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Review: Jim Lutes/Valerie Carberry Gallery



By Chris Miller | November 22, 2011

Those who saw his 2009 retrospective at the Renaissance Society might well be surprised that Jim Lutes is painting moody landscapes. Until now, his career has moved back and forth between abstract expression and spectral, sketchy, flabby figuration. But the four wall-size landscapes now showing in Valerie Carberry are far too picturesque to be considered contemporary, which is not to say he hasn't tried to bring them up to date. His paintings are still recognizably twenty-first century, with space that feels flat, objects that are pixelated, erratically nervous mark-making, and little concern for Baroque luminosity or realistic textures. But still, each huge image has given this viewer the overwhelming and uncomfortable feeling of standing smack in the middle of Kelly Creek, Idaho, confronted by impenetrable walls of boulders, encompassed by dark, dangling

foliage, with no apparent pathway to escape this dark, remote valley in the Bitterroot Mountains. The Impressionists shared their pleasure with the great outdoors, the Romantics shared their wonder at its mystery and Lutes shares his anxiety with what he calls the “Dumb Country.”

Though not beautiful, his views are as dramatic, convincing and entertaining as scenes from John Boorman’s violent film *Deliverance*. They are accompanied by a boulder-sized, clear urethane bag stuffed with brightly colored trash, in a strategic nod to Pop and conceptual art. Unless marked “work of art,” the janitorial staff would probably haul it off to the dumpster. Taken all together, the message seems to be “Humanity, you’re not welcome here, take your junk and get out!”, which is not too far from the self-loathing that critics have found in his earlier figurative work. So perhaps these new landscapes are not so surprising after all. (Chris Miller)

Through January 28 at Valerie Carberry Gallery, 875 North Michigan