples in water, for instance. Does it matter *why* we see movement in static objects, whether we are conditioned to do so from our experience of everything from the speed lines

¹⁴ Discussion with Robyn G. Peterson, 10 March 2017.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

in children's comics to blurred imagery of CGI in movies? Perhaps it's inevitable that motion be communicated in this way, since the hand depicts movement through literal movement ... a line, gash, stroke, or blur that is the trace of the hand in motion. While on the one hand we can state accurately that every image is abstract, it is equally true that every abstraction has an origin. If you were to fix the invisible line of a fly-fishing cast, the path of a sparrow, or the tumble of a rock down a hill, might it not resemble the lines of a work by Jackson Pollock, Arshile Gorky, or Cy Twombly? Artist Joan Snyder has said, "There is no such thing as 'abstract art.' It has to be an abstraction of something."¹⁸



Clyde Aspevig, *Spring in the Foothills*, 2016, oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches. Private collection.

It would be remiss not to draw attention to Clyde Aspevig's finely honed sense of place. He possesses an ability to call forth the scent of the air and the color of the light in each of his chosen locales—and, in particular, the American West—with a forcefulness that collectors and critics alike have noted. As so many before have observed, to know a place and then see an Aspevig painting of it is to experience a jolt of recognition at a visceral level. Nowhere is this perfect pitch more evident than in his paintings of the coulees, peaks, creeks, and plains of his home ground in Montana. Peter Hassrick refers to Aspevig's "wedding of the spirit of place with aesthetic harmonies and personal temperament."¹⁹ It makes perfect sense that home in its purest sense should inspire some of Aspevig's finest work. It also follows that, knowing the land as he does, he should wish not to lose it. Both through his art and in other ways, he works with an almost missionary zeal to share the land, preserve it, and help others see what he sees. He would be the first to say that his paintings should be but a gateway to each viewer's personal communion with the land itself.

Robyn G. Peterson
Executive Director, Yellowstone Art Museum, 2006-2017

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¹⁸ Quoted in Eric Fischl with Jerry Saltz, editors, *Sketchbook with Voices*, San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, p. 115.

¹⁹ Peter Hassrick, *Clyde Aspevig: Selected Paintings* (Steamboat Springs, CO, and Billings, MT: Steamboat Art Museum and Juniper Ridge Studios, 2008), p. iv.