

Opinion: Light On Landscape, Derek Buckner and Janet Jennings at Pamela Williams

By Robert Long

As landscape painters, Derek Buckner and Janet Jennings work in complementary styles, and it is fun to see their recent pictures hanging on opposite sides of the Pamela Williams Gallery in Amagansett. Mr. Buckner is a bit of an Impressionist and Ms. Jennings is something of a Luminist.

Mr. Buckner's clouds are made of small, rough patches and daubs of color while Ms. Jennings's clouds are as smooth as angel hair, no matter how stormy or even life-threatening the weather.

Both painters like the way light looks with a storm approaching, or at least with a shift in weather soon to come. Mr. Buckner is fond of the slanting light of late afternoon, and makes the most of it, dappling scrubby landscape with shadow. His "Dune Path" is right out of William Merritt Chase, a vivid, light-blasted slice of beachscape, that light conveyed by the accumulation of many small dabs of color.

In "East End Sky," too, the light is clear and bright, while in "Dune Grasses," the largest of the canvases at 42 by 60 inches, cobalt blue shows up in a distant slice of ocean and the sky goes a deep, thick tone of blue with pinkish clouds scudding through it. Mr. Buckner likes to mix pinks and yellows into his skies, another touch of the Impressionist in him.

His pictures of barges at a city pier are more modern looking and have a more authentic feel than the landscapes. The late afternoon light is reflected off the sides of buildings along the waterfront, brick turning rosy as sunset approaches. Mr. Buckner constructed these pictures as if from a set of building blocks - they are neatly drawn in paint, but the colors give them immediacy.

You can't help but think of Hopper when you see such resolute and mysterious scenes, but Mr. Buckner is full of surprises. In "Barges, Evening," the river is a wonderfully slick yellow-green color, and the sky is bluish-green slathered with oily pink and yellow - de Kooning colors. A thick ribbon of smoke pours sideways from a distant chimney, and that oddly abstract horizontal element, so white and crusty that it looks as if it had been glued to the canvas, is imaginative magic.

Mr. Buckner is also showing a series of small pictures of tractor-trailer rigs parked in the gloom of a parking lot at night, illuminated strongly from one side by a distant mercury vapor light. The silhouetted truck cabs and trailers are often reduced to green, red, or blue, and their outlines have been smoothed; these are Mr. Buckner's equivalent of Cezanne's little still lifes.

Each of Janet Jennings's views of marshes at Napeague, Accabonac Harbor, and elsewhere is made of three elements - a piece of sky, some water, and a spit or two of moist land. In some of the pictures there are subsets of these elements in the form of trees or a house, but the artist is mainly trying to evoke atmosphere.

The brighter of the pictures are tranquil, with crisp colors and clear contours, and they read like idealized versions of landscape. There is something chilly and artificial about them, as there is about April Gornik's pictures; in their different ways both Ms. Jennings and Ms. Gornik's pictures are like Caspar David Friedrich's, but with all the Romanticism drained out, which makes them look modern.

In a very different series of variations on the same bucolic subject, Ms. Jennings makes the sky and water a queasy green and the clouds a poisonous copper-orange; something bad has happened to the world, though we don't know what. In "Storm Over Fish Farm," the silhouette of a building in the distance is charred black, as is the spit of land it stands on. This may be a postapocalyptic vision.

But the combination of colors is terrific, and Ms. Jennings has whipped up some terrific cyclonic clouds in several of these canvases. She might be showing us the end of the world, but she can't help making it attractive.

The exhibit can be seen through Nov. 13.