



Cade Tompkins Projects

The Vision and Art Project

CHRONICLING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN VISION, ART, DRAWING, AND PAINTING

Thomas Sgouros' Sublime Vision

A Memorial Exhibit at RISD's ISB Gallery

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Remembered Landscape 2007. 60x64. Oil on linen

For the first time since 2013, a selection of paintings by Thomas Sgouros (1927–2012) was exhibited, this time at RISD’s ISB Gallery (June 2–July 10, 2016). To step into the gallery with Sgouros’s work on view was to pass from the hard, democratic light of a bright summer day into the more tender and diffuse light of a chamber illuminated in part by canvases whose deepest subject is perhaps the spirit. This is true both of the meticulous still lifes and scenes of Rome Sgouros did when fully sighted and the “*Remembered Landscapes*,” as he called them, which he created after losing his sight at the age of 65 to macular degeneration. For, while the paintings Sgouros did before he experienced vision loss are distinctly different from the paintings he did after, they are also profoundly similar.

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"Marigold in Pitcher". (1992). 13x13 5/8. Watercolor and graphite on paper.

Sgouros, raised in Chicago and Cambridge, Massachusetts, by Greek-American parents, was a professor emeritus at RISD and recipient of, among other awards, the Claibourne Pell Award. His career, which spanned 56 years, included over 40 years teaching in the illustration department at RISD, where he mentored countless artists and illustrators (including Chris Van Allsburg and David Macaulay, both of whom dedicated books to him), built curriculum that is still in use today, hired talented faculty, and is generally seen as responsible for the ongoing ethos of the department. To honor Sgouros's multifaceted legacy at RISD, the illustration department reserved the inaugural exhibition in the newly renovated ISB Gallery for him. The show was curated by David Porter, an associate professor in the department who was himself hired by Sgouros

and became a close friend. Porter selected the forty-nine works on display from paintings held by Cade Tompkins Projects as part of the artist's estate. Aside from a handful of works from Sgouros's career as a professional illustrator, Porter chose watercolors, oils, and pastels that were "redolent of Tom," as he said, "works that had a spiritual aspect to them." In keeping with the theme and intimacy of the exhibition, the accompanying wall text included reminiscences from ten people who knew Sgouros during his time at RISD.

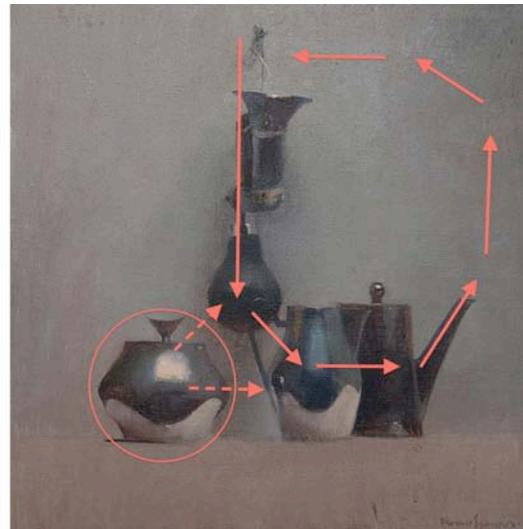
In the still lifes Sgouros devoted himself to in the first part of his career, he tended to paint in extensive iteration a handful of objects that held special resonance for him—a postcard of a painting by Degas; a vinegar and oil jar given to him on the occasion of his first marriage; a bicycle horn that had belonged to his son; Prip silver smithed by a colleague at RISD. He did not



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return repeatedly to these subjects in an effort to capture the “anecdote,” as he sometimes called it. He returned to them, rather, in an attempt to solve what he termed “the riddle of the rectangle,” which involved coordinating idea, shape, value, color, space, rhythm, and contrast in an interpretation of what he saw and felt. Thus, though Sgouros worked from life before going blind and often achieved a remarkable similitude between what he saw and what he painted, he was not focused on rendering the appearance of nature in his work, but on, as he once said, “organiz[ing] its elements—shape, color and mass—to create a poetic statement which transcend[ed] the material.” The resulting still lifes emanate, as do those of one of his favorite artists, Giorgio Morandi, with a sense of infinite mystery; realities that can be sensed and felt as something hidden within, or beyond, the material.

In one of the still lifes in the show, for example, *Prip Silver with Horn* (1990), it can be clearly seen that Sgouros is organizing the canvas (“the riddle of the rectangle”) intentionally and graphically to effect. It is not an accident that the black ball of the horn provides a focal point to the canvas, just off center, and that the handle of the Prip silver piece second to the right visually elides with the ball, drawing the viewer’s eye to the artist’s chosen focal point, then directing it stage left and up along the sharp geometry of the kettle spout. From there the eye is kept on the canvas by a soft compression of values, only slightly darker along the edge, up and over, returning left to the flute of the horn, then back down to the ball. Carefully composing the objects with an eye toward the Gestalt law of proximity (where objects in close enough proximity appear to form groups), the Prip vessel to the left is at once isolated and separated, balanced, inviting the eye to jump back and forth from horn to vessel and neighboring vessel and back, one among many subtle, intentional, and masterful compositional moves that comprise the language of painting and allows for the expression of the *experience* of a thing.



"Prip Silver with Horn" (1990). 14x14. Oil on canvas.



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In 1992, just after Sgouros had completed and exhibited 84 still life paintings, macular degeneration devastated the vision in both his eyes in a brief six-month period—a more rapid progression than is often the case. He had no time to prepare himself, psychologically and otherwise, for the impact of the disease on his life and art. At the same time, his first wife, Joan Sgouros, was dying of cancer. Though he had a long career behind him, in his estimation he had only just come into his own as a painter when macular degeneration struck. He could not imagine a life without painting, but he also could not conceive of how to continue his career with the little vision he had left. As he discusses in a 1994 article in the *Providence Journal*, in his darkest moments at that time, he struggled with feeling that he had come to the “end of his life”; he even considered, quite literally, “jumping off a bridge.”

Instead, he continued teaching at RISD and going to his painting studio every day. As he explained many years later:

I had to work and I didn't know quite what to do, so I started making paintings. I had no idea what I would be doing. I couldn't examine anything based on observation, which turned out to be a pretty good thing, because I don't think an artist should be a reporter of observation [but] rather something a little more profound, and I hope that's what I'm doing.

He used masking tape and a T-square to create horizon lines and then began painting the *Remembered Landscapes* that would constitute the sole subject of his work for the last twenty years of his painting life.

The first ones he did were small, still, tentative, nearly monochromatic, and sometimes hint of his despair—as opposed to the large, roiling, sometimes wildly chromatic landscapes he would eventually undertake. What he was referring to when he called them “*Remembered Landscapes*” is not entirely clear. On the one hand the term suggests, rather poignantly, that he was painting the memory in his mind's eye of what he had once seen on the horizon, instead of the beloved objects he had once rendered in such precise detail. But they are “remembered landscapes” too in that, aided by books, he was thinking of and implementing the strategies other painters had used to achieve their effects in his own work. In a 1988 *Watercolor Magazine* article, for example, he had observed how J. M. W. Turner gave one of his paintings power and vitality by painting bright orange in the trees above the horizon, how Winslow Homer used a heavy dark value in the background and a warm value in the foreground to create deep space, techniques Sgouros used to similar, magnificent effect in his *Remembered Landscapes*. And, finally, Sgouros's landscapes are “remembered” in the sense that he relied on his memorized palette and artistic muscle memory as he worked.



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"Remembered Landscape, 2, IV, 10". (2010). 18x24. Oil on linen.

In moving from the work before his vision loss, such as *Prip Silver*, to his work after, exemplified in paintings such as *Remembered Landscape 2, IV, 10* (2010), we see echoes of the former in the latter, especially with regard to the presence of horizon lines and reflections. In *Prip Silver*, a subtle but pictorially essential horizon line strikes across the canvas directly in line with the base of the vessels, rendered not with line or contrast but through a delicately organized shift from cool to warm. By virtue of the principles of perspectival space, we need only look across our desk or table to see the

visual impossibility of such a subtle horizon line or edge lining up directly under an object; horizon lines are always beyond and behind the subjects we behold. Yet Sgouros deftly defies this perceptual truth and imparts another one of many overt fictions upon his canvas, a line that is at once both graphic and spatial, rendering his painting thus not representational but something else all together. In his *Remembered Landscapes*, he draws from his life-long habit of careful observation and renders miasmas of color as abstractions that are more than they appear to be at first glance. As he once said of these works: "In many ways they are abstractions. Shape relationships, color relationships, texture relationships that happen to be in the context of what could be landscapes."

In the 1994 profile that appeared in the *Providence Journal*, Sgouros says he worries that his story will be "poignant" or worse, that he will come off as an inspiration to others. Whether he liked it or not, this man—who was to all accounts an inspiration before macular degeneration in his commitment, rigor, and kindness—became an even greater inspiration. How could he not? He painted beautifully, exhibited, and sold work up until his death. As one student after another who had him as a teacher in the latter years of his life recounts, he offered tremendous insight despite, or perhaps because of, his failing vision. One of his students, David Slonim, who took Sgouros's watercolor class before his vision loss and sought him out many years later when he was going through a difficult transition in his own work, went to visit Sgouros in his studio when he was working on his *Remembered Landscapes*. Slonim is still moved by this visit, which had an immediate, salutary effect on his work:



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Here's what I remember. He was very open and humble. He went through my whole portfolio, his eye an inch from the pictures. He told me a good painting is a visual arrangement that speaks to us because of the visual arrangement, not because of the thing being depicted. This was a man who was going blind, surrounded by canvasses, huge paintings he had worked on with his face to the canvas, only able to see a few inches at a time.

David Porter, the show's curator, says that when you look at a Sgouros painting, you are taken past the painting, the landscape is disappearing. The effect calls to his mind the final stanza of Philip Larkin's poem, "High Windows":

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

It's impossible to imagine a more apt description of the effect of a painting by Sgouros.



"Remembered Landscape 13, II, 09" (2009). 60x64.

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