

CRAIG MANISTER
Recent Paintings

FRONT COVER:

Figures with Steeple and Tree

2009 oil/linen 11" x 14" (detail)

BACK COVER:

Figures with Town and Tree Trunk

2008 oil/board 11" x 14" (detail)

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Craig Manister

Recent Paintings

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Figures with Bridge and Fortressed Town

2008 oil/linen 36" x 48"

Vistas and Peepholes

Today, painters ply a perilous route between two authorities. On the one side lies modern academia, which interprets on the basis of signifiers and stylistic gambits. On the other are purely visual experiences of the works of Giotto, Courbet, and their modern descendants—that is, experiences of a pictorial rather than sociological nature. These kinds of experience resonate for artists we might call “painters’ painters.”

Craig Manister is such an artist. Having studied with Milton Resnick and Pat Pasloff in the 1970s, Manister is no stranger to the mysteries and rigors of painterly abstraction. In the mid90s, however, his work began to evolve from fields of all-over, nearly monochromatic calligraphic marks to painterly, color-heightened landscapes. Keyhole shapes recalling human figures—as well as oddly opaque peepholes—began to appear. For a time the artist restrained his palette to black and white to concentrate on drawing prerogatives. (The results filled his previous show at The Painting Center; two such canvases grace the current exhibition.) Since then he has returned to color with renewed energy while consciously continuing the keyhole motif. The current crop of paintings suggests an intriguing crossroads in his thinking. To my eye, they reveal a new discipline of color, with hues vigorously locating the strange, quiet exoticism of his forms and spaces.

Vibrant, all-over color can make for a wonderfully tactile atmosphere, as the Impressionists discovered. But gird these hues within an overall rhythm of pres-

tures, and one achieves something more: a sense of inner scale, with forms exerting themselves individually through tensile, breathing spaces. Manister's textures are luscious, and his motifs intrigue—but it's the vital rhythms of these latest paintings that truly catch the eye.

For instance, pulses of colors and forms in *Large Figures with Tree and Mountain* (2009) energize a particularized space. A tree presses sturdily into the foreground; the ground recedes broadly into the distance, measured out in horizontal tiers of groundcover and water; far away, a Mont-Sainte-Victoire-like peak anchors a deep bowl of sky. Pale keyhole-figures both emerge from and modify this elastic space. In human terms, they are no more animate than the trees, mountains, and clouds, but like these natural elements they comprise highly specific gestures. The inclinations of their large "heads" communicate their intimacy; their tapering, almost symmetrical gestures plant their conversation as solidly as a rock between the opposing angles of foreground tree and—across a thicket of foliage—the far-away peak. We begin to realize that the keyhole-figures are human surrogates in the deepest sense, embodying rather than just signifying our own sensate engagement with the environment.

Other paintings present new scenarios, not as limnings of ideas, but as cadences of color. In *Figures and houses with Reflections* (2009), the verticality of a central, massive tree plays with the delicate row of houses at the horizon. To the other side, another tree twists upward, elasticizing the column of air between the two trees. Paired keyhole-figures, now secondary elements, observe from the mid-distance. In *Figures with River and Hillside Settlement* (2009), the keyholes incline in the same direction, doubling their tug against a tilting fore-



Large Figures with Tree and Mountain

2009 oil/linen 36" x 48"

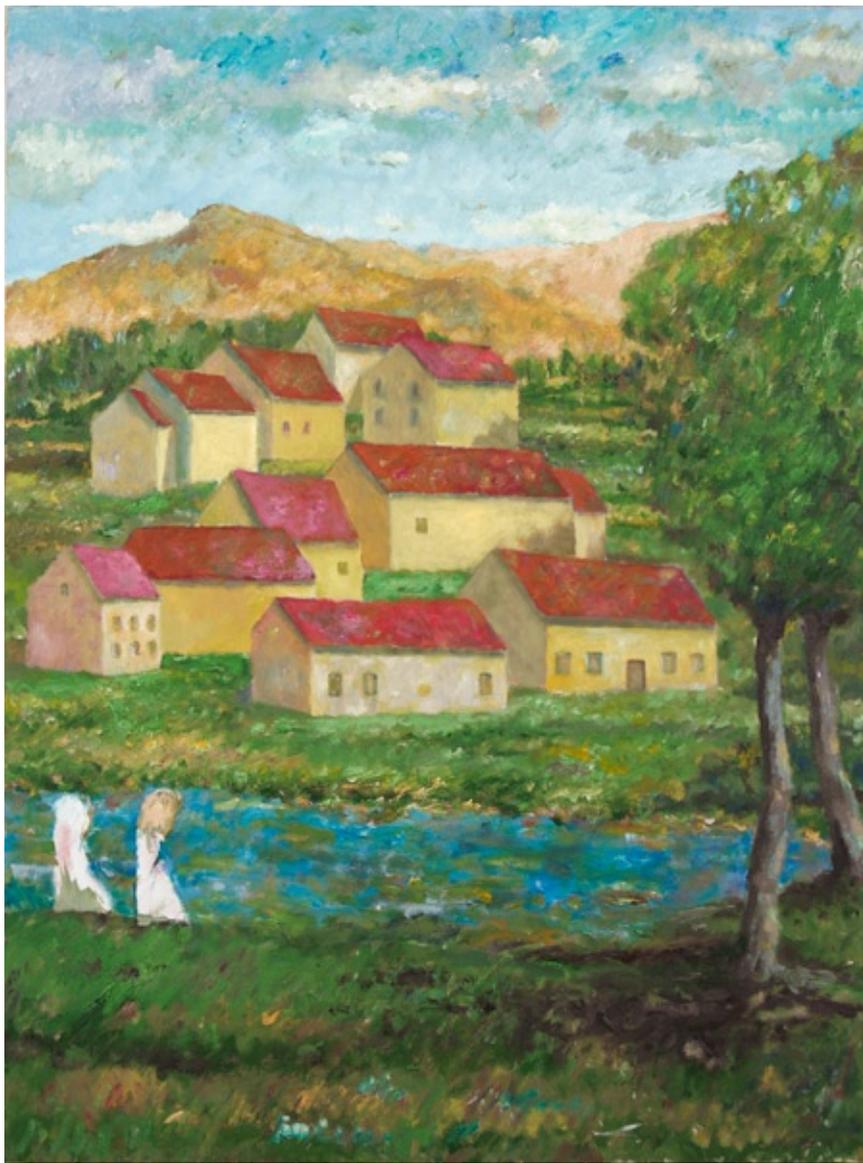


Figures and Houses with Reflections

2009 oil on linen 24" x 36"

ground tree; the yawning space between them can barely contain a busy swelling of houses. As a final send-off, a distant peak echoes the figures' angling gesture.

In some of Manister's paintings, Italianate landscape details and Corot- and Cézanne-inspired motifs suggest an otherworldly nostalgia. Taut compositional rhythms, however, lend them the conviction of original experience. To me, the keyhole-figures have gained self-confidence over the years. More so than a decade ago, they hold as independent elements, both constraining and propelling his designs. One could say that the artist has earned his license for seductive imagery through years of tough and productive experimentation. Particularly



*Figures with River
and Hillside Settlement*

2009 oil on linen 48" x 36"



Figures in Grassy Field and Three Trees
2008. Oil/linen, 48" x 36"



Two Figures, Tree and White Houses

2009. Oil/board, 11" x 14"

refreshing is his implicit regard for the masters, whose echoes appear here not as social tendencies or stylistic tics, but as profound and personal formal investigations. In this sense his intimate vistas, so oddly populated, are indeed peepholes onto traditions of painting.

Are traces of Resnick's influence apparent in these latest canvases? I think so. It shows in a kind of naïve bullheadedness—in the faith that utter determination and spiritual connectedness will conjure the epic. (In point of fact, the mere notion of following in Titian's footsteps demands a certain stubbornness.) But Manister possesses a more modest temperament than Resnick, and possibly greater humor as well. He has discarded some of Abstract-Expressionism's more heavy-handed strategies: the vast physical dimensions, and the almost didactic austerity of means. But the same naivety of hope pervades his work. The rigor of his idiosyncratic images encourages us, too, to hold onto our high expectations of painting.

—John Goodrich



Figures with Steeple and Tree

2009. Oil/linen, 11" x 14"



Two Figures in Landscape with Water

2009. Oil/linen, 24" x 36"



Figures with Bridge
2008 oil/linen 36" x 48"

Craig Manister is a painter involved in a discourse with the canon of art history, fueled by early study at the NY Studio School and more recent travel to Europe.

For more than a decade, the work created by this discourse has been supported by consecutive PSC-CUNY Research Awards for creative projects in painting. His work has been shown at the National Academy Museum, Beijing Art Institute, Mei Shu Guan Art Museum, Elizabeth Harris Gallery, the NY Studio School, Staten Island Museum, Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art, Neilsen Gallery, The Painting Center, Sideshow Gallery, Farleigh Dickinson University, Wagner College, Ober Gallery, and Queensborough Community College Gallery.

He was included in *After the Fall: A Survey of Abstract Painting Since 1970*, curated by Lily Wei, at the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art in 1996.

Craig Manister teaches studio painting and art history at the College of Staten Island, City University of New York. In addition, he serves as Director of the Gallery of the College of Staten Island.

Manister established and heads the Summer Studio Program at Art Lab, the Art School at the Snug Harbor Cultural Center, a rigorous program in traditional drawing and painting methods that brings together some of the region's leading contemporary painters as instructors.

He was born in New York City and currently lives and maintains a studio on Staten Island. He earned a BS degree at Richmond College and completed an MFA degree later at Brooklyn College.

