

ART REVIEW: Sagg Main in Dramatic Verve by Robert Dash

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by Janet Goleas

The list of old wives' and husbands' tales go on and on and prove nothing more than that there will be weather. And plenty of it.—Robert Dash, Notes from Madoo

“Robert Dash: Theme and Variations” offers a glimpse into the serial imagery of the late painter, gardener and writer Robert Dash. Unique in his vision, Dash created paintings, drawings and prints that were unconfined by the ordinary but gleaned from the everyday.

At the Parrish through April 26, 2015, two bodies of work focus variously on Sagg Main Street, a roadway that cuts through the historic community of Sagaponack, the artist’s home for some 47 years. There he presided over Madoo Conservancy, a horticultural masterwork he created. Its two acres of luscious botanicals, historic outbuildings, romantic vignettes and stream-of-consciousness plantsmanship has made it something of an organic Shangri-la, renowned worldwide among garden enthusiasts and historians. Madoo is possessed of Dash’s creative spirit, offering a reflection on ingenuity, intuition and indefatigability, as if wedded to a fairy god.

His paintings, on the other hand, often reflect the quotidian. Like the work of his friend, the artist and art critic Fairfield Porter, and the New York School poets with whom he maintained lifelong friendships, Dash’s subjects were drawn from everyday life. Close to his home, from almost any vantage point the view is vast and spectacular, but Dash painted as if his imagery was pressed up against a window.

Frontal and expressive, in the arc of his development as a painter, he moved between naturalism and realism and from painterliness to draftsmanship. He worked from memory, photographs and observation to absorb the neighborhood imagery that surrounded him. Street signs, bicycles and telephone poles were intermingled with long stretches of farmland, sky and the cedars, berry bushes and grasses that form the landscape.

His palette moved from rich greens and earth tones flecked with lavender, citron and pink to milky grays and browns; his pictorial structure ricocheted from the obliquely angular to endless horizon lines.

The exhibition begins in the museum’s central spine gallery, where Dash’s *Sagg Main* series examines the rudiments of Sagg Main Street with dramatic verve. Inspired by a 1972 lithograph by the artist, (represented by the first print in the installation), in six consecutive works he

deconstructed the imagery, applying gesso and oil to the prints in varying motifs.

Graphic and expository, here Dash moves between vehemence and restraint as he lays open the anatomy of the Main Street image, transforming it with brushy color blocks and vivid mark-making. As the series moves from left to right, the narrative mutates from flatness to depth, its derivations bouncing to near total abstraction.



Lithographs by Robert Dash installed in the Spine Gallery at the Parrish Art Museum as part of "Robert Dash: Theme and Variation". Courtesy Parrish Art Museum.

Likewise, in the large scale paintings in the adjacent gallery, Dash explores a multitude of Sagg Main variants. In these late works (they are all from 2007) the artist is scrutinizing, reflexive and emphatic, challenging our perception of the Sagaponack landscape. He worked in series, often surrounded in his studio by three walls of blank canvas or paper hanging cheek by jowl; a table with paints set squarely in the center. In this way he worked in the round, moving from square to square, each painting or drawing fueled by its neighbor.

Of the 11 paintings on view, each is a rectangle within a rectangle, with the picture floating well inside the margins of the canvas. While they shift in tone and temperament, each painting offers an aspect of the countryside that extols its vastness and big skies, with dramatic angles that echo the forced perspective at Madoo, as it exists along a 120-foot brick path designed by Dash that culminates in a reflecting mirror.



“Sagg Main (#3)” by Robert Dash, 2007. Oil and charcoal on linen, 70 x 60 inches. Collection of The Madoo Conservancy. Courtesy Parrish Art Museum.

The artist, as eloquent as he was creative, did not spend much time comparing gardening to painting. He might say that working “blunder by blunder” tied the two modalities together or that each relied on “wristy” actions, both pursuits benefiting from a loose wrist.

The painting *Sagg Main (#4)* is cool and subdued, with tones of cement gray and mauve that commingle among thick black outlines. Likewise, in *Sagg Main (#11)*, tense black and gray contours circumscribe the picture elements while bleached yellow and beige brushwork form the interior space. Breaking up the image field, Dash introduces yellow striations in brief, all-over, vertical marks that feel like falling rain.



“Sagg Main (#4)” by Robert Dash, 2007. Oil on linen, 70 x 60 inches. Collection of The Madoo Conservancy. Courtesy Parrish Art Museum.

It’s easy to imagine Dash bustling from painting to painting here, addressing various elements with a poetic sense that ranges from detached observation to aesthetic pandemonium. He pulls out all the stops in *Sagg Main (#7)*, pinching the image field until its sides invert, as if sucking in its last breath.

A mixture of browns, black, ochre and gray, the painting is apocalyptic, sporting a large gray sun that bears down on the burnt landscape. Here, cloud forms shoot across the sky like torpedoes, slicing diagonals into the picture field. Across the gallery, *Sagg Main (#6)* employs similar elements to very different effect. Graphic—even cartoony—the native imagery pops across the canvas like the single frame of a comic strip.



"Sagg Main (#7)" by Robert Dash, 2007. Oil and charcoal on linen, 70 x 60 inches. Collection of The Madoo Conservancy. Courtesy Parrish Art Museum.



“Sagg Main (#6)” by Robert Dash, 2007. Oil and charcoal on linen, 70 x 60 inches. Collection of The Madoo Conservancy. Courtesy Parrish Art Museum.

It's both instructive and wonderful that an early Dash hangs nearby, in one of the permanent collection galleries. *Evening Blow*, 1972, offers a stunning view of the small homes and relative wilderness that used to line the streets of Sagaponack. Reeds and switchgrass dominate the foreground while pale saltboxes dot the horizon.

The painterly brushwork offers an interesting point-counterpoint to Dash's later works. In *Evening Blow*, he employs the flatness of the brush to block in solid masses of color that rest side by side as they form into imagery. Conversely, in the *Sagg Main* series of canvas paintings, Dash marks the surface—almost writing on the canvas—with the point of the brush. The two actions are distinct and distinctly different, with results that form the basis of his oeuvre, one in which graphic dexterity meets the richness of painterly nuance.



“Evening Blow” by Robert Dash, 1972. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 108 inches. Courtesy Parrish Art Museum.

BASIC FACTS: “Parrish Perspectives—Robert Dash: Theme and Variations” is on view through April 26, 2015 at the Parrish Art Museum, 279 Montauk Highway, Water Mill, NY 11976. www.parrishart.org.

A panel exploring the writings, paintings and garden philosophy of Robert Dash will be held on April 11 at 11 a.m. Panelists include Parrish curator Alicia Longwell, poet Douglas Chase, Guggenheim Curator Alexandra Munroe, and New York Times garden writer Anne Raver.

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