

## GREGORY AMENOFF: 2007

Essay by Trevor Winkfield

In recent years, Gregory Amenoff's paintings have taken the form of grandiose tableaux, oversize scenery which would not look amiss if utilized as vast backcloths against which certain of Wagner's more extravagant adventures could be played out. Or at the very least, stand surrogate for Wotan's backyard. Often painted with earthen hues bordering on the glacial, their scale seems closer to architecture than to easel painting ... and yet they are less forbidding than initial glimpses might suggest. In one particularly Romantic scene, Spring flowers hang like painted bunting. Several sport emptied spaces, though none can qualify as vacant lots. They're more akin to those "pregnant doors" we often come across in mystery movies, the kind of looming door which, from one frame to the next assumes a sudden portentous importance: we know for sure someone is about to enter.

In Amenoff's latest work, such ominous spaces have now been repopulated (though not by humans), the compositions tightened, their light given weight. Clouds become objects, not mere vaporization. Amenoff is, above all, a naturalist, and if we ignore that fact we've lost his magnetic north. It was, after all, the rocky escarpments found in his larger tableaux which were responsible for instigating his return to a more abstract shuffling of shapes. Though of course we're still talking about an abstraction firmly rooted in landscape. Abstraction in the sense of extraction, much like Mondrian's method of extricating grids from tree limbs. (Although Amenoff, like so many beneficiaries of Mondrian's temporary schism, now gets the best of both worlds: abstraction and realism seamlessly rolled into one, almost without a thought.) One of the salient features of Amenoff's earlier series of landscapes was his ability to imply, in the midst of a Winter scene, that Spring is encroaching over the horizon. Or again, in the midst of a Summery debacle, the calm closing-in of Autumn. All reminders, in the most literal sense, that a good painting, like a good book, can transport us to another place.

This commingling of seasons, a notion Amenoff filched from Breughel, is particularly characteristic of northern climes, Amenoff's meteorological homeland. Sunny one hour, rainy the next, windy by evening, northern climates can compress all four seasons into one daylight span. Amenoff now makes similar allowances in his recent paintings, where the center and sides of a painting can register different temperatures. Georges Braque, who in his Notebook confessed, "I would rather be in tune with nature than copy it," was also aware that, as a painter, "You must arrive at a certain temperature to render things malleable." Both statements might have been made by Amenoff himself, who, like many contemporary painters, now finds Braque's legacy more potent than Picasso's.

*Point Braque*, painted as a kind of homage to the master, encapsulates Braque's two statements to a T, insofar as its space is at once stolid yet flowing, a type of visual rumba. Amenoff never depicts humans in his landscapes and yet, as here, a rocky prominence can act like one, and assumes such a louring presence that it takes on a life of its own, and lo and behold detaches itself from the seabed and lumbers ashore. With its remarkable ginger coloration (closer to pastry than to geology), this ambling kraken is virtually hewn out of the paint surface, almost as if it were a piece of sculpture (a reminder that Braque, like so many early modernist painters, was also a formidable sculptor). This slab of modern sculpture fronting a landscape also illustrates how Amenoff's paintings repay lengthy scrutiny: though a virtual square, the longer we stare at *Point Braque*'s focal point, the more the square assumes the shape of a tondo, hemmed in above by the yellow arc, and below curtailed by a rocky cartouche, both acting as a collar for the promontory. What initially seemed so stolid and immobile has become fluid, and now leads our eye on a circular tour.

This involvement with the inner mechanisms of organic matter puts Amenoff on a par with that Transcendental poet who, when asked where he stood in relation to nature, replied indignantly, "I am in the thing!" But Amenoff is only in touch with nature; he's not overwhelmed by it. That way madness lies, at least for painters. He's not fool enough to place himself in the nucleus of a storm, but he will open his studio window and catch hailstones in the palm of his hand.

Amenoff is as much excavator as architect. Several of his recent works exude the moist, glistening colors which are revealed when we overturn a garden stone. In many ways he has resuscitated his painterly vocabulary of twenty years ago, that vermiculated surface fathered by lava which went underground when, in the late 1980s, he began using rabbit skin glue and distemper to flatten and calm his picture planes (though not his compositions, which remained eruptive). Whilst not so sparse as the work which resulted from that puritanical renunciation, a painting such as *Arch III* exhibits a similar preoccupation with keeping paint in its place (and not in your face). The surface still has depth as well as breadth, but is now treated (one almost says subjugated) with a variety of gestural paint applications ranging from delicate Impressionist dabbing to full-scale gouging and sculpting with a palette knife.

Amenoff paints improvisationally, without preliminary sketches. It's all concocted in his head, the "it" in this case being America, a very mysterious country indeed, even when devoid of its usual inhabitants. What other country encompasses landscapes as diverse as Death Valley and Walden Pond? This variety of venues within a single land mass finds radiant mapping in Amenoff's recent topography, *Arc*, where America is viewed through Martian eyes. Or those of a very astute native. With a surface more brewed than painted, malleability has reached boiling point via a palette using little more than basic reds, yellows and blues. A roiling synaesthesia results, one in which animal becomes vegetable, and this in turn solidifies into mineral. Nothing is settled, everything heaves. The checkered snail in the foreground could also be a root, and the slate slab it lurks behind is more likely to be a watery inlet. Nocturnal tones co-exist with buttered sunlight ... or are those streaks a loaf of honey lodged in amber?

Perhaps against our better judgement, Amenoff has, in triggering our imaginations, enticed us through a landscape which registers everything simultaneously. As the old Latin tag foretold, *omnia exeunt in mysterium* ... everything dissolves in mystery.