



ART REVIEW: Beautiful Serendipity in Diana Horowitz Plein Air Paintings

May 26, 2016

by Peter Malone

Seventeen canvases by Diana Horowitz, each measuring no more than 5" x 7", hang in a continuous line along the walls of the cozy smaller room at Lori Bookstein Gallery in Chelsea. The "Italian Landscapes" exhibition on view through June 4, 2016 is a series of *plein air* studies Horowitz made last year at [Lake Como](#), a scenic spot about 80km north of Milan that has been popular with painters for centuries.

These little pictures are more than charming in their own right; they present a lesson in the demanding realities of one of painting's more difficult methods. Everything about these works reflects the artist's dedication to a process, the complexity of which is easily underappreciated.



"Diana Horowitz: Italian Landscapes" at Lori Bookstein Gallery. Image courtesy of the artist and Lori Bookstein Fine Art, New York.

Close inspection of their palm-of-the-hand dimensions yields an intimate and carefully observed series of views. At the same time, a narrative of sorts unfolds, following the artist's daily circumambulation of the lake's eccentric shoreline. Each small rectangle makes an episodic advance toward the vast space Horowitz re-creates in the viewer's mind and also serves to track the artist's movement from one vantage point to the next.

Though a few panels recall the luminist glow [Sanford Gifford](#) was drawn to at this very location more than a century ago, as a series they touch upon a feeling for the experience of landscape not unlike that expressed in the photographs of walking trails and other *plein air* subjects by [Richard Long](#).

One of the many appealing qualities the series demonstrates is a resistance to that aspect of categorizing that can demote *plein air* painting from a method to a style. Most gallery visitors, especially those partial to representational painting, have a basic sense of what *plein air* signifies. But what expectations arise from the phrase itself?

Categorization, though useful, can oversimplify a viewer's expectations. And yet in this instance, the fact of their *plein air* source is crucial to grasping the essence of the work. It's the expectations

triggered by the category that can cloud one's appreciation. [Rackstraw Downes](#) and [Ying Li](#) are *plein air* painters, but aside from their sharing the category, their work is as dissimilar in method and sensibility as two painters can get.

Plein air is not a term coined exclusively for art. Commonly used in French to reference outdoor events for which the outdoor aspect is worthy of mention, it is as useful a descriptor for a picnic as it is for a painting session. This is important to keep in mind, because *plein air* in reference to painting notes a chain of conditions, events and tasks engaged by the painter—walking, looking, waiting, walking further, watching the sky, assessing the day's potential—all of which take place before a brush touches canvas. It is an elaborate process with many variables, any one of which can have a significant effect on the finished work.

The Horowitz paintings at Bookstein are especially successful in how they reveal the artist triumphing over less than optimum weather conditions. When committed to painting outdoors, the simple choice of a trip to a specific site must be seen through. Regardless of the artist's plans, though, nature will do what it pleases. Reading left to right, the first three canvases in the show set a tone of contingency and adaptation that remains consistent throughout the rest of the exhibition. [Winter Fog from Mennagio](#) (2015) is the view of a steep elevation that ends at the water's edge in a near sixty degree angle. The picture's cropped view stops short of the mountain's summit; an omission that only adds to the feeling of mass Horowitz conjures deftly from a palette of fragile tints.

The scale of the mountains surrounding the lake is one of the ways Horowitz controlled compositional structure. *Acquaseria* (2015) is one of several pictures in the show that favor a very low horizon line, emphasizing the height of the mountains as they rise above the lake surface. Filling most of the composition with the pale blue shades that make up the mountainside allows delicate contrasts to enunciate the areas of the hillside receiving sunlight filtered through the general mist.



"Acquaseria" by Diana Horowitz, 2015. Oil on panel, 5 x 7 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Lori Bookstein Fine Art, New York.

Varenna, Morning Light (2015), like all the paintings in the series directing the viewer's gaze toward the opposite shore, overcomes its pronounced flatness by a series of diagonals accentuated with a cropping of the ridgeline, revealing a foggy pinkish sky above



"Varenna, Morning Light" by Diana Horowitz, 2015. Oil on panel, 6 x 6

inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Lori Bookstein Fine Art, New York.

Luck is an inescapable feature of *plein air* painting, particularly regarding weather. It's fair to assume a trip planned to a region boasting mountains rising over the still water of an alpine lake was chosen for properties other than fog and haze. Yet it is precisely the artist's interplay with implied mass and a soft uncooperative atmosphere that allows each canvas to realize its unique appeal. The series as a whole works because the artist managed to pull a number of slim yet effective formal variants from the limited range of possibilities offered her by chance.

Varennna from Above (2015) comes closer to a traditional landscape view than many in the series, but is still somewhat flattened by the soft atmosphere. Finding visual anchors capable of providing structure for the gradual stages expected of images reliant on aerial perspective was apparently a challenge, especially when working from a position on the side of a hill overlooking a church steeple in the foreground.



"Varennna From Above" by Diana Horowitz, 2015. Oil on canvasboard, 7 x 5 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Lori Bookstein Fine Art, New York.

Horowitz solves the problem by first distilling the shapes in the foreground to little more than blocks of diluted color. Architectural elements are left barely distinguishable from what appear to be cypress trees. The pale blue of the lake surface then shines forth, while the mountain face behind it is painted a slightly darker violet. The subtle contrast of warm and cool are exploited to great effect.

And then there is *Como Church, Gray Day* (2015), the grouping's oddly conventional painting, apparently the result of an unusually crisp afternoon that allowed at least one composition of classically receding planes. Considering how the series holds together precisely because it is wrought so beautifully from unfavorable conditions, the inclusion of this piece in the exhibition might at first seem a bit jarring, though its virtues are undeniable.



"Como Church, Gray Day" by Diana Horowitz, 2015. Oil on canvas, 5 x 7 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Lori Bookstein Fine Art, New York.

With its cool, glassy-gray light, it's reminiscent of [Vermeer's View of Delft](#) (1662). In the context of the series taken as a whole, its unambiguous clarity is like a composer suddenly shifted to a different key. In the context of *plein air* painting, it represents just the sort of unexpected event Horowitz must have committed to when purchasing her airline tickets.

BASIC FACTS: "Diana Horowitz: Italian Landscapes" is on view April 28 through June 4, 2016, at Lori Bookstein Gallery, 138 Tenth Avenue, New York, NY 10011. www.loribooksteinfineart.com.

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