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HAF fellows

Nicole Wittenberg, Cradle Cove 3

By: Layla Blitzer



Nicole Wittenberg, *Cradle Cove 3*, 2022. Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches (121.9 x 152.4 cm). Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Jason Wyche.

Nicole Wittenberg, a New York-based artist and curator, like so many New Yorkers, journeys out of the City to draw inspiration from nature. Her vibrant paintings often depict the landscapes of Maine; *Cradle Cove 3* is no different. However, this oil on canvas work, painted in 2022, features not only a landscape of a neon pink sky and water with a mass of dark trees, but also a dark figure, hooded or shrouded in shadow.

Nicole Wittenberg's use of a vibrant color palette transitioning from dark to light suggests that the dark figure is resisting a transition to happiness; the figure is framed in light but faces the dark mass of trees rather than the brighter sky. The artist's expression allows for emotional transcendence beyond the reality of the scene.

Wittenberg uses figures and color to represent the emotion she intends the viewer to feel. In the piece, a dark, hooded figure stands in the foreground facing a sky of vibrant, bright pinks and a mass of black trees, both mirrored in the water. The more one looks, the more variation in the pinks becomes evident, with orange and blue undertone creating depth in the sky. The trees are not solid black, with deep browns and reds giving depth and shape to the conifer trees. These varied and striking colors are reflected in the water, which distorts the shapes with its movement. Moreover, Wittenberg uses loose and expressive brushstrokes throughout the piece—especially in the reflections—which is different from the typical, more true-to-life landscape. The focus is the figure in the foreground, one's eye follows the figure's gaze and moves to the mass of black trees which are shrouded in shadow; the bright pinks of the sky pop against the shadowed figure and trees, evoking a vivid sunset at dusk.

This piece evokes feelings of intensity, mystery, and happiness; the artist's goal is to “capture the sensorial emotions of particular moments and experiences in nature—chasing the feeling of being there.”¹ Typical landscape paintings do not necessarily evoke emotion, especially for someone who was not present at the scene, however, Wittenberg uses bold color, loose brushstrokes, and overall composition to trigger the observer's emotions. The landscape is less defined than the figure, who is in

¹ “Nicole Wittenberg - Our Love Is Here to Stay,” Acquavella Galleries, accessed July 26, 2023, <https://www.acquavellagalleries.com/exhibitions/nicole-wittenberg>.

the foreground. But the figure is still hooded and mysterious—why are they there? What do they feel? What do they make me feel? The viewer doesn't necessarily know the answers, but even in asking questions one begins to engage with more than just the image and begins to feel. Wittenberg, likely, would be pleased that the viewer is left pondering more than just the surface image; "I am not interested in the photographic reality of a place," Wittenberg explains.² The scene does not look particularly true to life in either color and form—the colors are too restricted in hue and the brush strokes are quite impressionistic. However, the painting captures a true feeling and evokes more emotion than a photograph would because her "trust" in what she sees allows her to convey the emotion of the moment even if it is not exactly how things looked in reality.³ She elaborates on her goals of capturing not just an image but also a feeling and a memory: "what I find interesting is the translation of a lived experience and sensation into an image so I can return to that moment every time I make and see a painting."⁴ Wittenberg's goal is not to replicate the physical reality of the scene, but rather to recapture the sensorial experience she had when in that space and to recreate that feeling for her audience. This goal is not unique to Wittenberg, nor to the visual arts. Still, her blending of subject, medium, and technique help her achieve this goal in her own unique style.

Cradle Cove 3 is one of Wittenberg's more recent works. In older pieces, she

² Osman Can Yerebakan, "Nicole Wittenberg's Sensual Tree Portraiture Drifts South for Art Basel," *Cultured*, November 23, 2022, <https://www.culturedmag.com/article/2022/11/23/nicole-wittenberg-painting-acquavella-palm-beach>.

³ "Nicole Wittenberg," Ross and Kramer, accessed July 26, 2023, <https://rkgallery.com/artist/nicole-wittenberg>.

⁴ "Nicole Wittenberg," Acquavella Galleries.

explored the human figure and subverted expectations by painting the male figure, rather than the female one, in the nude.⁵ She has also been noted for exploring her own struggles with illness and physical pain in her early work.⁶ The female gaze and female suffering are less frequently depicted in Western cannon. While she appears reticent to discuss how this work informs her landscapes, it is not a stretch to say that her early—and to an extent ongoing—explorations of these topics and the emotions they evoke inform her current work. After all, in all her work, her stated goal is to capture a moment and an emotion, be it desire, pain, or something else entirely. As such, it is not surprising that while we see vibrant, cheerful pinks and oranges, the viewer may still feel melancholy and longing in the moment Wittenberg captures in this painting.

I agree with the artist's decisions, and I do think this landscape evokes much more emotion than the usual landscape, which is consistent with the goal of the artist.

Wittenberg uses her paintings to evoke emotional transcendence; rather than just painting the physical reality, she captures her emotions through the scene. To me, this is the essence of the creative fields; Wittenberg uses color, texture, and figures as visual cues that trigger emotional response out of our subconscious associations. Therefore, the viewer does not need to have been at the scene to experience emotion. Her goal continues to be creating connections with her audience, a goal in which she has succeeded. Hopefully we will see much more of her work in the coming years.

⁵ John H. Richardson, "Men Have Painted Naked Women Forever. What Happens When Women Paint Naked Men?," *ELLE*, March 2, 2017, <https://www.elle.com/culture/art-design/a42837/women-painting-male-anatomy/>.

⁶ Ibid.

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