

B A T T L E / *g r o u n d*

J A M E S L A N C E L M c E L H I N N E Y

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C. Barbour Strickland, III / *Director, Greenville Museum of Art*

We are especially pleased that James McElhinney's first museum one-man show in North Carolina should be held at the Greenville Museum of Art.

Throughout the preparation of this project, which began in 1993, Jim has been committed to its purpose and has been a source of constant support and insight. His keen interest in every aspect of the catalogue and installation has guaranteed its accuracy and success.

I would like to thank Ronald Graziani for his thought provoking essay and Amanda Love for designing the catalogue. Additionally, I would like to thank Elizabeth Ross who, with the assistance of Kelly Grant and Bruce Thorn, designed the interactive computer display for the exhibition. Finally, I would like to thank the many sponsors of the exhibition, without whose financial support this catalogue would not have been possible.

Michael Dorsey / *Dean, East Carolina University School of Art*

It is with the greatest anticipation that I look forward to the solo exhibition of James McElhinney. He is a celebrated artist whose work evokes a timeless presence. Furthermore, his exhibition richly illustrates the impressive spirit of collaboration at work between the East Carolina University School of Art, the Greenville Museum of Art and the City of Ayden, North Carolina.

In November of 1992, the ECU School of Art and the City of Ayden established formal ties through the construction of the Visiting Artist Studio in the historic Old Town Hall. This 1917 building's second floor was redesigned to accommodate an artist's studio/apartment for the School of Art's Visiting Artist Program. This arrangement is unique among colleges and universities and was intended to assist in attracting outstanding individuals to the School of Art as well as assisting Ayden in the revitalization of its downtown. James McElhinney will complete a three-year residency in the studio and has the distinction of being the first ECU Visiting Artist to reside there.

Dr. Michael J. House / *Mayor, Town of Ayden, NC*

The Visiting Artist's studio and apartment in Ayden's historic Old Town Hall is a unique and successful cooperative effort by the Town and the East Carolina University School of Art blending public and private support, art, historic preservation and downtown revitalization. It has been recognized widely as a creative yet appropriate use of a landmark historic building and received the North Carolina Downtown Development Association's Award of Excellence for Innovative Development in 1994.

When we first explored this concept with Dean Michael Dorsey of the School of Art, we hoped it would bring a visiting Artist like Jim McElhinney to the University and to Ayden. Jim is a valued Ayden citizen as well as an outstanding painter and teacher. He has given freely of himself to our community, and we are proud to call him one of our own.



1994–present Visiting Artist in Painting,
East Carolina University School of Art, Greenville, NC

Education

1976 Master of Fine Arts, Painting, Yale University
1974 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Painting, Tyler School of Art
1973 Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture

Exhibitions

1996 "Battle/Ground" Greenville Museum of Art, Greenville, NC
"Remote Sensing" West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV
"Annual Exhibition" Community Council of the Arts, Kinston, NC
1995 "Observations" F.A.N. Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
"Solo Exhibition" Second Street Gallery, Charlottesville, VA
"Art on Paper" Weatherspoon Art Gallery, Greensboro, NC
"New South, Old South, Somewhere in Between,"
Winthrop University Galleries, Rock Hill, SC
1994 "Solo Exhibition" Jack Blanton Fine Art, Richmond, VA
"Solo Exhibition" Waterworks Art Center, Salisbury, NC
1993 "American Battlegrounds" F.A.N. Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
"Solo Exhibition" Danville Museum of Fine Art and History,
Danville, VA
"Natural Defense" Peninsula Fine Art Center, Newport News, VA
"Natural Defenses" Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design,
Milwaukee, WI
"Battlefields" Knox College, Galesburg, IL
"Seeing the Elephant" Carol Reese Museum, Eastern Tennessee
State University, Johnson City, TN; Eastern Shore Art Center,
Fairhope, AL

1992 "Natural Defenses" Saint Joseph's University, Philadelphia, PA
1990 "Contemporary Philadelphia Artists" Philadelphia Museum of Art

Grants and Prizes

1995 "Partners in the Arts" Richmond Arts Council, Richmond, VA
1987 "Visual Artist Fellowship" National Endowment for the Arts
1976 "Ely Harwood Schless Memorial Prize," Yale University

James Lancel McElhinney / *Artist's Statement*

Landscapes are created whenever people adapt terrain to their use. "Landscape" is not a thing, but an activity that reorganizes the physical realm of nature to serve peoples' aesthetic, economic and political goals. Americans comprehend landscape as either scenery or property, consuming both in picturesque terms, while cherishing a sense of identity based on a "sense of place."

Places, like landscapes, are not defined by what we see, but how we see them. Specific physical locations are often inhabited by a number of competing landscapes -- placed there by the desires and values of those who create them. The American landscape is a battleground of competing desires and definitions. It is nothing less than a national quarrel.

To represent the American landscape in painting, it seemed useful to begin with what it represents. Locating my starting-point away from the cloistered realm of aesthetic discourse, I took to the field and commenced painting the killing fields of the South -- the scene of our nation's most tragic quarrel. A lot is revealed about how Americans celebrate landscape by observing how we preserve, alter or destroy hallowed ground. James Howard Kunstler remarked that "sacred places are part of the standard equipment of any civilization." Edward Linenthal argues that what makes these spaces sacred is not only the memory of past events, but present battles over how they should be used, preserved or developed.

For me, these paintings represent a different way of approaching landscape -- breaking out of a discussion of art for art's sake. Selecting painting locations demands evidence of those organizing principles that we seem compelled to inscribe upon the terrain, something that abides uniquely in American culture.

Perhaps war and commerce do organize space in similar ways.

Perhaps there is nothing strange about battle-trenches nestling up against burger joints.

Perhaps because American culture is always a quarrel about what it is, no definition will ever suffice to describe exactly how landscape is pursued in the land of the free and the home of the brave.

Making these paintings allows me to pose the question.

Perhaps that is enough.

Artists or their patrons often refuse to celebrate the genre of landscape painting as a visual form of social discourse, perhaps preferring that the significance of art not be viewed through the particularities of a sociological lens. Nonetheless, the significance of any artistic landscape—or for that matter, any art—has always been inscribed within the values, ideals and desires of the various communities to which the artist belongs or to which she or he aspires to belong. And, if the art historical canon of landscape art is any indication of what to expect on the esthetic horizon, the success of current versions of the landscape genre will continue to be inscribed within a controversial ideo-esthetic consensus. While esthetic controversy might seem frightening (or for that matter, trivial) to those who view democratic conflict and debate irritating or unnecessarily complex, esthetic debate is worthwhile when the dialogue anticipates with a show like this, similar concerns in a larger sector in society. Fortunately, James Lancel McElhinney's ideological landscapes are not ambivalent about being a part of that sociality.

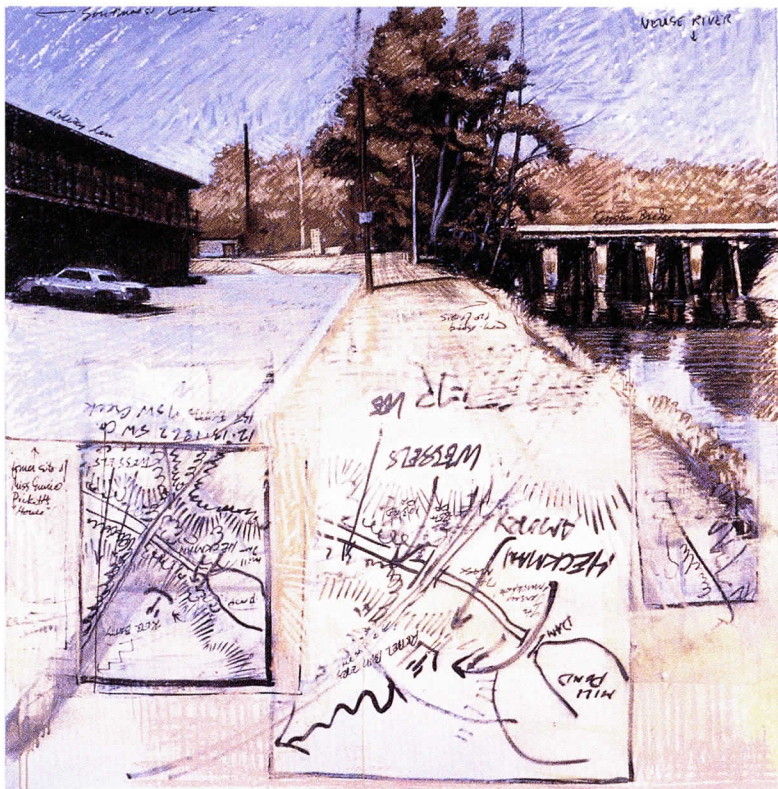
To begin a debate about any art—here, specifically about the politics of representation gestured in the paintings by McElhinney—requires an acknowledgment that any marshaled tools and assumptions are in themselves (like the art on display) constructs. My view of the meaningfulness of these landscapes carry the same implications as the artist's views to a landscape—that is, both types of views are already marked by assumptions and habits.

The artist has much to say about how one might want to read his landscapes. He speaks of the physical landscape as “an activity that organizes the physical realm of nature;” of “landscape understood as property,” or “as a battleground of competing desires.”

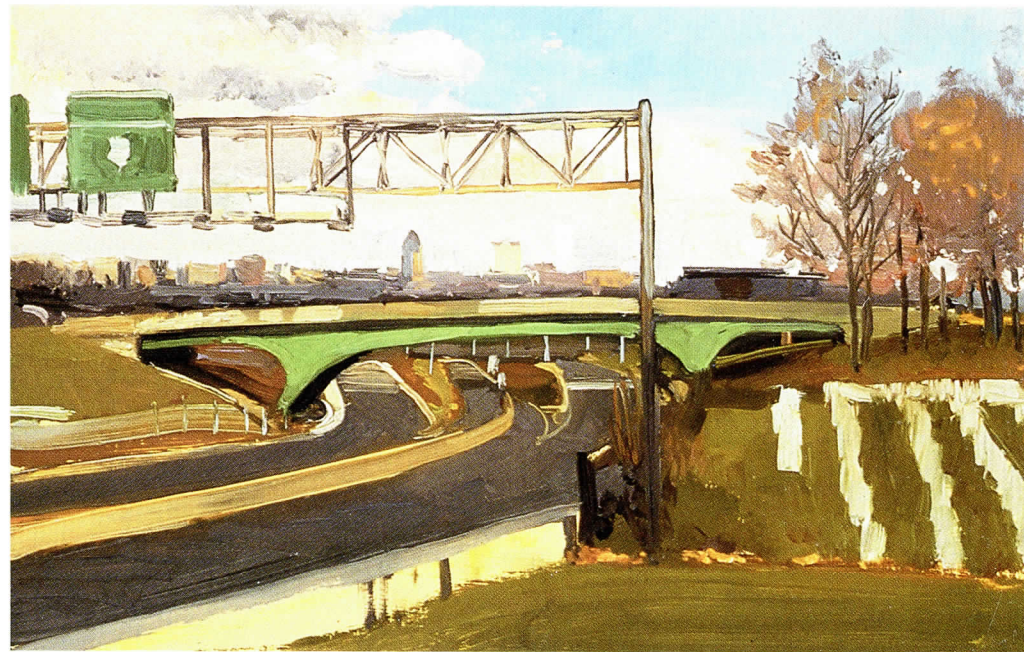
With the statement, “Landscapes do not occur in nature, but as a result of human activity,”¹ the artist gestures to how one sector in the more recent discourse has focused on dismantling the neutrality of landscape as a concept. It is a discourse that assumes landscape as a concept is always shaped by a framing set of expectations grounded in the habits of one's perceptions.

In this show, those desires have taken the specific parameters of how “the competing desires of war and commerce organize terrain into landscapes,” or more specifically, “civil war battlefields and their current condition.” Of interest here is the ambivalence that surfaces in how these paintings frame that landscape. For in their ambivalence, these landscapes locate the intersections of some of our most conspicuous ideologies—war and commerce; for that reason alone, one cannot be too concerned about what they say or what they leave unsaid. Set aside, for the moment the obvious reading of how the military mind-set has always been intimately inscribed within (it would probably be more accurate to say a sibling of) the so-called competing economic desires figured as malls in many of these paintings. A de-constructionist would probably bemoan the complicity involved in this avoidance, a re-constructionist might applaud such a discursive move. What is more interesting here, is how the relationship between war and commerce are gestured in these paintings.

With the paintings, *Fort Mifflin* or *48th Pennsylvania Infantry Monument*, the artist gives esthetic form to what he calls the American landscape. He treats the motif as a view to a history pitted against ongoing commercial desires.

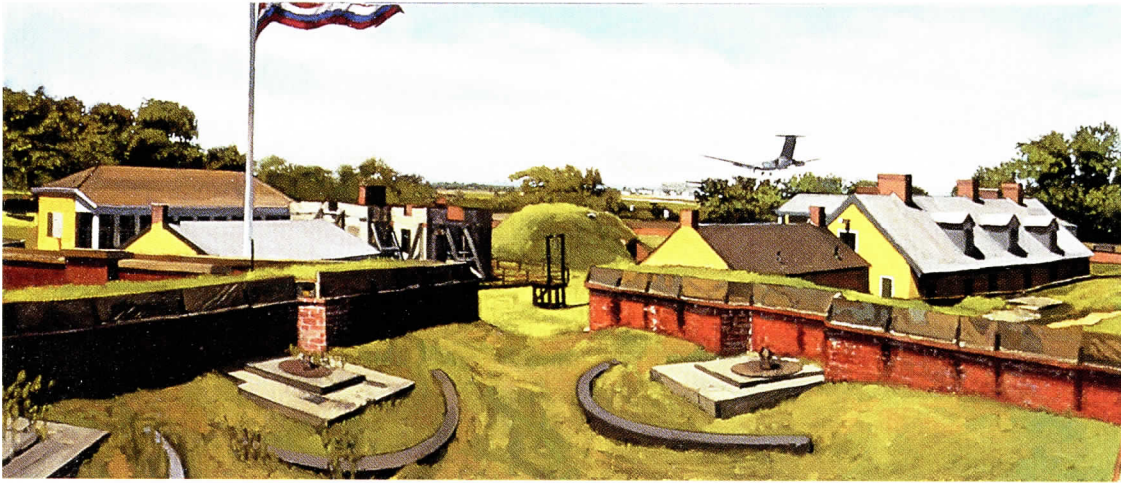


"Battlefield of Kinston Bridge—December 14, 1862" / mixed media on paper. 48x48 inches. 1995

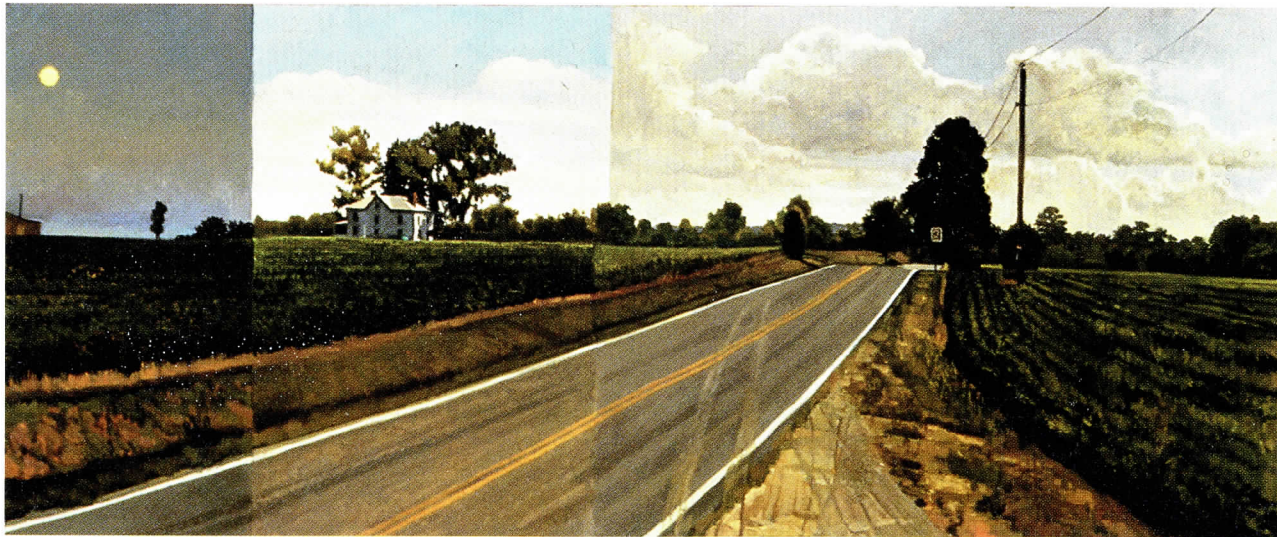


"Interstate 94 Crossing the Civil War section of Wood National Cemetery, Milwaukee, Wisconsin" / oil on panel 10x15 inches 1993

But the earlier series—there are two noticeably different series of landscapes in the show, and I will deal first with the earlier series of landscapes—do more than link two types of institutionalized human activities in the same terrain, the paintings stage the particular tensions within the esthetic look of realism. The question is where does one want to ground the paintings' realism: as a process of capturing what was actually out there—the specifics of an actual site—or as arbitrary views (or series of views) to a landscape staged as a "battleground of competing desires." The artist suggests the former when he comments about how the preliminary research into the site is "never used as source materials for my paintings, which are made on location." *Malvern Hill* with its three atmospheric versions partitioning the landscape into a fractured historical narrative of time experienced might also lead us to choose the former reading. The painting further evokes the "actual" with its depiction of a sequence of scenes separated into discrete photo-like frames; the paintings carry the having-been-there quality often assumed with look of a photograph.



"Fort Mifflin and Philadelphia International Airport" / oil on canvas, 12x24 inches, 1993-95



"Toward Federal artillery positions from the skirmish-line at Malvern Hill" / oil on canvas, 20x49 inches, 1993





"Monument to Colonel George Gowen and the 48th Pennsylvania Infantry—Magnolia Avenue and Crater Road, Petersburg, Virginia" / oil on canvas, 10x15 inches, 1993

FOSTER'S RAID - DEC. 11-20 1862
ACTION AT KINSTON BRIDGE
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← TO GOLDSBORO

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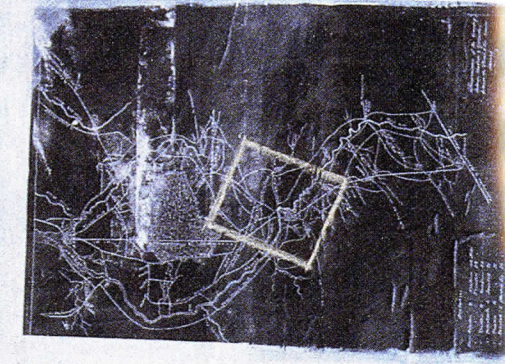
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Instead, let's assume, for the moment, that the mechanical tools and/or compositional devices (for example, a vanishing point and its confining radiating rays) that have helped to structure the concept of a realistic landscape have less to do with fixing the specifics of a terrain out there and more to do with seeing oneself seeing. This view of realism suggests that the devices of realist landscape painting—the vanishing point and radiating lines—act as substitutes for the actual eye of the beholder, with the caveat that the viewer is looking through a necessarily ideologically charged eye, one differentiated by values, gender, beliefs, age, life style, etc. Looking at McElhinney's and other realists' works in this fashion, suggests a more democratically defined realism, one that anticipates the habits and conventions of the onlooker or beholder rather than capturing what is out there. One can then begin to deal with how realisms impinge upon other realisms, how landscapes confuse as well as clarify, resist as well as communicate, distort as well as celebrate what is out there.

In addition, with this anamorphic view of realism, memory not only becomes the glue that fixes any realist point of reference but an ideologically charged glue. Memory, as a factor, has always helped stabilize the canonical definition of esthetic representation—that is, by its very convention esthetic representation re-presents that which is necessarily absent on the canvas. McElhinney attests to this convention stating, "I am always painting from memory. Even when I am working in front of the subject, the moment I move my eyes away from it to look at the canvas, I am painting from memory." But that awareness of how painting is always only a re-presentation of a terrain into a picture is usually counteracted with a reminder to the beholder, nonetheless, that a realist painting is not a fiction but a remembering. Indeed, McElhinney states, "Photorealists are not just celebrating the information, they are celebrating the photograph. In my work, I prefer to celebrate painting as an activity. . . . Painting is more direct." While the notion of memory may be considered an entity in itself, or the desire to preserve memory an equally autonomous entity, these landscapes emphasize how certain memories have been structured into a visual formula. That is, these landscapes teach us to see from a particular vantage point.

"Few civil war battles are far from interstate highways [in *I-94 Crossing the Civil War section of Wood National Cemetery*, they're literally overlapping] or shopping malls," notes McElhinney. In displaying that terrain, the artist uses a vanishing point/vantage point that favors the war memorials, with the markers of commerce—as consumption (stores and malls), and as mobility (trains, autos or airplane traffic)—staged as if destroying the sacred aspect of the terrain. Military history is played out here against the backdrop of commerce, and clearly in sympathy with the past. Commenting on how he decides on a particular site to paint, McElhinney states, "Based on what the site represents... I look for a motif, some configuration of terrain, features that suggest a painting." While he firmly situates his esthetics in the long tradition of the picturesque, like other participants in this tradition, these paintings also rely on the parameters of the sublime (read, ruins) to help shape that desire.

Unlike its 19th-century forebears that relied on a distant ruin as a diversionary detour into nostalgia, the vantage point, for example, in *Fort Mifflin* is from the northeast bastion, looking across the ruins as foreground.



"Battlefield of Kinston Bridge--Foster's Raid" / mixed media,

60x100 inches, 1995

"Battlefield of Rawles Mill" / oil on panel, 7.5x20 inches, 1994

Fort Mifflin has the ideological vantage point of a military preservationist. In addition, instead of depicting dilapidated ruins overgrown with brush-nature getting back at the machine-in-the-garden, a typical format of the 19th century version of the picturesque—these landscapes stage the ruins as threatened with the ever-consuming presence of the commercial machine.

For some time now, the “landscape correct” approach has taken shape through all kinds of transformative ecological proposals of sustainable development. These landscapes suggest lessons can be learned—indeed, must be forged—from looking at our landscapes or our sacred military ground (and metaphorical equivalence, sacred memories) will be permanently transformed into something less than sacred. McElhinney’s paintings have the good sense not to project an esthetic green wash onto the landscape, while advocating romanticism as a form of restoring a sense of balance to the environment. Even further, the realist series of landscapes avoid the 19th century picturesque view of a benign naturescape, or the view of the natural full of universal or reverential rhetoric. Instead, they suggest a deeply felt disdain for what is taking place in the landscapes depicted. Yet the battleground is not staged between man and the nonhuman elements of nature, but between two competing human activities. Despite the sheer abundance of commerce and traffic that threaten the human history at these sites, the geological look staged in these landscapes suggest sustainable development isn’t what is at stake here. Rather, in these paintings, a crucial ideological element has been removed from the views. Over the course of a century, the view of nature as rich in mineral resources has turned the ideological parameters of the picturesque sublime on its head.

Currently, the issue is no longer how to manage the machine-in-the-garden, but what to do with the garden (now)-in-the-machine. Since the demise of manifest destiny and its version of nature possessing unlimited resources, its sibling, sustainable development, is now the guiding light behind sound ecological programs; these paintings become picturesque by resisting the look of the human/non-human battleground taking place in the terrain. By finessing the sublime elements off the picturesque aspects the artist has, in effect, staved off a possible full-blown controversy.

These paintings are illuminating in that they gesture toward a politics of preservationism, or at least damage control. While the antagonist in *Fort Mifflin* is subsequent commerce threatening sacred military grounds, in *The 48th Pennsylvania Infantry Monument*, a statue of Colonel Gowen “shares space with an enormous Merchant Tire and Auto Sign.”

In the latter, both commerce and military desires are staged as more or less blood relatives. As the artist sees it, “Colonel Gowen stands at parade rest, trying to decide between Michelin and Goodyear. He’s been to war, now he’s buying a tire.” Although *The 48th Pennsylvania Infantry Monument* presents a highly ambivalent picturing of competing desires, the artist still views it as a “perfect poster child for battlefield preservationism.”

While these paintings lament that commerce is interfering with a past and its memories, little is suggested about how the memorials at the sites also interfere with, preserve, alter or destroy memories. It’s not that the historic sites as monuments or their memories are inconsequential. Far from it, the point here is that the very tissues of memories vary among participants. Memorial preservationism in this democratic sense becomes multiple, contested—a view war memorials often avoid. That is, the look of our war memorials—like our malls’ designs—assume certain things about which desires are appropriate to preserve or celebrate. Little in these canvases deal with the fact that nothing remains of historic battlefields except the *markers* that have become our symbols that now stand in for the histories no longer present—a cemetery, a monument to a famous colonel, earth mounds, the polished cannon with its now-fused pile of round shot, or the ceremonial re-enactments that continue to relocate memories of the civil war as tactical maneuvers—or how those markers frame history into a particular narrative.

Inscribed as they are within the esthetics of the picturesque-sublime, these canvases are also participants in one of the tradition’s primary parameters—the politics of tourism, which requires a sighting, markers which register the sight as worthy of attraction, and a viewer-would-be-tourist. The would-be tourist’s initial access to any tourist sight tends to be through off-sight markers—postcards, ad brochures, word of mouth—which direct the tourist to on-sight markers which, in turn, trigger the tourist’s recognition of the sight as worthy of attraction.

In these paintings, the artist concentrates on the on-sight markers. But the artist has gone through a similar preliminary process, a process that also triggers the artist's recognition of the sight—in this case, a point of entry that celebrates the military over the commercial. McElhinney comments on how he arrives at what a site represents, using the off-sight markers of the military speculator: "The first step involves the comparison of old military maps with modern ones, followed by reading battle reports, historical writings... regimental histories,... becoming a member of several civil war round tables,... then the production of hand-drawn maps in the persona of the Federal engineer staff-officer at major battle re-enactments." Such military "field work" has played a role in the long history of the picturesque-sublime and McElhinney's desires have found fruitful ground. The artist's working method sides with the military speculator over that of the tactical equivalencies of a commercial speculator. With such a conceptual framework, and typology of markers, their realism anticipate a particular vantage point. Framing, elevating, positioning, and the way the artist uses boundaries in these paintings play a

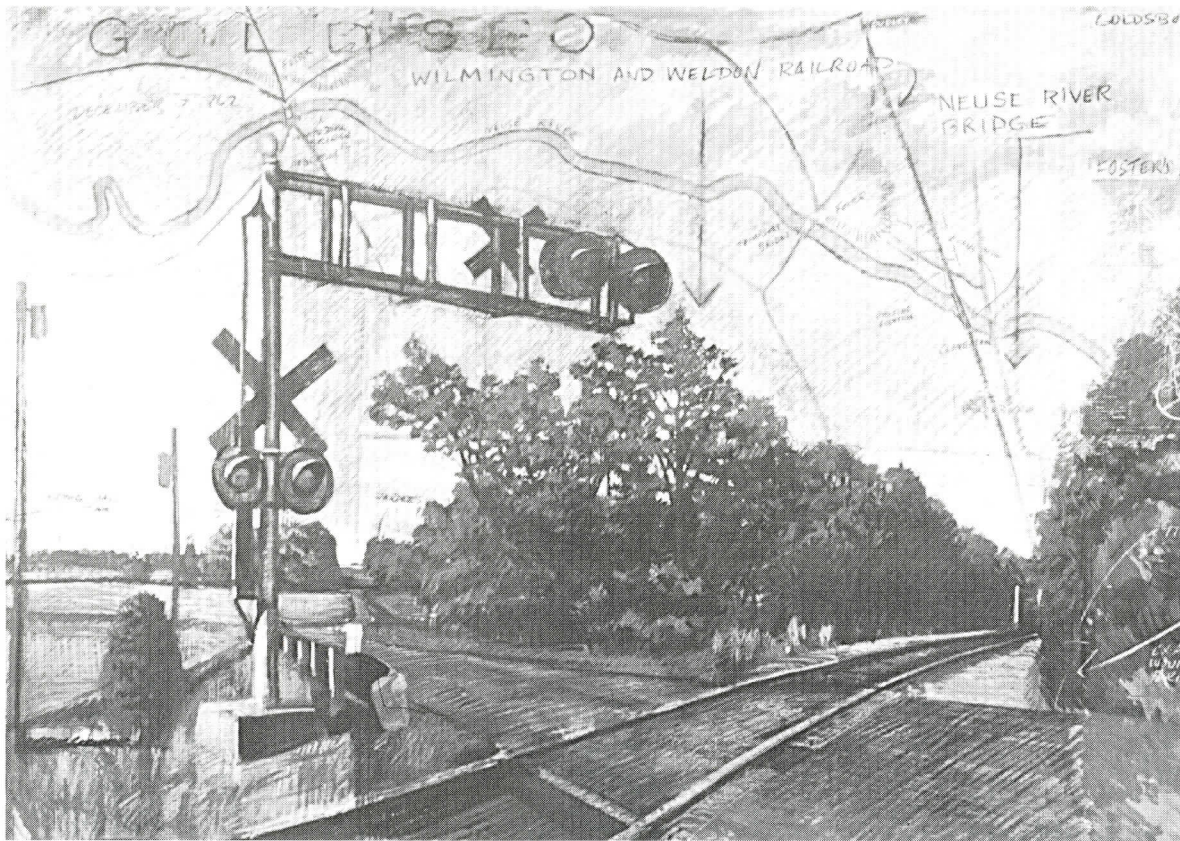
crucial role in designating certain markers as enshrinements and other markers as intruders. A healthy sense of ambivalence surfaces when comparing canvases; alternating from a desire to celebrate memorial symbols that mark our landscape to cynical critiques of how military symbols are also often misguided in their pursuits. These paintings embrace preservationism both in style and in the ambivalence or codes that continue to frame that sociality. The artist's own view to that landscape and the viewer's own position within that terrain is where the paintings begin to take on significance.

Just as landscapes can be viewed as battlegrounds between enterprises, so too can the thematics of seeing. For example, in the three largest and most recent paintings in the show, a radical formal shift has taken place. The stakes seem to have been raised. The paintings have moved away from the look of realism; these large images now tease one into accepting apparently unproblematic notions of expressionism and cartography. There is a certain essentialism that surfaces in the gestured marks of these large canvases, suggesting a subjective unmediated experience in their expressionism.

The addition of the cartographic (often taken for the terrain, a direct link with both reality and representation) lends another kind of immediacy (although emphasizing the opposite pole of experience). One gets in these latter paintings both a suggestion of an emotional directness (in their expressionism) and an objective (or cartographic) directness of the site. The method deployed in the latter series is no longer a frontal attack on a terrain (as suggested in the realism of the early canvases), but a combined flanked assault—the emotional directness of expressionism and the objective directness of the cartographic. Juxtaposed together in the same image, they suggest neither the expressionism nor the cartographic of being ideologically charged. The latest work has the tale-tell signs of an esthetic re-entrenchment in its careful reconnoitering of the esthetic canon.



"Fort Macon, Bogue Banks--Atlantic Beach, North Carolina" / oil on canvas, 20x49 inches, 1994



"Battlefield of Goldsboro Bridge--Foster's Raid" / mixed media, 70x100 inches, 1996

McElhinney has chosen a specific terrain and, through a complex set of values and beliefs, has marshaled them into a series of landscapes. But to view these landscapes as unproblematically positive or negative would only displace the ambivalent body politics in which art is always a participant. For example, both *geiste* and jester are close etymological relatives in the thematics of expressionism—that is, both essence (the *geist*) and arbitrariness (the jester) have been tour guides through the realm of expressionism. In fact, the art historical canon usually claims that it is the uniqueness of the distortions (the jestering marks of expressionism) that verifies the essence (*geiste*) of the experience captured on the canvas. Nonetheless, if one understands the look of expressionism in the latter series, or for that matter the cartographic presence, in terms of how as formalistic devices they also act as substitutes for the actual eye of a beholder inscribed within habits of perception, then the large canvases too can be viewed as a form of expressive labor under the management of a conceptual investment. That is, one can begin to appreciate them as a visual form of social discourse. Whether such a reading would push these landscapes beyond the range of the esthetic canon is up to you the de-holder to decide, which is always where the meaning in art finds its significance.

¹ All the artist's comments have been pulled from a 1994 interview that appeared either in *Civil War*, 46, Oct. 1994 or from a forthcoming interview with James Howard Kunstler (in *American Arts Quarterly*).

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Ayden Old Town Hall, location of Visiting Artist Studio.
photo / William R. Hill



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