

Mass: Of Our World

These shapes that I relate to are absolutely everywhere. I see them as the compilation ... all these little shapes piled on top of each other make up the physical world; these are the building blocks, the structure ... the mass of our world.

-Alan Paine Radebaugh

Take a look at an Alan Radebaugh painting and what do you see? Shapes, thousands of them, dance and shimmy in and out of the shadows or lump into clusters and break loose again, a marvelous and ceaseless free for all. Up close they remind one of strings, those sub-atomic rings of energy that physicists theorize form the foundation of all solid matter, and from a distance with the eyes slightly squinted, they suggest all sorts of natural phenomena: a bed of leaves, rocks in sunlight, mossy whorls in a peat-colored stream, tree bark, a mountain side. Let your imagination rip. It's all there.

But does it really matter what they suggest or even where they came from? The artist would rather us not take his shapes so literally, since to do so only limits their possibilities. Like Aristotle, the perceptible qualities of an object such as its color, texture, size, and shape are mere accidents that mask the essential thing in itself. It is the sense of accumulation that counts more than the identity of one part of the whole.

All of Radebaugh's paintings in last 15 years have been composed of these shapes, which he has called at one time or another "announcements," "sightings," or "fragments," natural incidents that "glow" or in some way stand apart from the profusion of nature and speak to him. Each shape was distilled from sketches made on site, copied with painstaking accuracy but with all the telltale details eliminated, leaving no evidence of where it came from or what it signified, only its lustrous heart. Combined with other similarly poignant gifts from nature, the fragment is attached to others in a chain of new events that swell in number and complexity until the painting, one day, reaches critical mass, so to speak, and is finished.

But the painting is never finished in the sense that it stands alone. Like the shapes, the painting was conceived as part of a collective, one of many canvases in a series. Radebaugh started joining canvases a few years ago, surprised by the liveliness it gave to the seams where they join, especially if the joints didn't quite match up. As the sequence grew, he became excited by the idea of multiplication and the single painting's increasing reach over time and space towards limitlessness. Such is *Mass*, composed of thirty-six canvases in the form of eight single paintings, eighteen diptychs, six triptychs, and one tetrad hung side by side or occasionally top to bottom in a single chain stretching around the thirteen walls of the Jonson Gallery. In viewing these, the visitor is required to navigate the Jonson's three galleries-arranged in a "U"_to see them all. Taking it all in piecemeal, the scenes shift relative to one another, some close, others further away, creating layers on top of layers, a holistic experience less characteristic of a gallery exhibition than of an environment. The works surrounds, engages, and intrigues in ways that is contiguous with the world, part of its ebb and flow-"of our world."

Radebaugh is absorbed in the flow and be one with nature. "I let myself...emulate that force...I am the water and the wind, those things that make these shapes." Sketching in the field he is at times so focused that time stops and immediate environment beyond the drawing itself melts away. In such a state "my mind goes blank and there is a frenzy in the brush...Jazz...chaos...motion...dynamics...hyper-activity," all of it eventually condensing into a "corporeal manifest." Radebaugh is in his painting, deeply, a state analogous to Jackson Pollock who invented the phrase to capture his ecstasy at being utterly absorbed in the sublime beneath his feet. Everything else is irrelevant.

The experience could be likened to the trance state of visionaries, though without the visions or the mysticism. The exhibition's title "Mass," thus suggests more than the collective stuff of the world; it reflects the artist's love of inspiration, even the sacred, certainly in music, even considering his paintings to be in effect a visual form of sacred music. His favorites are the requiems of Mozart and Verdi, and Beethoven's *Missa Solemnus*, all meditative, repetitive, and chant-like, music whose stately solemnity helps him paint for hours on end. Likewise, the music of Satie, John Scofield, and Miles Davis do much the same.

The Jonson Gallery is pleased to present this major work by a well-known Albuquerque artist, who designed and painted the series specifically for the Gallery. It is an honor and a fitting tribute to the Gallery's founder Raymond Jonson who was a tireless champion of progressive art in New Mexico for nearly sixty years. Jonson supported all forms of art, asking only that the artist be committed to his ideals and his craft. It is appropriate, therefore, that this work, obviously the product of passion and dedication, be among the last to be shown in the Jonson Gallery pending its move to new quarters in the University Art Museum.

On behalf of the Jonson Gallery and its supporters I would like to express my deep appreciation to the artist for his output of energy and time to bring this work into existence and to help make this exhibition possible.

Robert Ware