



DAVID LIGARE
MY ARCADIA: PASTORAL PAINTINGS



DAVID LIGARE AND JOHN STEINBECK

David Ligare's and John Steinbeck's visionary California is lush, edenic and pastoral. But the pastoral is a tricky designation. Traditionally, it signifies cultivated and harmonious space between wilderness and civilization. When the world is too much with us, the pastoral soothes. Cultivated nature restores sanity. We bend our knees. Find solace. To look at a Ligare painting seems an act of sanity, just as reading Steinbeck's descriptions of the land connect us to the haunted beauty of Central California. Even when California hills are bathed in late afternoon light—Ligare's favored time--change hovers. Steinbeck's narrative is Ligare's vision: we gaze longingly at the ideal, knowing it's elusive, that light fades.

Both Steinbeck's and Ligare's California landscapes are sharply etched and deeply felt. This matter of seeing is no mean task, for it involves a kind of double vision; keen sight and insight. Artist and writer pay rapt attention to the changing colors of California hills--tawny, golden, sear. Both love "dumpling summer clouds," "round comfortable oaks," and hills "bathed in pale cold sunshine." Ligare's paintings capture his own "wonder of light on an object." Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* is a place that exists in the "hour of pearl," a time between darkness and dawn, a time bathed in mystery. In a Ligare painting and a Steinbeck novel, the perceiving eye and the human heart are joined so that familiar landscapes and ordinary light are transformed, our own understanding of place reconfigured.

—Susan Shillinglaw,
Author of *Carol & John Steinbeck: Portrait of a Marriage*

MY ARCADIA

I lived for almost thirty years on the broad shoulders of Mt. Toro, overlooking the valley and rolling hills that John Steinbeck called "The Pastures of Heaven" in a book he wrote by that name in 1932. In the story, Steinbeck describes a perfect place in which imperfect people live and die. This is the essence of what has been called the "pastoral mode," a literary structure first employed by the Greek poet Theocritus and the Roman poet, Virgil. In their books, "The Idylls" and "The Eclogues" they describe the pasturage for sheep, goats, cows and those who tend them as a median space between the city and the wilderness. The tradition of rustic shepherds and shepherdesses has lasted for over two thousand years and in that time has resulted in countless poems and paintings evoking a place of peace and beauty but one that humanly is aware of its mortality.

I first came across this idea by way of the French/Italian painter, Nicolas Poussin's painting "Shepherds at a Tomb, (Et In Arcadia Ego)," 1640, in which three shepherds and a shepherdess gather around a tomb and point to the words, "Et In Arcadia Ego," meaning "here am I (death) in this ideal and beautiful place (Arcadia)." The real location of Arcadia is on the Peloponnesian peninsula in Greece. Like Monterey County it's a lovely landscape with agriculture, mountains, forests and seacoast. It's a confluence that happens in Italy as well as California. These qualities and their inhabitants make for the myths that emerged so long ago and continue to this day, at times, like the Salinas River, flowing underground.

For me there has always been a literary quality to the landscape of Monterey County. I was lured here in my early twenties by the writings of Robinson Jeffers and John Steinbeck. Both authors described the settings for their poems and stories elegiacally or as serious reflections of their symbolic meaning, say the tragic duality of the rock and the hawk in Jeffers' poem and the paradoxical landscape in Steinbeck's "Pastures of Heaven" or the spring and dark cypresses, symbols of life and death, in "The Red Pony."

Monterey County has been my Arcadia, a deeply beautiful landscape sometimes even with flocks of sheep and shepherds. It has been protected from short-sighted ruination by laws and regulations that limit development and preserve sacred spaces like Pt. Lobos/Big Sur.

— David Ligare, 2020



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THE PASTORAL IDEA

The term conceptual art may not come immediately to mind upon encountering David Ligare's splendid landscapes. But take another moment and look more closely. Ligare is a man of enormous intellectual curiosity, whose work arises from deep wells of cultural scholarship. The artistic and philosophical models of the Classical world of Greece and Rome create the framework on which all of his artwork rests, but within it he has fashioned, by way of 17th century France, exquisite depictions of that central California landscape celebrated by writer John Steinbeck as “the pastures of heaven,” where he resided for thirty years.

A piece of conceptual art is one driven by a powerful idea, but this component often overwhelms its artistry. Not so in Ligare's art, where the two work in tandem. In Classical Greece, (and in the arts of China, which Ligare has also studied), appreciation of aesthetic values implies a balanced human life. The Greek triad of truth, goodness, and beauty (or thoughtfulness, skill, and beauty, as he names them) are inextricably linked to the concept of wholeness, and it is this idea, together with the transitory nature of time, that Ligare investigates and consistently works to emphasize in his paintings.

Ligare orchestrates his landscapes with care. “I like to give you someplace to stand,” he explains, taking inspiration from Claude Lorrain (one of two



17th century French artists he particularly admires; the other is Nicholas Poussin), in whose paintings the far distance is nearly always indicated. He feels that it is philosophically important to have a foreground, middle ground, and a great distance in his work. He models his landscapes on these holistic ideals, setting out an effortless passage through a scene, as in the recent *Corral de Tierra* (2020), where we can wander among rolling hills and valleys dotted with trees, and gaze to the far horizon under luminous afternoon skies.

The luminosity inherent in Ligare's work is one of its defining characteristics. He is attuned to the slanting rays of the liminal hour, when at the threshold of day and night (or metaphorically, life and death), the air is infused with

an ephemeral glow. He recreates that aura seamlessly, in the long purple shadows and golden shimmer that illuminates the distant ridges in *Pastures of Heaven* (2019), and sets trunks of trees and even blades of grass ablaze in *The Preserve* (2020). The soft but dwindling light bestows a subtle reminder that even in the midst of great beauty, human life—like time, is fleeting. This pastoral land and its surrounding coastline were beloved by both John Steinbeck and the poet Robinson Jeffers as a place of inspiration and solace. As they paid homage to it in words so David Ligare has done, with equal honor, in paint.

—Helaine Glick, Independent Curator



Cover:
Pastures of Heaven, 2020, oil on canvas, 40 x 60 inches

Inside Panels:
Corral De Tierra, 2020, oil on canvas, 24 x 36 inches
The Preserve, 2020, oil on canvas, 24 x 36 inches
Landscape with Deer II, 1999-2020, oil on canvas, 60 x 90 inches

Back Cover:
Sheep, 2020, oil on canvas, 12 x 16 inches

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