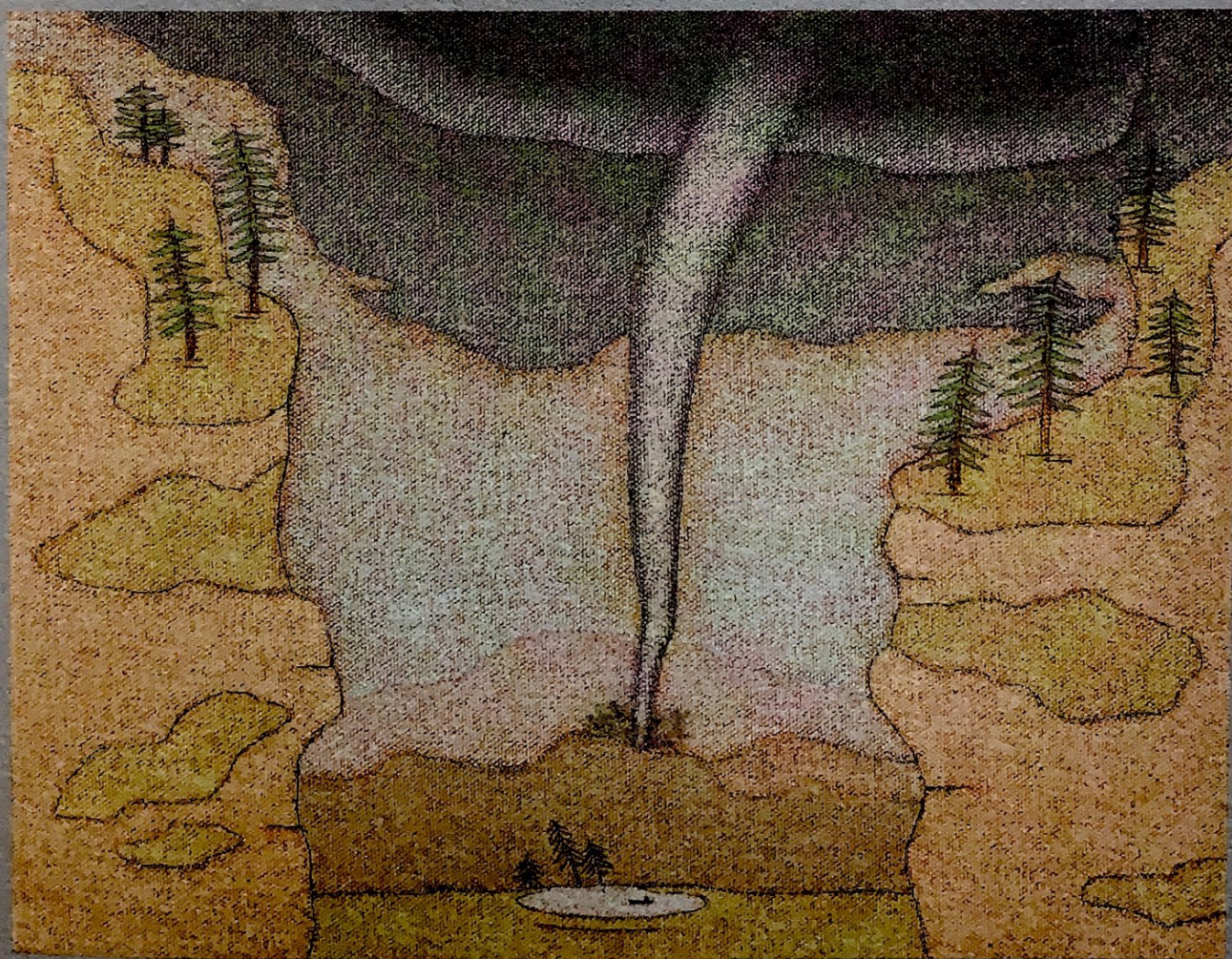


JOHN DILG

Leaving the New World



LEAVING THE NEW WORLD

Franklin Evans

John Dilg's new old-school paintings in his exhibition *Leaving the New World* navigate taxonomies of painted forms derived from found images and his memory of the American landscape. His new paintings variously depict trees, tree stumps, and isolated leafless branches; hills, mountains, and islands, frequently with steep faces, sometimes with flat tops; lakes, ponds, rivers, and waterfalls; moons and a hint of a sun below the horizon; clouds and a tornado; the occasional human or animal form — a fisherman, a jaguar, a bird, a dog, and a whale; and an emoji heart. These images collectively suggest a place that absorbs time and its changes with a calm, sentient alertness. The *New York Times* art critics have described his paintings as “pictographic” and “cartoon-visionary”. These works unavoidably speak to the ecological challenges to earth and climate change in particular. Both the Old and New Worlds alike are marked by drying rivers and dying trees, among them the centuries-old sequoias and banyans depicted in Dilg's paintings.

These paintings not only reference the landscape through their image forms, they also reveal painting as the landscape through their process, as the thin canvas with its visible weave becomes the terrain in which paint, including some earth pigments, are affixed. Dilg's paintings seduce the viewer with their formal specificity and craft and the varied art references they conjure. Memory provides the forms and compositional relationships. A reserve line encloses the shapes, which he fills with a flat application of a monochrome earth tone. The reserve line, such as Matisse used in his flatly



painted *The Red Studio*, becomes more apparent as Dilg carefully applies paints laterally in dry brush oil onto the toothy canvas weave. He confines himself to a narrow range of tones and temperatures, with the subtlety seen in the paintings of Morandi, Klee, Pissarro, and Vuillard. These small paintings reveal spaces and forms that project an internal glow: they fluidly transport us to vast realms, temporal and atemporal, and propel a psychological journey through archetypal associations. Dilg's tight range of tones, the paint layered at least twice, produce nuanced colors and optical mixes, all matte and low chroma: red earth, cedar, peachy persimmon, yellow ochre, picholine olive, sage green, pale viridian, robin egg blue, steely gray, and ice white. His color system pulls the elements of each painting into a unified space, a contemporary version of Renaissance *unione*. The gentle chroma, with the artist's open surface scumble, resembles the worn surfaces of Roman frescoes.

I met John Dilg in the summer of 1989 when I traveled by car across the United States to research graduate school painting programs. My driving adventure in a way foreshadowed my future art professor's landscape paintings, the dominant genre in his work since 2000. Talking on the steps of the graduate painting studios at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, Iowa, John generously invited me into his space. Iowa City is a small college town, an oasis of culture in the American Midwest. The countryside is characterized by the images that populate his paintings — steep-sloped hills, mounds, dells, rivers, and waterfalls. My three years studying with John were an ongoing conversation about the force of painting to propel a philosophical journey. This optical, psychological, and cultural investigation explored the dense atmosphere of humanity, history, painting, and place. I learned that painting could offer a

space in which to rethink time, quite apart from its scientific and quotidian applications.

Since the 1990s, Dilg has often composed his paintings with rectangular shapes, frequently centered and symmetrical. These rectangular shapes also regularly support other shapes. In recent paintings, including those in *Leaving the New World*, he varies the dimension and location of this primary shape. He has said that the shape was derived from a drawing and a painting, both made in 1983, which were inspired by an art student's performance and a dream Dilg had about that performance. Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, the shape became increasingly imagistic. During this time, he discovered the artist Miyoko Ito, who also employed a reserve line, and whose idiosyncratic work was linked to Diebenkorn's Ocean Park series, which in turn descended from Matisse's 1914 abstract geometric *View of Notre Dame*. The rectangles in Dilg's landscape paintings become plateaus, mounds, hills, icebergs, tree stumps, wide waterfalls, buildings, and four-legged animals as well as the negative space beneath them. All these forms seem alive.

In his newest paintings, the rectangle appears as many things. It is a plateau with four pines and two waterfalls in *Heartbeat*. It is the cluster of hacked tree stumps that grow fractal versions of themselves in *Her Leaves Cry in the Wind*. It is the New World jaguar turning to look back behind itself in *Jungle Republic*. It is the flattened rock/hill form in *Agate Like a Mountain*. This primary shape locates the subject of each of these paintings. *Heartbeat* and *Her Leaves Cry in the Wind* imply a desire to continue despite obstacles, such as the overuse of the land and climate change. In *Jungle Republic*, Dilg's jaguar fills much of the picture frame.



Heartbeat

2022

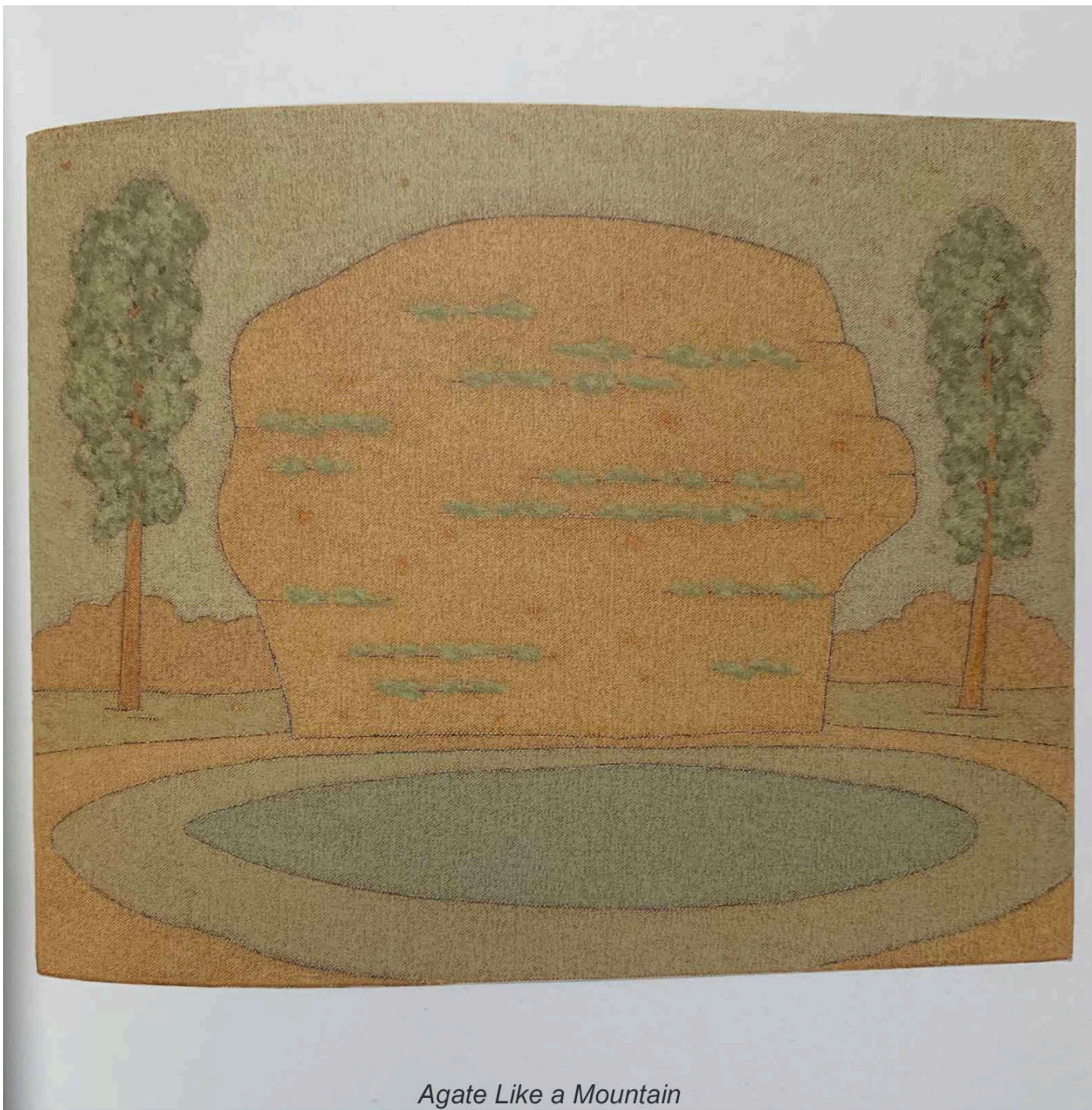
Oil on Canvas

14 x 17 7/8 x 1 1/8 in



Her Leaves Cry in the Wind

2022
Oil on Canvas
14 x 17 7/8 x 1 1/8 in



Agate Like a Mountain

2022
Oil on Canvas
16 x 20 1/8 x 1 5/8 in

Its spotted camouflage is painted in a somewhat broader value range than that in the other new paintings, as if to urge us to look more carefully at what is camouflaged, like the ideological assumption of the triumph of well-intentioned government. *Agate Like a Mountain* directs the viewer toward the erect flatness of a hill in the shape of a piece of toast and an equally flattened oval that reaches the bottom edge of the painting in an otherwise symmetrical composition. Here the subject and composition bring to mind Morris Hirschfield's 1940 *Waterfall* and the hyper-compressed spaces in Cézanne's paintings of rocks and trees.

Dilg's high-value, low-contrast versions of landscape paintings evoke associations to other art and culture. All the paintings look back at the viewer, quietly confident of their own vitality. His *Course of Time* imbues the familiar Niagara Falls with soft light. The painting connects to other visionary and non-academic artists who also painted Niagara, such as Thomas Chambers and Edward Hicks. Dilg's motionless *Once and Future* shows a large land shelf in the unexpected shape of an iceberg, evenly lit by a moon and a sun below the horizon, and then an abundance of waterfalls, and discretely distanced verdant pines. The soft mound of *Heartbeat* supports trees and from it flow two streams of water, a motif Dilg has included often and is usually centrally located as here. In this mound, Dilg has also painted an emoji heart with an anatomically accurate center-left location, as if on a person. It should come as no surprise that Dilg collects amateur waterfall paintings, including some of Niagara, which he has installed as a shrine in his Iowa home. Jason Farago in his 2021 *New York Times* review of Dilg's paintings in his exhibition *Flight Plan* noted a whispering quality, which synesthetically marked a visual tone in the living lands of Dilg's worlds.



Jungle Republic

2022
Oil on Canvas
12 x 16 x 1 1/8 in



The Course of time

2022

Oil on Canvas

14 x 17 7/8 x 1 1/8 in




Once and Future

2022

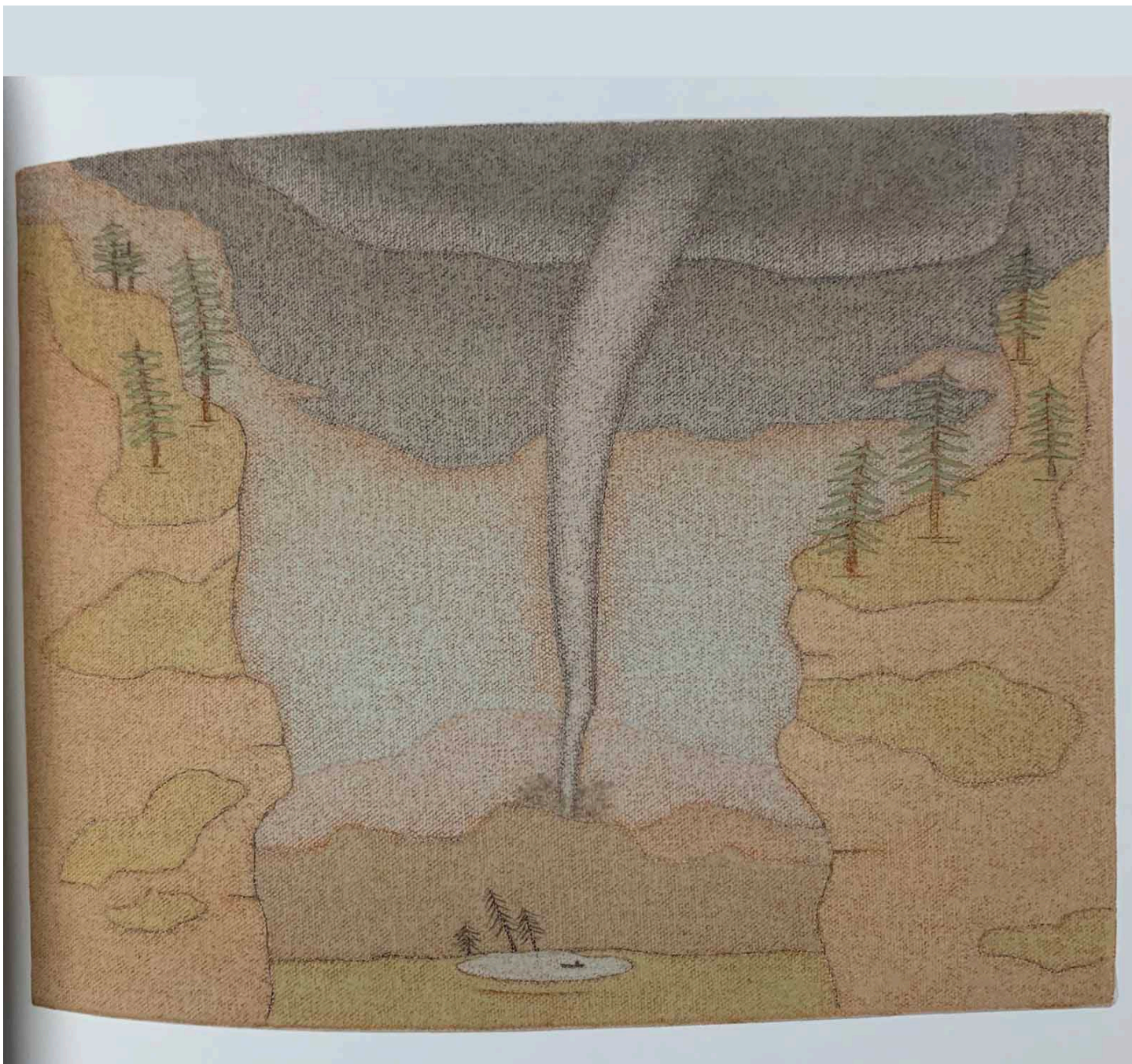
Oil on Canvas

14 x 17 7/8 x 1 1/8 in



Dilg's latest work in this exhibition, *What the Thunder Said*, evokes the threatening quiet before a storm, with an unsuspecting fisherman out on the water. This strange stillness is reminiscent of the American Luminist Martin Johnson Heade's 1859 *Approaching Thunderstorm*. Dilg breaks the calm with the plume of an approaching tornado, which vertically splits the painting. Trees tilt away from that bilateral split and staggered tonal gradients within the tornado-toned sky cover the top third of the painting. Dilg provocatively titles the painting by reference to T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland, Part V — What the Thunder Said*. Eliot's poem ends with a complex collage: a layering of time, urgency, regeneration, and resignation, and an anthem promoting art that draws freely from a full range of experience and memory. As an assemblage of time within a painting, *What the Thunder Said* is an homage, perhaps an inspiration, but also a stoic acceptance of loss. Coincidentally, Eliot refers to five cities, one of them Vienna, unknowingly alluding to this future exhibition of Dilg's paintings.

What the Thunder Said, like all of Dilg's work, suggests an experience that is out of time and simultaneously absorbs all of time. Dilg paints his fisherman in one time, a tornado in another, and the memory of both in yet another. Because he is an American artist, Dilg's paintings might be associated with the work of 19th century arcadian American romantics; however, he has stronger ties to the 19th century European Gothic sublime, and his work looks more toward the influence of Old World modernism on contemporary painting. Most of the new paintings in *Leaving the New World* express a resigned loss of arcadia and are characterized by a calm rejection of the illusion of America's manifest destiny. His paintings find their home in the Old World sublime of wonder and danger, a perspective that places civilization's inevitable follies



What the Thunder Said

2022
Oil on Canvas
11 x 14 x 1 5/8 in

within the awesome scale of nature. For Dilg, nature appears as a large system stoically resigned to its path. In this world, the human presence is temporary. In his *Fishing*, Dilg makes plain his relationship to the High Gothic sublime of Casper David Friedrich, with his small, silhouetted figures, their backs turned to the picture plane. Dilg's fisherman in silhouette appears unaware of the proximate danger evidenced by a whale tail nearby. In an unusual approach for him, here Dilg uses an aerial perspective, like the deeper soft space in Friedrich.

Dilg's normally compressed and flattened space is noticeably expanded in some of the new work. He may be contemplating the space age Gothic sublime in the overview effect, since astronauts have had deep emotional responses to seeing the planet from an extreme vantage point, beyond the earth's atmosphere and in outer space. The powerful beauty and fragility of the living Earth from this point of view excite metaphysical and philosophical investigations. In *Course of Time* and *Wish Ourselves Away*, Dilg pulls the viewer back and up, using traditional perspective. This vantage often suggests omniscience, but Dilg points at memory and the elusive search for something that is unknown but revealed in the end to have been predetermined. In *Wish Ourselves Away*, tree stumps with fractal top growth reappear, framing a waterfall and revealing a shark fin in a river above, on the plateau. This elevated perspective and the shark fin are a significant change from a similar earlier painting, *This Land*, from 2013. There, the top plateau plane and its shark are absent and there is no fractal regeneration atop the tree stumps. In a way Dilg expresses a sublime tempered by resignation, the viewpoint of an Old World romantic artist but in 2022, after two centuries of America's despoliation of its wilderness heritage and its recent quixotic efforts to reach the stars.




Fishing

2022

Oil on Canvas

14 x 17 7/8 x 1 1/8 in



In service to memory, Dilg's painting journey revisits certain forms. His new *Theory* links to his 2006-7 *Voicecast* and 2002 *Ice Storm*. All three share a leafless tree with sharp, skewer-like branches, alluding to the way in which Dilg works through and transforms the images within his paintings. Furthermore, the composition of *Theory* is nearly identical to that of *Voicecast*. The leafless tree enters from the lower left of the picture as a large-scale form within both these two spare paintings. Circles mark the branches, and a bird sits at the right side of the lowest horizontal tree limb. All these shapes are in silhouette and consciously flat. 2022's *Theory*, with its bigger silent bird and bulkier branches, is more foreboding, a suppressed silence, a breath held against something, and a persistent white noise.

These new paintings in *Leaving the New World* evince survival, even as human activity seems relentlessly determined to destroy the future. They advise a stoic resignation while being aware of the forces beyond our grasp. In *It Is Written in the Stars*, Dilg hints at prognostication through the stars, whose light we experience eons after its emission as it beams across space/time. His title doesn't explain what is being foretold by the stars, whether the future of a planet or the life of the universe or even something personal. The banyan tree is a symbol of self-reflection and enlightenment, a potent analogy for painting and living as processes that are aware of their predetermination and the illusion created by local stochastic variation. Dilg has said that this banyan tree reflects two memories: one, when he was in India in the 1970s studying on a Fulbright Grant, and a second in Punta Gorda, Florida, in the 1980s, when he first traveled there with the person who would become his life partner. He does not claim to know the exact meaning of this or any of his paintings, but he is determined to pursue a careful painting



Theory

2022

Oil on Canvas

16 x 20 1/8 x 1 5/8 in

process to try to clarify his fluid memory of images and experiences. In this painting, he seems to recognize now that the banyan trees lodged in his memory were a harbinger of his long love, like a star that reveals only later what already happened, how it generated light countless years ago that just now reaches our eyes. Dilg's open, whispered questions are answered best by his inspired paintings, quietly resigned to discovering the inevitable and devoted to the quest for manifest awareness.





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