John D. McClanahan
The Velasco Paintings

August 22 - September 24, 2017
INEFFABLE CLARITY: THE LANDSCAPES OF JOHN D. McCLANAHAN

Landscape: a concept in art (particularly Western art) that is at once obvious, familiar, and ubiquitous. It is inherently grounded and potentially grounding, yet laden with myriad assumptions, possibilities, and interpretations. The simple act of a horizontal line, dividing a picture plane into that which is above and what is below, conjures a host of both conscious and subliminal responses. Landscape, cityscape, seascape, mindscape: no matter how abstract, the inescapable physical reality of “horizon” as the meeting of earth and sky, air and water, known and unknown - all at the far reaches of our vision - places us and we, somehow, know where we are. John McClanahan knows this, and invites us into his personal memories of place and time; of color, shape and texture; of specific locations and natural phenomena rendered both palpable and ineffable.

The complexity imbedded in these “simple” works is part of their appeal, and it reveals a lot about the quiet, gentle, keenly observant soul responsible for their creation. These modestly scaled works draw you in with subtlety and grace, with an elegant frankness in their execution, with a generous spirit and the sheer unobtrusive conviction of their being. Clearly rooted in a body of work that reaches back to the 1960s, the works in this exhibition are the result of a pleasantly intense flurry of creative activity over the past couple of years. They are

Flint Hills #67
Watercolor, gouache, and paper on paper
2015

Cover: Outcrop
Watercolor, gouache, charcoal, and paper on paper
2016
fresh and unfettered, stylized mental snapshots of what McClanahan sees and feels and remembers of specific places, times, or spatial configurations. Bold forms and rich colors are juxtaposed with delicate washes and quickly sketched lines, emphasized with an intense shot of cerulean or cadmium red, or diffused with rich, round, soft colors that look good enough to eat: they enthrall and distract you momentarily from the overall scene, only to bring you back to the image through superb handling of composition, surface, and the effects of landscape itself on our psyche.

McClanahan’s works are rooted in his own memories and the sensations they evoke, but he calls on ours, too, as we wade through the cool water of his rocky creeks, or look out over vast rolling fields, or get caught in the thrall of formal abstractions such as Flint Hills #67 or Between Here and There. In the magnificent Konza Prairie series, we feel as much as we see of the imminent approach of storms building on the great Midwestern plain. The crackle in the air is as palpable as the smell of the coming rain, the wind on our face, and the rumble in the distance, all excitement and foreboding and awe.
McClanahan says that for the first 10 of his nearly 60 years as an artist, he painted exclusively on-site, responding to the specificity of place and context. In the late 1970s, he began taking photos and making sketches for later use. Some of the current works, he says, go back to these original “notes” but most, now, are from memory: of his grandfather’s farm in southwestern Missouri, where he spent his childhood summers; of his time in Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas; or the place he feels most at home, the Konza Prairie of his native Kansas, where he says he is most aware “of the pulse of the earth beneath my feet.” Each of these locations holds a memory, some unique pride of place, a peculiar set of aesthetic and emotional responses that exist both in memory and the immediate present.

The paintings reflect these specific memories of time, place, atmosphere, color, and sensation – both the actual memory and McClanahan’s later responses to it. Each memory is filtered through the lens of hindsight and experience, and marked by shifts in McClanahan’s aesthetic concerns, as well as his very personal relationship to the whole process. He typically starts by sketching-in what he calls the “bones” of a given idea, a compositional scheme based on a specific place. Then pure painting kicks in, and the process develops a balanced, back-and-forth rhythm: memory dictates composition and form, triggering more memories and emotions, colors and details are intuitively filled in, then dealt with formally until he feels the work is finished.

This intense focus on formal coherence is key. McClanahan’s unapologetic use of traditional water-based media (primarily watercolor and gouache, with flourishes of charcoal) and his insistent return to the landscape could be seen as nostalgia, were it not for the obvious exuberance, intensity, and free-flowing energy packed into
these powerfully rendered acts of an assured hand and a clear mind. He doesn’t question his memories or their formal execution, he thrives on them and keeps them perpetually engaged. Color is not literal, it is a gloriously intuitive emotional response tempered by strong artistic judgment. Long views vie with vignettes and details of terrain, horizontal formats are challenged and harmonized by vertical, zigzag compositions. The opacity of gouache overlays the transparency and fluidity of watercolor, bold acrylic highlights define both the illusion of reality and the abstract lusciousness of the painting’s surface.

If we accept that the mere presence of a horizontal line can imply a landscape, then distance – physical, temporal, or psychological – plays a key role in defining that horizon. McClanahan plays with scale and immediacy in these works through a deft handling of composition and our intuitive reading of the horizon line. The naturalistic colors in works like *On the Heights* and *Twice in the Same Place* lull us into seeing the brushy, almost calligraphic black lines as a convincing portrayal of natural space, aided and abetted by our perceived position relative to the blank sky/space above. Yet, the peculiar palette of *Elk Creek*...
and the expressionistic color in Hillside don’t hinder our reading of land and sky. Even the blatant abstraction of Hillside Homestead, Landscape with Sky and Plain, or Flint Hills #16 is accommodated in our reading of the space, defined by the relationship of above and below.

In Quarry the illusion is rendered in cut paper and sharp striations, unified by thick washes of brushy color, grounded through the most elemental suggestion of hills and rocks in the foreground and a tiny little strip at the top of clear, searingly blue sky. This one feature brings the rest of the work into representational focus, and we begin to see the abstract formal layers and striations and drips and swirls of paint as that which is between “here” and “there” in the far, far distance, and we believe we can make out buildings and equipment on the rim at the other side. And perhaps we can.

Ultimately, McClanahan is working through his own memories, his own past and present, and his own interests in color and texture and place and time. But he’s willing to invite us along, and to give us some signposts along the way, and to let us find our own paths and pleasures and experiences. He achieves

Top to Bottom:

Hillside, Watercolor, gouache, and charcoal, 2016

Hillside Homestead, Watercolor and gouache, 2016

Landscape With Sky and Plain, Watercolor, gouache, and painter’s tape, 2016

Flint Hills #16, Watercolor, gouache, and charcoal, 2016
this through a simple yet profound sense of who he is, and what he can do with paint. The narrative and the interpretation and the conclusions are entirely up to us. McClanahan’s nuanced but essential vision is summed up in a comment he made while going through some of these works in his studio. He said:

“There are two things I try to incorporate into every painting. One is a beginning, a middle, and an end. The other is a shot of cadmium red light.”

These works are, ultimately, very like the artist who makes them. They are intensely personal but inviting and unfailingly generous. They are fresh and immediate but unrushed. They are the product of a sure but free hand, and they draw us in with both their formal elegance and their tacit clarity. If sense of place is a state of mind, McClanahan’s inner compass is an excellent guide.

Diana Lyn Roberts
June 2017
All events are free and open to the public.

Museum Hours:
10 am - 6 pm Tues. - Fri.
10 am - 4 pm Sat.
1 pm - 4 pm Sun.
Open 45 minutes before performances of Baylor Theatre.
Closed Mondays and University holidays.

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Museum programs are funded in part by the generous support of the Martin Museum Art Angel Endowed Fund, the Sue and Ted Getterman Endowed Fund, and the Virginia Webb Endowed Fund.