

DELUVIAN IMAGES

This past Wednesday, an April day of record-breaking temperatures in New England, I walked down the length of Kenrick Street, quietly crossing from Brighton to Newton in a matter of a few steps. I was heading to the Kantar Fine Arts Gallery to see Sloat Shaw's artwork for the first time. The air was heavy with humidity and clung to me as I walked, and the birds were chirping in the ominous way they sometimes do just before a storm. I thought of a line from a Roethke poem I had once memorized: "Great Nature has another thing to do / To you and me, so take the lively air" and felt certain of its prophecy, for better or worse.

A short while later, I arrived at the gallery, just as Nature decided to demonstrate her force, raising violent winds from stillness and sending the temperature plummeting — a good twenty five degrees—within minutes.

In retrospect, it was the perfect kind of day for an encounter with Sloat Shaw's paintings and iris prints, since they have so much to say about transformation, the human condition, and the awe-inspiring qualities of nature. When I first entered the small white space of the Kantar gallery, I was overwhelmed by the dramatic landscapes of Shaw's "Flood Series": great chasms, and strange desert frontiers, bathed in light and sometimes shrouded in mist. Her paintings are at once foreboding and uplifting, managing to unite the decay of massive landforms with a suggestion of regeneration, healing and regrowth.

"After the flood: Day 7," for example is a large painting that presents the viewer with a massive gaping wound in the green earth from which fire, smoke, mist and light rise and swirl. The canvas has been vertically cut and hand-sewn in places, as if enacting the cycle of destruction and healing that dominates the natural world. There are clearly many thin layers of paint on this canvas (40 or more), which give its surface a somewhat iridescent shimmer and form a skin-like covering over the scars. What's more, the layering process effectively transforms the abyss, depending on the viewer's angle of approach, into a lake surface not unlike those in Monet's water lilies series, reflecting light like a mirror.

On the calm and pale green left bank of the gorge appear several sticks of varying sizes. Oddly enough, Shaw divulged that she began to add the sticks to her paintings after she was inspired by views she had seen on the side of route 3A in Quincy. During the colder months, she built "miniature landscapes out of rock and clay with remnants of human presence (sticks, old bridge supports) anchored into the earth."

Shaw eventually abandoned the models for the



Sloat Shaw's "At flood time Day 2."

reservoir of images in her own mind, but the evidence of human presence (sticks, steps and vague villages in decay) remained. This becomes less surprising when we learn that Shaw was on track for a doctorate in anthropology, studying with Margaret Mead at Barnard College, before she veered off course to become a student of art at the Museum School. In a way, the sticks in Shaw's landscapes almost become human figures, acting as placeholders for humanity as they stand on the brink of the earth's shifting plates.

Though the paintings and prints in the "Flood Series" range in size, they all seemed big to me. Perhaps this has to do with the way Shaw fills the frame of her paintings, capturing in each work one fragmentary, still moment of an otherwise vast and tempestuous world. Bearing titles such as "After the flood: Day 30," and "At the time of the flood: 33rd Day," they are clearly connected to a western archetypal memory of the origins of our planet. Yet, Shaw's images tend to evoke more pagan sentiments, similar to those described by the Romantic poets as they viewed various dramatic scenes in Nature.

In his long poem "Mont Blanc," for example, Shelley fervently addresses the spectacular mountain as though it were alive: "Dizzy Ravine!" he exclaims, "when I gaze on thee / I seem as in a trance sublime and strange / To muse on my own separate phantasy." Shaw's dramatic landscapes share this ability to mesmerize the viewer, and because they are as mercur-

rial as our moods, they also encourage connections on a highly personal level.

I found that while I was attracted to the gothic decadence of Shaw's images in general, I was particularly captivated by one specific image. This was an iris print of a painting that was not displayed in the gallery, titled "After the flood: Day 31." In "Day 31" a narrow strip of land stretches from the left foreground of the image to an expanse of solid ground in the distance. On either side of the natural bridge are sharp drops into the unknown. The sky in the background is painted in shades of luminescent salmon and pale peach, and there is a suggestion of a sunny orb to the right of the walkway. In this painting, the mists have lifted and the floodwaters appear to have receded.

Two tall sticks in the foreground of the path form a sort of gateway to the other side, while a cluster of three shorter sticks stand facing the new continent. "Day 31" admits fear but also offers hope for what the future may bring. Like many of Shaw's works in the "Flood Series," this image advocates forward motion and exploration, gently reminding its viewer that the only way out of the abyss is through it. aM



Sloat Shaw's "After the flood Day 6."