



Whitney Museum of American Art

Neil Jenney's "Acid Story" (1983-84), on display at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

## ART REVIEW

## Focus on Assaults Against the Land

By HOLLAND COTTER

The 19th-century tradition of using the landscape as a vehicle for social commentary has had few takers among contemporary artists. Neil Jenney (born in 1945) is one of them, and six of his chilly, immaculately executed paintings have been brought together as part of the Collection in Context series at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Organized by Elizabeth Sussman, the show leaves no doubt that Mr. Jenney is an artist overdue for reassessment, but it also suggests why he remains a marginal figure.

His debt to earlier American art is clear at a glance. His reiterated images of blasted trees and sunset skies, for example, were standard Hudson River School emblems of decay and renewal, fraught with allegorical implications. Mr. Jenney acknowledges the symbolic nature of his own paintings by stenciling their didactic-sounding titles directly onto their frames. The frames themselves — thick, shelflike and painted black — recall the prosceniumlike structures used by Frederic Edwin Church and Albert Bierstadt to turn their landscape paintings into near-cinematic spectacles.

To these conventions, Mr. Jenney adds a contemporary twist. In contrast to Church's confidently sweeping panoramas, Mr. Jenney's view of nature is often narrowly focused and radically cropped. In the small, horizontal "Acid Story," the trunk of a dead tree is cut off in closeup, as if viewed through the gun sight of a tank. Similar implications of conflict

mark the two paintings titled "America Divided." In one, a strand of barbed wire stretching across the center of the picture separates the viewer from the darkening sky beyond. In the other, a rusted spike lies abandoned in blood-tinted earth, like the evidence of a recent killing.

In all of these paintings, however, which date from 1978 to 1993, the real victim of continued, if sometimes subtle assault is the land itself. "Venus From North America" seems at

Old metaphors are adapted into a new environmental message.

first glance to offer a note of hope. While its ostensible subject is the Evening Star faintly visible high in the daytime sky, details of the landscape below — the breast-and-buttocks-shaped mountains and a single, anatomically curving branch — suggest the pervasive presence of the goddess herself. A second look, however, reveals the hills to be a sear, infertile gray while the branch emerges, leafless, from a fallen tree in an all but inorganic world.

For better and for worse, a similar inorganic sense characterizes Mr. Jenney's paintings as a whole, making them easy to admire but hard to like. They are, after all, highly synthetic creations, laboriously patched together at least in part from the

symbolic codes and formal paraphernalia of another time. The faint whiff of mock-academicism that such self-consciousness produces will probably keep them sidelined from mainstream appreciation for the foreseeable future.

At the same time, their attentive reimagining of earlier models is what makes them moving. The landscape paintings of an earlier America were also mechanical contrivances meant to speak to their time: Thomas Cole's romantic views of the Catskills were cautionary tracts on nature endangered, and Martin Johnson Heade's series of moody depictions of coastal thunderstorms dating from the 1860's can be read as a pictorial fever chart of the ebb and flow of the Civil War: "America Divided" indeed. (Several of Heade's landscapes are currently on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; review, page C29.)

Mr. Jenney has managed to adapt these older metaphoric conventions without debasing them and has extended them into — among other things — a complex environmental message for our own time. With their fastidious surfaces, cumbersome frames and symbolic images, they are closer to being monuments than paintings, a kind of sculptural post-nuclear Luminism. Like that 19th-century American painting movement, they have their limits, but they remain a considerable accomplishment just the same.

"Collection in Context — Neil Jenney: *Natural Rationalism*" remains at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street, through Dec. 11.

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