

*To Live with Wild Things: Tom Uttech's Worlds*

By: Robert Cozzolino

Conservationist, writer, and naturalist, Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) begins his meditative and sensual *A Sand County Almanac* with the assertion, “There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot. These essays are the delights and dilemmas of one who cannot.”<sup>1</sup> Leopold’s confession is a passionate declaration of his relationship to the land and its myriad inhabitants. Living and working in Wisconsin, Leopold became in life and after his death an inspiration for collaborative land stewardship and ecology. One of his essential lessons is that we join a community in nature which we can either enhance or harm. Recognizing that we are just one aspect of the natural world requires us to live more respectfully and responsibly.

Tom Uttech’s paintings emerge from the same Wisconsin landscape and philosophical terrain that motivated Leopold. At root, Uttech aims to inspire his viewers to immerse themselves in nature. “Paintings can be a way to show how wonderful things can be,” he says. “Maybe [they] will make people interested in the environment and then grow to love it. That can lead to knowledge and then concern. This work is as useful as a direct criticism of polluters.”<sup>2</sup> That hope and allusion to a pragmatic—even activist—dimension to Uttech’s work connects him to a wide range of artists who make the environment the subject of their work. The world around us is in constant flux, reminding us that ecological changes are rapid and irreversible. Innumerable artists working today have taken this to heart including Alexis Rockman (who envisions a post-human global ruin reclaimed by nature), Diane Burko (who immerses herself in the scientific community in order to understand the effects of global warming on arctic regions) and many others who approach their work in ways alien to Uttech.<sup>3</sup>

Although Uttech shares these concerns, his paintings neither preach nor make climate politics an explicit facet of their content. The result of innumerable hours spent in the woods and boundary waters of northern Minnesota and Wisconsin as well as his “spiritual home” of Quetico Provincial Park in Ontario, Canada, the scenes presented do

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not depict specific vistas recreated from sketches or photographs. Uttech has photographed the dense woods, rushing rivers, creeks and ponds that he knows from experience. Yet his paintings are composed from an imaginative conjuring of the colors, sounds, textures, emotional states, and physical sensations he has internalized of these places. He begins with a blank surface and approaches the foundation drawing with a piece of vine charcoal in his right hand and an old piece of cloth in his left. Gradually, what develops is the mirage of a place that Uttech would like to spend time in—to be part of for a while.<sup>4</sup>

Uttech's process is open to improvisation, and his painting surface gradually acquires an accretion of many layers. Often, the form of an animal or tree is first suggested through the impromptu flick of the brush or particular swell of paint and then sharpened and brought into being. Although they are freely developed, Uttech's paintings eventually come into focus as a tightly interdependent system of relationships. "I attempt to find a magic in the organization that tells a story all by itself," he explains. In conversation, he invokes both Piet Mondrian and Johannes Vermeer as painters whose rigorous designs form the skeleton that supports the life of their compositions. Yet Uttech's work thrives from this underlying structure, concealed beneath the lush evocation of place, as it seems to bear the natural rhythms and cycles of the forests, streams of migrating birds, and filtered light spattered through foliage.

Some of Uttech's large-scale works vibrate from a cacophony of movement that shivers out of the visual realm and prompts a musical response; at least that is the unmistakable presence instilled in me by works such as *Mamakadjidgan* (2012), where the pink-to-peach-to-periwinkle sky sustains a rising chord over which the staccato and vibrato punctuation and trills of bird calls and their rustled wings disregard meter and reinvent polyphony. Slashes of blood orange and pomegranate crystallize as thin trees with their ensembles of feathery leaves and an endless syncopated pattern of flight, trot, and sprint flows from right to left out of the picture and into a marsh beyond the lake. Like the bear poised before this revelatory eruption of life, we are transfixed as waves of sound, color, shape, and wind wash over us.

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In part, Uttech credits the hallucinatory qualities inherent in his vision of the landscape to his life in Wisconsin. There are waking-dream experiences to be had throughout the state in all seasons. A crisp magnifying quality of light; the chance witnessing of hundreds of butterflies alighting along a road, briefly mistaken for falling leaves; rock formations mistaken for large mammals—all of these I have experienced in my time living in and visiting Dane County. Uttech's predecessors and peers, such as Marshall Glasier (1902-1988), John Wilde (1919-2006), Martha Glowacki (born 1950), and Fred Stonehouse (born 1960) have captured the sensorial sharpening, psychologically de-centering, and even spiritually ecstatic aspect of Wisconsin's geography and environment. Uttech's paintings bear an intensity of observation and mystical reverence that would seem in tune with religious iconography. "There is no connection to religion in my paintings," he counters. "Although I'm magnificently aware of something that's beyond what is here. I'm in constant awe of it. I'm trying desperately to reveal what that is in my paintings...When you get into a detailed study of what's in the world, it's magic beyond belief."<sup>5</sup>

The intense physical and psychological sensations that Uttech's compositions provoke are in tune with the effects and aims of earlier American landscape paintings, particularly works by Frederick Edwin Church (1826-1900), which overwhelm with the tangible evocation of place. Church had an eye for extraordinary atmospheric phenomena that might have been doubted by those viewers who had not experienced such things first hand as in his cosmic *Aurora Borealis* (1865; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.). Similarly, Uttech has captured these effects in works such as *Ganawaabandiwiag* (2002-03), which presents feathery magenta and swirling emerald green lights dancing across a night sky. In *Adisokewinini* (2011-12), a lone bear rises up on its hind legs to greet the impossibly bright silver swells of light from the moon. Clouds swirl upward along the right side of the composition, drifting purposefully from the horizon to curl inward at the highest point of the sky. Flowers and fireflies confuse each other with relative glow in the crisp lunar sheen. Nature enacts an ancient rite without warning or explanation.

Moments staged like this might prompt a viewer to question Uttech's fidelity to

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reality. Parallels in the words of earlier writers amplify Uttech's lived experience. Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his extraordinary essay "Nature" (1836) illuminates a sense of merging with one's environment that is at the heart of Uttech's imagery. He wrote,

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel nothing can befall me in life, —no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, —my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, —all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental . . . I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.<sup>6</sup>

Elsewhere Emerson remarks, "every object rightly seen unlocks a new faculty of the soul."<sup>7</sup> Uttech's remarks about being in Quetico, receptive to the life churning and buzzing around him echo Emerson. "[There] I often experience what I call 'peak time,' and I want my paintings to be about the feeling and experience at the moment of perception when every sense is open and magnificent beauty overwhelms."<sup>8</sup> *Ninbimwewe* (2011-12), an extraordinary view of owls and other birds rapidly crossing the vertical vortex of a forest shown lit simultaneously at two or more disparate times of day, appears remarkably close to the embodiment of this "peak time" Uttech invokes.

Leopold knew this time well and he waited patiently for it in the hours before dawn, relishing the exciting build up to the noise of birds and other creatures. One of the most memorable passages of *Sand County* describes this:

At 3:30 a.m., with such dignity as I can muster of a July morning, I step from my cabin door, bearing in either hand my emblems of sovereignty, a coffee pot and notebook. I seat myself on a bench, facing the white wake of the morning star...At 3:35 the nearest field sparrow avows, in a clear tenor chant...One by one all the other field

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sparrows within earshot recite their respective holdings...Before the field sparrows have quite gone the rounds, the robin in the big elm warbles loudly his claim to the crotch where the icestorm tore off a limb...The robin's insistent caroling awakens the oriole, who now tells the world of orioles that the pendant branch of the elm belongs to him, together with all fiber-bearing milkweed stalks near by, all loose strings in the garden, and the exclusive right to flash like a burst of fire from one of these to another...Next the wren—the one who discovered the knothole in the eave of the cabin—explodes into song. Half a dozen other wrens give voice, and now all is bedlam. Grosbeaks, thrashers, yellow warblers, bluebirds, vireos, towhees, cardinals—all are at it. My solemn list of performers, in their order and time of first song, hesitates, wavers, ceases, for my ear can no longer filter out priorities. Besides, the pot is empty and the sun is about to rise.<sup>9</sup>

Uttech's paintings encourage viewers to approach both the world depicted and the world beyond the gallery or city with a new awareness of nature's voice. "A marsh isn't still at all. It's an absolute cacophony of noise and activity. Frogs are croaking, yellow rails are ticking, geese are honking, all under moonlight with fog and stuff," Uttech reminds us.<sup>10</sup> Amid electronic bleeps; car, train, and jet sounds; and countless other intrusions that mask the reverberations of the earth; and like Leopold, Emerson, and Church before him; Uttech demonstrates an engagement with nature that is critical to everyday life. His art is a persuasive plea to value and live with the wild things.

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<sup>1</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (London, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), vii.

<sup>2</sup> Uttech, quoted in Barbara Joosse, "Tom Uttech: Retreat to Reality," *Porcupine* 5, no. 2 (2001), accessed online September 28, 2012: [www.porcupineliteraryarts.com/uttech.html](http://www.porcupineliteraryarts.com/uttech.html). See also Lucy R. Lippard, "Magnetic North," in Margaret Andera, *Magnetic North: The*

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*Landscapes of Tom Uttech* (Milwaukee Art Museum, 2004), 23.

<sup>3</sup> Some recent examples of exhibition projects that specifically address the interrelationship between humanity and nature, climate change and activism. Denise Markonish, ed. *Badlands: New Horizons in Landscape* (North Adams, MA: MASS MOCA, 2008); Joanna Marsh, et al. *Alexis Rockman: A Fable for Tomorrow* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2010); Ian Berry, *Diane Burko: The Politics of Snow* (Philadelphia: Locks Gallery, 2010); Ann M. Wolfe, ed. *Altered Landscapes: Photographs of a Changing Environment* (New York: Skira Rizzoli and Reno: Nevada Museum of Art, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Phone conversation with the artist, September 28, 2012. Unless otherwise noted all quotes from Uttech derive from this source.

<sup>5</sup> Uttech, quoted in Joosse, “Tom Uttech: Retreat to Reality.”

<sup>6</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. William H. Gilman, ed. (New York: Signet Classics, 1965), 193.

<sup>7</sup> Emerson, *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 206.

<sup>8</sup> Uttech, quoted by Tom Garver in exhibition brochure, for *Tom Uttech*, February 1-15, 1995, Schmidt- Bingham Gallery, New York.

<sup>9</sup> Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*, 41-43.

<sup>10</sup> Uttech, quoted in James Auer, “It’s All natural for This Artist,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, March 10, 2002.