



# ART REVIEW: Elliott Green Paintings Marry Landscapes to Dramatic Abstraction

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by Peter Malone

“Human Nature,” an [exhibition](#) of a dozen canvases by [Elliott Green](#) exhibited at [Pierogi](#)’s new Lower East Side space, epitomizes a crucial aspect of this present moment in painting, a moment that may be felt as a tremor caused by the representational plate grinding against its abstract counterpart.

As the allure of merging intensifies among a growing number of painters, so does the anxiety that was once held in check by dogmatic theories that maintained a stable fault line. As painters today attempt reconciliation, they often and perhaps unavoidably cling to the more comfortable side. With the ground quaking below, they maintain a steady foothold by favoring one side or the other of the divide.

What’s unique about Elliott Green is how he strides confidently right over the rumbling fracture. Brandishing all manner of surface gymnastics, he takes the staid genre of landscape painting and puts it through a gantlet of techniques right out of [David Reed](#)’s ruthlessly abstract lexicon. His mashing of a universally understood genre with boldly artificial surface gesture vibrates with an unsettling blend of grandeur and kitsch, with results that are as strange as they are discomforting.



Elliott Green’s “Human Nature” at Pierogi Gallery, February 2017. Courtesy of the gallery.

And yet there is something genuinely exhilarating about these works, especially the fearlessness from which they seem to have sprung.

Each picture is a coherent whole, constructed of individual color applications of a dizzying textural variety. Individually conceived areas hold to the method of their creation. Patches of color remain fixed within the mark made where the edge of a spatula defined the starting point. Color is sometimes dragged across previously delineated areas, often thinning and blending into pentimenti below.

Multiple overlapping and abutment is accentuated by edges that vary from delicate staining to abrupt impasto. There is little fussing or adjusting beyond the addition of more applications, more secondary viewpoints, more textures. The effect is cumulative and unified, though each vignette of painting activity is distinct, as if it were a picture unto itself.



“Psychoid Moraine” by Elliott Green, 2016. Oil on linen, 18 x 24 inches. Courtesy of Pierogi Gallery.

Green’s vistas are clearly imaginative. Like the romantic creations of [Dozier Bell](#) and [Tula Telfair](#), his landscapes are conjured behind the eyes. Where he differs from these traditional paint handlers is in his brash and near mechanical applications. Optically seductive regions are woven carefully into an overall composition, leaving a collage-like surface that coheres with surprising success. Trowel and squeegee dominate, though areas show signs of brush, rag, and any number of other techniques.

What makes it all work is that Green shares with all good landscape painters an intuitive feeling for the subject. This is where I believe the paintings earn their greatest appeal. For all his self-conscious styling, the artist does not mock his forebears or beg for ironic distance from his subject. Guided by a personal and distinctly unembarrassed muse, Green proves one can commit to the requirements of a traditional genre and still practice a highly subjective, surface-oriented painting method that does not deteriorate into parody.

Facing the entrance, the title piece, *Human Nature*, an approximately 7- by 8-foot canvas, sits perfectly proportioned to the free-standing wall on which it hangs. Comprised of blues, intense primaries and a few elements of earthy greens, the topography here appears, like many in the show, to be in geological flux. A volcanic glow of yellow and red defines the left side, while drizzles of blue mist fall gently from the sky in the upper right. Horizon lines appear at several levels as if depicting mountain lakes, sitting high above a roiling sea (or are they mountains?) that dominates the lower half of the canvas.



“Human Nature” by Elliott Green, 2017. Oil on linen, 82.5 x 97.5 inches. Courtesy of Pierogi Gallery.

The effect can be as garish as [Frank Stella’s \*Salto nel Mio Sacco\*](#), the large piece in the lobby of 599 Lexington Avenue, or as beguiling as [Joachim Patinir’s \*Penitence of St. Jerome\*](#) in the Metropolitan

Museum of Art, with its all-encompassing rivers, mountains and stormy heavens. In other words, Green's vision appears both chaotic and ordered, a suitable dichotomy considering the paintings' primordial tone.

His range of spatial description is uninhibited by concerns for precedent. His interest in reducing a terrain to elemental shapes echoes [Rockwell Kent](#), [Lawren Harris](#) and [Georgia O'Keeffe](#), while his painterly tendencies are as freewheeling as [Willem de Kooning](#)'s whiplash line. Sweeping linear brushstrokes break up the congestion in *Fire Drip*. The watery set-asides created by these brushed edges provide the viewer optical respite from the manic textures that make up the better part of the picture.



"Fire Drip" by Elliott Green, 2016. Oil on linen, 76 x 54 inches. Courtesy of Pierogi Gallery.

One such linear stroke in the lower right corner suggests a causeway over a body of water leading out of the frame, reminding me of a comment de Kooning once made in reference to the compression of his compositions. To paraphrase, he implied that he liked to leave a way out, an exit somewhere in the picture.

To witness Green's ambition is alone worth the visit. The artist's comfort with gesture and cosmic drama is so much more risky and compelling than the gratuitously offensive or self-consciously careless transgressions that often pass for daring these days. One can only hope Green's demonstration of human nature in the context of painting's longer history becomes contagious.

There is much to be said for Green's willingness to rely on a toolbox of idiosyncratic paint applications, while allowing each to develop to their full pictorial potential. Moreover, the fact that he pays no attention to how these applications may read as superficial ploys and then, through sheer chutzpah, gathers them into complex vistas is remarkable. It will be fascinating to see how these paintings fare among artists in years to come. Having an influence on fellow painters is one of the best measures of success.



"Elevator" by Elliott Green, 2017. Oil on linen, 36 x 80 inches. Courtesy of Pierogi Gallery.

**BASIC FACTS:** “Human Nature,” paintings by Elliott Green, is on view February 18 through March 26, 2017 at the Pierogi Gallery, 155 Suffolk Street, New York, NY 10002. [www.pierogi2000.com](http://www.pierogi2000.com).

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