

Manufacturing Desire: Sylvain Louis-Seize and the Toxic Sublime

By David J. Fairlie

Sylvain Louis-Seize's medium is his own invention, the product of much experiment. He combines, among other things, solvents, oxidizing agents, tar, in an acrylic base, to create the rich, dark earth of his landscapes. It looks active because it is active, his rusty tones and textures result from the same process as actual rust. As he says, after he applies his paint his pictures 'go on painting themselves'. And he welcomes chance effects of this activity: these stresses at once characterize the medium and constitute the subject, of his paintings.

"I want to explore the concept of industrialization and the environments that co-exist and prosper from it," says Louis-Seize. "I try to bring some understanding to the nature of our self-indulgence on our surroundings. Redemption is the theme with which I approach each painting. Sadness, hope, despair, frustration and happiness are represented in each piece on different levels. I want the work to reveal a sense of optimism that life will prevail under all the destruction."

This young artist – originally from Montreal, but now living in Toronto – has had a series of stunning exhibitions this year in Toronto, Montreal, and now in Prince Edward County at the Oeno Gallery.

His landscapes are beautiful, but they aren't simply or easily beautiful. If the sky has the mild, infinite blue of an August afternoon, when we can believe the whole world is made for us, the light seems separate from the lights that glint in the soil and the rare, snaky acid stream. More often the earth itself seems to breathe an antique yellow vapour, warm but never fresh. And though the soil does gleam rich and active the trees it supports are often stunted, stressed. According to the artist they are the trees and brush that somehow manage to hang on amid the industry of a big city. Picturesque, resilient, even gallant, they seem, on his wide plains, to have survived not only the industrial stress but the industry itself.

They and the rest of the landscape are covered with a shining coat of clear acrylic. Nature is synthetic, a manufactured object of desire, juxtaposed with traces of urbanization, what Louis-Seize describes as "a kind of irresponsible beauty, something that has occurred by chance and not intention." The effect is to make Louis-Seize's pictures as immediately attractive as a window in a darkened room. Then, like a window, his bright surface proves a barrier to us. Behind it the view is disquieting -- of a landscape beset by drips and stains, scrapes and burns, but also a landscape that is indistinct, general, even abstract, and one that is eerily silent. It seems sealed by the acrylic, or, given the evident stresses, suspended in the acrylic. We can't snap it into focus.

Louis-Seize's pictures haven't the clarity of a photograph; they aren't an explicit record of environmental degradation. Neither do they have the particularity of memory. They don't urge us to activism, nor invite us to easy nostalgia or simple regret.

As in the case of any serious artist, to notice what Louis-Seize's art is not is also to ask how it is new. If he teases our usual expectations of landscape the question is, why?. Why, in some of his paintings, are there overtly abstract elements: letters that might form words or numbers that look like bits of computer code? Do they flicker from the landscape itself, or float in the acrylic medium where they're shadowed by the wens and welts he preserves in its transparency?

Louis-Seize paints nature as we are teaching ourselves to see her. The artist says his subject isn't primarily nature stressed by industrial processes, but our idea of her, itself stressed by our experience of our technological world. We're learning to accept the sight of a damaged nature. At the same time, we're becoming used to seeing her in the digitized representation of television and computer screens. They draw our attention as surely as a window, but more than barring us, they distract us from nature by their hard brilliancy, even while we lose sight of nature's own particular presence.

The Romantics believed an essential aspect of nature's beauty was her terrible power. The beauty of Louis-Seize's landscapes makes us feel less awe than a deepening apprehension. We are invited to think, not about what nature may do to us, but about what we are doing to her and to ourselves, by this extraordinary artist's vision of the 'Toxic Sublime'.

At the OENO Gallery June 30-July 30

Previews June 30 and July 1

Opening Reception with the Artist: July 2 12-5pm

Salon Night with Sylvain Louis-Seize: July 20, 7:00-9:00pm (RSVP 613-394-2216)

316 Old Orchard Road, Carrying Place, Prince Edward County