



In "As the Sun Rises," William Glen Crooks creates a rhythm of light and shadowy territory. Jeff Lancaster photo



Night seems to be moments away in Crooks' "Blue," and sky becomes a towering expanse of subtly shifting colors.

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

WILLIAM GLEN CROOKS SPINS LUMINOUS COLOR FROM NATURAL VISTAS IN 'A VIEW FROM THE ROAD'

By Robert L. Pincus, ART CRITIC

Scenes are still large in the American West. So are the expanses of mountain and valley. But the landscape has changed markedly since the days of painters like Albert Bierstadt and Maurice Braun. There seem to be more suburban tracts than bucolic expanses of land, while the beauty of skies is often blunted by a screen of smog. Yet enough natural grandeur survives to stir artists.

The challenge, for the tradition-minded landscape painter, is to find a way of mirroring the world without looking as if the art is simply rehashing Bierstadt, Braun or anyone else. In a sense, it's process of reinvention, taking from history without looking historical.

William Glen Crooks manages this feat in his exhibition at Scott White Contemporary Art. The exhibition, "A View From the Road," is his first solo effort in San Diego since 2001.

The artist, who lives and works in Imperial Beach, is no radical nostalgist. He is quite comfortable painting an urban

scene, as in "Peacock's Corner" with its close attention to architectural facades and life along the sidewalk.

But Crooks has a strong gift — and affinity — for the meeting of light and natural vista in scenes he captures from the back roads of Southern California, Utah, Texas and elsewhere. The lumi-

nous look of his paintings isn't overtly spiritual, but it does give them a transcendental glow that would have made such 19th-century greats as poet Walt Whitman or painter Martin Johnson Heade smile approvingly.

In "The Crossing," Crooks' largest canvas to date (90 inches across and 72 inches high), the glow of the road lures your eye first. You travel, imaginatively speaking, into the painting along its route. But the road gently curves out of sight and the eye moves forward instead, across the slowly elevating landscape until it reaches the sky.

The terrain of clouds alone in "The Crossing" could suffice as a painting onto itself. There are softly rounded ones, which appear to float on a thin plane of blue. They hover just above the higher elevation of land. Moving still higher in the sky, a cliff of clouds stretches to the top of the canvas and it becomes a pure field of color — a range of blues fanning out to

a spectrum of oranges, yellows and whites.

The artist, in the accompanying exhibition catalog, speaks of "drawing with color." He also comments, in conversation, about the absolute centrality of color to his work. One artist he admires in this regard is Mark Rothko, for his "great verses in color."

This isn't mere rhetoric. Crooks has long paid close attention to the relationship of one color to another and the subtle changes that an artist can employ with one hue alone. But in the new work, he has brought his abilities as a colorist to a higher level.

The scene in "The Crossing" is so seamless that it's easy to miss the subtlety of its shifts from yellow to orange or blue to violet. They are, however, part of what makes the composition succeed.

"Andrew J" depicts a conventional subject, a tugboat, and one that has been degraded by Sunday painters. But Crooks



The road pulls a viewer into "The Crossing," Crooks' largest painting, while the distant clouds lure one further into the picture.

gives it new life through the intersection of light and color. There's a rich red along the boat's side, further enriched by intricate shadows. Brilliant yellow circles form an irregular pattern along the tops of the posts on the ship's deck and the whites in the image seem to glow.

Blue is central to these recent paintings. One selection is named for it and "Blue" is thick with atmosphere. The gradations of the color that stretch across the cloud-filled sky hover above a horizon line that erupts into yellow along its left edge. Land is dark with the outline of sparse shrubbery arising from it. Night is moments away.

The picture offers a subtle tribute to Rothko, reminding us that too much attention is paid to the line between abstract and representational art. Compelling painting is compelling painting. It's what the individual artist makes of any approach that matters.

"As the Sun Rises," also large scale, is

a kind of counterpart to "Blue," with its light of dawn and emphasis on a pale palette. The eye is drawn to the center of the picture, with its warm, organic yellows and oranges. There are high mountains above (in blue) and roadside buildings below (one is done in an intense white).

Crooks' best paintings in this exhibition are the large ones, but smaller ones offer their own pleasures. "Descanso" embodies late afternoon evocatively, with its play of yellow across the middle of an angled landscape—a strip of brilliant light in a scene dominated by shadowy trees and punctuated by a lone building.

Though the title locates the painting to San Diego County and is dated to this year, the scene itself seems removed from the present day. Even the truck, a small sight, is aged. Is there a nostalgic appeal to this painting? Without a doubt. Is there something more? Absolutely.

The United States, with its agrarian

roots, has had a strong bond with landscape art going back to its early years. Though the country is long removed from an emphasis on farm life and culture, a bond with the land has remained strong, perhaps surprisingly so, in American art.

One expression of this connection is earthworks—large-scale art in remote landscapes—by the likes of Robert Smithson. He is currently the subject of a retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

Smithson died in 1973, but James Turrell is carrying on this concept with his Roden Crater project in Arizona, an epic example in progress. Another major manifestation of this bond is the continuing vitality of landscape painting, of which Crooks is an eloquent representative.

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DATEBOOK

"A View From a Road," paintings by William Glen Crooks

Through Nov. 6

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