Dreaming in Light, Land and Water: Todd Brainard's Golden State

Sweeping deserts and billowy seas, snowy mountains and tree-lined valleys, glamorous metropolises and scattered small towns have long made California a rich topic for artists and writers. The state inspired many of Ansel Adams's gloriously eerie photographs—crisp white clouds over the Golden Gate Bridge, gray storms brewing in the Sonoma Valley—and Joan Didion wrote the hot, dry Santa Ana winds into their rightfully uneasy place in our cultural memory while Mike Davis encapsulated the age-old power struggles casting their shadow on the Golden State's city of angels. For the past twelve years, Todd Brainard too has trained his eye—and very agile brush—on the California landscape.

From the Gold Rush to Hollywood, the state has long been a favored destination for seekers of fortunes and dreams, a place where the imagination runs as wild as the terrain. But hope is not without its nemesis; the underbelly of dreaming, be it blind ambition or callous frustration, plays its hand as well. Brainard's elegiac paintings hold both sides of the coin in the balance, proving as hopeful or as apocalyptic as each viewer allows. Though his landscapes don't contain people, it is the viewer that completes the work, saturating each picture with optimism or pessimism, rendering painting the proverbial glass—half-empty or half-full.

Raised in Sacramento, where he lived until the age of nineteen, Brainard has since made his home in Long Beach. Though these are both large California cities, one the seat of the state's government the other home to its busiest port, neither has the fame or

storyline of San Francisco or Los Angles; that the artist has remained just outside the state's Northern and Southern urban poles is relevant to his process and work. Brainard, a self-proclaimed populist and avid chronicler of the environment, lives and works a stone's throw from the seaside in an area of Long Beach redolent with the warm, community sensibility of towns along the state's Central Valley. And yet remaining just outside the state's—and the art world's—geographic mainstream has not hindered Brainard's success; his works have been shown in commercial galleries, including Roberts & Tilton in Los Angeles and Kidder Smith Gallery in Boston, and in group exhibitions at the California Museum of Photography at the University of California, Riverside; the Luckman Gallery, at California State University, Los Angeles, and many other venues.

Looking at things from just outside the expected point of view is integral to Brainard's work; this unique perspective is the through line in each of his highly keyed paintings. While Brainard's landscapes have the look and feel of real life, they pulsate with the light and color of a surreal fairy tale. His vibrant skies are as readily reminiscent of lollipops as of a dusky sunset, of coloring books as of catastrophe. In the majority of these paintings, the connection between earth and sky remains prominent, almost primal, and is enhanced by a deft use of scale and composition. Vast swaths of lush grass or barren earth counterbalance expansive skies while lights, buildings, trees—any evidence of human habitation—fill a lively but comparatively narrow strip between land and air.

Sitting in the artist's relaxed studio above a bustling street filled with shops and cafés, I notice a small photograph perched on an easel next to one of the newer paintings.

The glossy photo depicts two lines of water running through brown earth and topped by a cerulean sky. The image was taken in the Antelope Valley where the Los Angeles and California Aqueducts cross one another, their contents neither touching nor commingling. The colors are saturated and seem to be manipulated or, to use common parlance, Photoshopped, and yet Brainard tells me this is simply a photograph he took on location. It wasn't toyed with, changed, or even particularly intended to be seen save as a reference for his work. The photo is propped next to a painting of the same scene in which the colors are slightly but noticeably different, exaggerated here or subdued there, according to Brainard's sophisticated yet essentially relaxed approach. This painting, *X-treme Crossing*, 2008, is smaller than most but representative of Brainard's thinking and process. In addition to working from the photograph, he journeyed to the out of the way place, walking the land and breathing the air. His vision for each painting is dictated by this combination of experiential memory, photographic documentation, and technical concerns related to color theory, composition, and painting procedure.

Over the past twelve years, Brainard has trekked the flame-razed roads of Griffith Park shortly after a fire, wandered back roads dotted with oil drills, and traveled to the site of a catastrophic dam collapse, letting a combination of personal recollection, newspaper stories, and social or political concerns guide his choice of locale. A new body of work, of which the aqueduct painting is a part, is specifically focused on the issue of water in California. For *fresh*water, Brainard has set out to paint a series of pictures related to the necessity—and subsequent use and misuse—of water in California, a long

and complex history plagued with flagrant abuses and desperate measures, as one might imagine when a place that is at heart a desert is populated by millions of people.

One of the early and more infamous stories is that of the Owens Valley, a disputed site since the 1910's when a government sponsored irrigation project, reportedly rife with deception, built the first aqueduct into Los Angeles from the river valley. This prompted a fight from local farmers and ranchers who were eventually forced to sell their drying land to the government. As this water was used up, court battles raged once again and during the seventies and eighties as residents of the nearby Inyo Valley attempted to prevent the city of Los Angeles from pumping water from their lands. The city's water crisis was evident in the number and variety of public calls to save water, including installing meters in local residences. Eventually, the city prevailed but California's relationship to water as a kind of Holy Grail is evident and its history bears all the twists and turns of a Hollywood blockbuster. *fresh*water highlights this relationship, giving rise to questions about the social and environmental impacts of water.

But in the studio, Brainard is more focused on the craft of making a picture than on the ideas that feed into his work. Imminently practical, he is aware that viewers will bring their own responses to the paintings; some will see a pretty picture, others a chemical disaster, and still others a historic site that invites questions about humans and their environment. Brainard is content with this variety of potential responses and actually prefers not to lead too heavily towards one point of view or another. Not surprisingly, he has memories seeing Edward Hopper paintings as a child. Though their palettes differ, Brainard shares with Hopper a confident use of color and the distinctive

relationship to crafting a place through composition and light, providing just enough emotional information to form the basis of a narrative accessible to a variety of interpretations. It's as if each painting is a springboard for a story that unravels in one's mind later, blending memory and mood with a recollection of the painting.

Despite this connection, many of his primary influences are photographers. From Richard Misrach's vertiginous landscapes to Bernd and Hilla Becher's clean lines and multiple grays, photography inspires Brainard's content as well as his process. Similarly, light plays an important role in his painting, congealing layers of translucent color to create seemingly oscillating shades that are not so much laid down as built up, each hue emerging from the combination of others. Sensitive to chemical solvents, Brainard uses only linseed oil to thin his paints, thus creating a blend of the vivid depth of oil and the translucent quality of watercolor. The effect is soothing to the eye, inviting one to look and, more importantly, encouraging further looking so that one's eye lingers on hills and skies as additional layers slowly reveal themselves like the colors of a sunrise: A brushy hillside is composed of multiple greens, its soft markings layered, not like grass exactly, but like our impression of grass; a dusky desert appears under the brilliant cast of a candy-red sky; an almost sickly yellow atmosphere casts a questionable shadow on a clay-packed road, an oil rig pumping away incongruously in the distance.

Although Brainard's painting is materially grounded in the technical and historical tradition of painting, it relates as readily to printmaking or photography and, metaphorically, to literature. Like a novelist, the artist crafts a place from disparate parts, color and line acting as thought and memory. Indeed, he likens his work to historical

fiction, a description that plays itself out in the way each picture mirrors and simultaneously veers from its counterpart in the world, creating a fictional place so closely aligned to a real one as to be nearly, but not completely, indistinguishable.

—Annie Buckley, 2008