

CHARLES BAUGHMAN, Splatterscapes

Charles Baughman is nervous energy personified in life and on canvas. He is a painter, sculptor, teacher, businessman, parent, creator of an educational complex called the Art Park where he engages students of all ages in the methods and thinking of art-making. In conversation Baughman gestures with his entire body as if words are not enough for understanding. This same manic level of creative energy distinguishes his artistic production.

Baughman's current body of work, a series of large-scale landscape paintings (splatterscapes) depicting the mountain-plains region of the American Midwest speak boldly to the viewer. Walk toward one of these images and it jumps right out at one, suddenly, spontaneously, like an instant close-up view on a digital camera when the specific identity of objects dissolves into pure, bright color, and succulent textures of uneven ridges, furrows, and threads

Baughman subscribes to the Emersonian reverence for the sacred in nature and follows our nation's oldest aesthetic tradition of seeking the sublime in the American landscape. Like the painters of the Hudson River School or the Taos School his art pays tribute to the inspiration of a distinctive region. He grew up on the plains of Nebraska and Kansas, in the geologic shadow of the Rocky Mountains, a landscape that encompasses vast open lands ranging in character from the Zen voids of the high deserts in eastern Colorado and Wyoming to the lush low horizons of seemingly endless prairies in the eastern Kansas Flint Hills. These lands are his subjects and his aesthetic *terre firma*.

Baughman evolved his mature style in a journey from a carefully rendered transcription of observed details to a joyful immersion in practices adapted from action painting. He lays his canvas on the studio floor. Bending or squatting down, he moves around the edges, constantly marking. Baughman uses a paint-dipped stick, his hands, or a random tool to drip, pour, splatter and push the paint around. Thus, the making of the painting, instead of being a *sitting*, becomes a *dance*. The resultant images of fall grasses or aspen trees shimmering in the breeze are not portraits but the resonance of experience. Baughman's canvases

explode in color fireworks, spiraling, layered filaments, surging skies and lakes of dynamic energy.

At first glance, Baughman's depiction of cherry blossoms, *Blooming Branches* (mixed media, 24 ½" h. x 4'), evokes a kind of dizziness as if one had removed her glasses. Some of this visual agitation derives from the fact that the object is a cropped portion of one branch, which seems to hover and shimmer in a luminous field of blue and white. One might step back from the canvas, as if to try to focus the scene, but even at a distance no fixed outline emerges to condense the buzz of small touches and flecks of colors in pink, mauve, fuchsia, blood red, violet, and peach, into a stable form. All is movement. It is as if a congress of insects had coalesced into dense, vibrating ranks. The eye's reward here is not "flowers," but a sense of elation.

Given his use of formal techniques that originated in 19th-century French Impressionism, it is surprising to discover that Baughman's imagery does not say "light and airy" to the viewer. Instead, there is a feeling of weight and substance to each image whether it is a complete scene or a fragment of a natural object such as the cherry blossoms. The materiality of Baughman's images derives from the viscosity and opacity of his paint and from the evidence of his forceful manipulation of his media. The latter includes commercial paints as well as art paints. The artist's unique marriage of the blurred forms of objects and the blunt physicality of paint justifies Baughman's naming of his style *Splatterscapes*.

Baughman's most conventionally formatted landscape in this group of works is the large-scale painting, *Sunflower State of Mind*, (mixed media, 6' x 6'), which is divided into three horizontal sections of foreground sunflowers and grasses, middle line of trees and hills, and high zone of sky. The front three to five rows of large brown seed heads ringed by yellow halos clearly identify as sunflowers. Yet even these distinct forms are overlaid with thick, violently swirled threads of enamel. The retreating field of blossoms quickly dissolves into a convulsed density of multi-colored dots, threads, splashes, and flows of paint.

Baughman shaped the hills beyond the flowers with his hands, pulling rows of soil and grass into being by combing the paint with his fingers. The colors go in atmospheric progression from yellows and green in the foremost hill to blues and purples in the most distant hill. However, the sky pops forward of that orthodox

shading in a flow of bright cerulean blue. Into this field of blue the artist poured thick skeins of opaque white, letting it spread and then feather out like bloated clouds constantly being squeezed by surrounding forces.

A closely related painting, *Thunderstorm Over Goldenrod*, (multi-media, 5' H. x 6' W.), presents a similar tri-part format of large foreground field of flowers, middle ground line of trees and hills rising against a third broad zone of clouds and sky. However, in this work, the individuality of plants and trees, the whole idea of edges, has dissolved into a welter of color resembling the tracings of electronic currents gone crazy on a neon-lit chart.

Baughman continues to distinguish the sky from the land by moving from multi-colored foreground to a predominantly blue top zone, and by changing his technique of paint application. Instead of using his hand or a tool to fling or stroke paint on the surface designated as sky, he just pours it directly from the can onto the canvas, layering the one color into another, allowing each to move and flow autonomously. In the image, *Thunderstorm*, purple "lightening" spreads out into blue "sky" like oddly-fingered hands grasping for space, while thin lines of white paint spark out like veins moving through a flesh of blue.

Baughman explains that he prefers to work rapidly and messily, incorporating accidents as well as automatic marks and spontaneous gestures into the image to eschew all trace of planning, mechanical refinement or rules. He emphasizes directness, intensity, and immersion in the experience of painting as well as in the sensations of nature. The painting, in its means as well as its subjects, proclaims the artist's bond with the pulse and breath of nature.

Charles Baughman has chosen not to frame his work to emphasize the idea that the life expressed on the canvas is not bound by edges but expands into the surrounding world. He also prefers to sign a side of the stretcher rather than the front of the painting to separate the image from conventional markings related to commerce and ego. Baughman does, however, insert a personal, symbolic token into each painting. Somewhere in each painting, usually near a lower corner, a heart-shaped pebble protrudes amid the printed surface as evidence of the artist's inspiration from planet earth.

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