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Sublime Landscapes Translated Into A Trio of Tongues

SOME places are beautiful, and some places are sublime. The American painter Olivia Petrides traveled to Iceland in 1993 and 1994, and to the Faroe Islands in 1995, which resulted in uncommonly evocative works.

"Catkins & Mt. Esja (May)" (below), is from Petrides's Iceland sketchbooks. Its "sublimity" defies the paper's 7 by 10 inches.

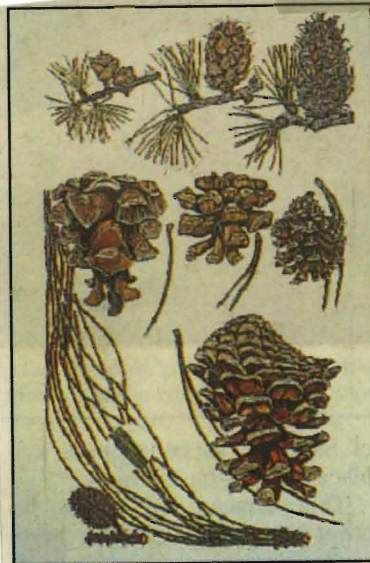
It is a concentration, without littleness, of the vast rigors of the landscape. It leaps from the tough, upright willow stem standing totemic in the foreground to the distant undulations of snow-vivid mountains and the intense blue of the lower sky. A darkly broken cloudscape weighs down over this light space.

The deep yellow of the catkins' pollen, edging the rounded forms like auras, is disseminated in the sky: near and far are linked, the tangle and the unreachable. Harsh black striated rock faces slide down in the middle distance. The eye does not move smoothly

through this picture, but bounds abruptly through it, buffeted by its forces. One feels suspended in midair, without footing.

The way Petrides paints here (using an opaque water-based gouache, applied with an impact close to that of oil) transposes the immediacy of a surrounding experience into an immediacy of paint-on-paper. Although this is a work of observation, it is a long way from being just a topographical record or illustration. It is fraught with feeling. The phrases "nature painter" or "naturalist artist" do not go far enough. Petrides conveys a sensibility in awe of the wild reaches of the earth. She talks about "forces."

"I am choosing landscapes that are very much about that," she says in an interview. "I am choosing very dramatic places. The



GUIDE: Cone-bearing evergreen trees with clustered needles, in Peterson's *A Field Guide to Western Trees*

forces ... are quite evident."

She has painted not only in Iceland, but in Yellowstone National Park, "also a very volcanic area. That's what interested me in Iceland. I looked at a map, and I

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'ROCK & WHIRLPOOL' (1996): Charcoal and oil pastel on paper, 58 by 41 in., by Olivia Petrides. Her love of natural forces is evident in the drawing.

looked at the edges of these tectonic plates." Indeed, her grand plan is to follow the edges of the tectonic plates that form the crust of the earth, and whose collisions and shifts cause tremors, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions.

Petrides says that she did not draw at all as a child. Her beginnings were actually more in the sciences. But her earliest travels

were motivated by the importance of looking. To observe and to record were instilled in her.

These child adventures were instigated by her father, the ecologist Dr. George Petrides, author of four "Peterson Field Guides" to American trees. As his daughter—who was later to produce scrupulous, explicit, strongly designed illustrations for some of her father's books—recalls: "We trav-



'CATKINS & MT. ESJA (MAY 1994)': Gouache, 7 by 10 in.

The small painting is from Petrides's Iceland sketchbook.

eled as a family a great deal, and his is rather a visual discipline. Maybe I was trained in that without realizing it."

As a painter, Petrides considers herself "a late starter." She was 28 before she went to art school. Before that, in her junior year of college, while on a year abroad, she first visited art museums. This was in Germany, and she had a revelatory encounter with the work of one of that country's 20th-century greats, Emil Nolde.

On the evidence of her Icelandic sketches, it was Nolde's

landscapes and flower/garden paintings that struck her forcibly. In them, natural forms rear up

like visions, primally expressive and intense, exotic, stormy, and mood-laden in color. These exhilarating midnight-sun paintings carry the viewer away by sheer conviction. "I thought he was wonderful," Petrides recalls, "and I wondered what it was like to paint like that."

She did not stop at wondering.

The art school she went to first was the one attached to the Art

Institute of Chicago, where she is now an adjunct associate professor of painting and drawing. She finds the demand to look – and to have her students look – at a great range of other artists' work a useful stimulus. Environmental artists are of special interest. She mentions Richard Long and Andy Goldsworthy, both Britons.

BUT it is Thérèse Oulton's work that Petrides takes time to

describe. What she finds fascinating in this British painter's work is "the huge mass of paint that she makes with very discreet little strokes." It "could be produced maybe more gesturally, but she chooses to do it in this very meticulous, laborious way."

In her own large work – "Rock & Whirlpool" (top) is a powerful example – Petrides structures her images by building up many smaller movements. These are predominantly linear, not unlike the contouring of

three-dimensional form found in some sculptors' drawings. With her interest in geological formations, it might be surprising if her work was not in some way sculptural. But she achieves this quality not with a mallet and chisel but by insistent drawing, by tight, strong lines that give rock a dark solidity, water an insucking concentricity. The lines contain the sky as if framed by a cave mouth.

Color in these big studio drawings is reduced to minimally concentrated significance; the main impetus is one of rhythmic motion through a fundamentally monochrome space and light.

Her works seem naturally to fit into three interrelated compartments: vigorously precise botanical illustrations, large drawings,

and sketches, which she sees as "different languages." One is "probably a more 'scientific' language," another "more 'aesthetic.'" She says that "no one language could describe a place, but maybe several could...."

In her own mind, her apparently diverse aspects "all relate to one another.... I think the most important things are the sketchbooks. That whole experience of being outside and sketching. From these sketchbooks I can go into the more precise work, or I can go into my studio and do the looser work."

The sketches she sees as "collecting sense data," and as "a vehicle to make me sit still – I look and listen.... That's the important part of what I do; I mean the idea of it, not the product. The memory of sitting there and doing it."

Central to that "memory" are the forces she sees in the environment in which she has worked. "I think that is what I try to do in the large pieces: I am sort of enacting those forces."

Christopher Andreae

Words of Note

A painter told me that nobody could draw a tree without in some sort becoming a tree.

**Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882),
American essayist, philosopher,
and poet**

■ From 'History.'