

John Riepenhoff *Gathering Under the Stars*

By Richard Galling

Big Moon marks John Riepenhoff's second solo exhibition of 2010. Here we find Riepenhoff adapting a *plein air* approach. *Plein air* or "open air" painting situates the artist outside the controlled environment of the studio and in the field. This often limits aspects of painterly process: time, immediacy, and certain control over the medium, become pressing elements implicit in the process.

Working from one lantern amidst the dark night sky of Nicolette National Forest in northern Wisconsin, Riepenhoff reconsidered *plein air* painting. In a way the artist willingly blind to his process. He is never completely aware of what is being painted until the following morning. The night sky becomes a framework in which to hang various abstract marks and gestures. Subtle shifts within the atmosphere offer an opportunity to layer various washes reminiscent of strategies utilized in abstract, impressionist painting. Clusters and individual stars allow for marks of varying impasto to situate themselves across the surface.

Color subtly cues the viewer into the reference of the scene. Layering washes of neutral and broken hues with more saturated pigments invoke a deep, cosmic space. Sporadic marks over the canvas attempt to attain the local color of stars and various after-images that often occur when one stares too long into space.

Riepenhoff's night paintings also seem to suggest a way in which the contemporary subject experiences landscape. Although working from observation, the scene is already informed. Color functions as a signifier, as the artist's choice in palette seems to have close associations with psychedelia and science fiction. The resulting images in these paintings are additionally imbued with proposals of what deep space may look like. Whether illustrations stemming from scientific data collected by satellites or computer

generated depictions of the cosmos utilized in films of the recent past, the artist and viewer have inescapable ties with media bearing a similar resemblance.

This creates a perplexing situation for how one is to comprehend landscape. In considering such a situation, Riepenhoff re-contextualizes phenomenological issues present in Cézanne's practice. By embodying nature, Cézanne wanted the viewer to reconsider the body's role in seeing. This approach resulted in a denial of visual strategies that had withheld since the Renaissance. Suggesting something closer to the experience one has with nature rather than a literal depiction of such; Cézanne's return to nature via painting makes known the artist's pre-conditioned contact with the world, not one determined by external circumstance.

Riepenhoff's work seems to take contemporary ideas of space and the cosmos and quite literally return them to nature. He does not deny external references. By being present and observing the night sky he infuses an informed idea of the environment with personal experience. Like Cézanne, he takes a pre-conditioned notion of nature and re-invents it by going back to the source. Cézanne utilized painting as a way to record mark, gesture, and color, based on the perceptual experience of being absorbed in nature. Riepenhoff, by absorption with an inescapable relationship the artist and viewer share with mediation.

This relationship suggests an a priori knowledge of the image within our current moment. Riepenhoff and his viewer draw from an immense database of imagery stemming from various sources of media. Films, photographs, album covers, and YouTube videos are all part of one's collective moment and shape how one interprets images and objects in the world. In this way he artist sympathizes with the viewer, by incorporating signifiers of the everyday. Riepenhoff simultaneously synthesizes seeing, images, and style with paint. Effectively combining what he literally sees through his embodiment of nature with his daily life.