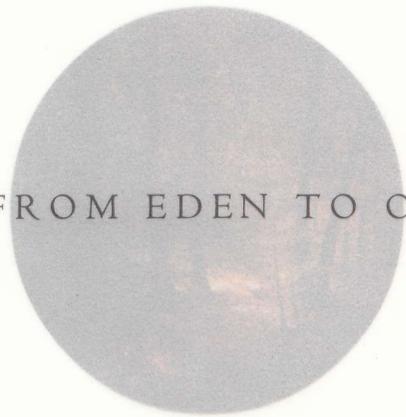


MICHAEL DE JONG FROM EDEN TO OZ



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Exhibition Curated by
Ronald R. Bernier, Ph.D.
Karen Evans Kaufer

With an Essay by
Ronald R. Bernier, Ph.D.

MICHAEL DE JONG FROM EDEN TO OZ

August 25 to October 13, 2002

Sordoni Art Gallery
Wilkes University
Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

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ISBN 0-942945-22-0

2000 copies were printed by Zodiac Printing Corporation

Catalogue design: John Beck

Typeface: Centaur, a classic American face designed about 1915 by Bruce Rogers

Photography: cityscapes by Michael Thomas; landscapes by Doug Burg

FROM EDEN TO OZ

Ronald R. Bernier, Ph.D.

In Utopia . . . everyone is rich—for what greater wealth can there be than cheerfulness, peace of mind, and freedom from anxiety? . . . The Utopian way of life provides not only the happiest basis for a civilized community, but also one which, in all human probability, will last forever.

Thomas More, *Utopia* (1516)¹

SMALL APERTURES PENETRATE white walls, opening onto public and private spaces. Framed in gold, they depict the intimate and sensuous enclosure of a deep forest interior, while from dizzying heights, framed in black, are footless views of a glistening metropolis—each tiny as precious object yet immense as content. The miniature scale and exacting detail prompt us closer, inviting us to peer, as if illicitly, into these distant spaces. We advance, and in that closeness, other bodies disappear, falling away at the edges of our awareness; vision is cut off, isolated from the presentness of the body. In this way Michael De Jong's images perform an operation of individuation, defining the viewer—the self—as isolated, withdrawn from the world, yet spying upon it. What is beyond, what is on the 'other' side, is the infinitely remote, the visionary ideal—Utopia. In the early watercolors, it is rendered as the full baroque spectacle of rugged mountain terrain and luminous vista, the romantic drama of nineteenth-century American landscape painting that told the heroic story of a New

World, here borrowed and reformatted to miniature scale. For those artists, painted vistas of uncultivated nature symbolized a desire for dominance and possession, confident expressions of a privileged national identity tinged with the romantic myths of paradise, innocence and Manifest Destiny.² America as the Great Experiment, the discovery of an unspoiled continent where man could escape the contamination of the Old World. Reduced in size and crushing in detail, De Jong's fetishes speak ironically to this theme of America as the new Golden Age. In its postmodern version, this paradise of abundance is recast as the sylvan retreat of a Pennsylvania garden and the towering pageantry of uptown Manhattan.³

The Garden/City—Nature/Culture—dialectic is ideologically loaded with paired associations of private and public, individual and society, self and world, solitude and community. Nature, as the subject of landscape painting, has long been invested with the physical, moral, and spiritual qualities of peace and equilibrium. It is the space of health, the sanctuary of remoteness and restorative wholeness in schizophrenic modernity. To experience nature is to step inside the subjectivity of private sensation and the good life. The city, by contrast, is nature's antithesis, the space of moral malaise, numbing spectacle, choking density, and alienating sameness. And within the present exhibition, the artist holds out the possibility of being simultaneously in two seemingly incompatible spaces, able to dip into that other, restful and refreshing asylum of rural virtue, while holding fast to the

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heady exhilaration, opulence, and breathless excitement of its opposite—the boundary between the two worlds momentarily breached.

As presented here—in the suffused golden warmth of the wooded interior and the cool, flickering and hallucinatory collage of urban surface—they are *both* Utopia. On the one hand, the prelapsarian perfection of the Garden of Eden, and on the other, the City of Oz, end of the journey, “a place where there isn’t any trouble”⁴—the city as final fulfillment of the original promise of America as Utopia. And Oz, like Eden, is precisely that: a fabled, fantastic, self-contained world—paradise regained.

It is fitting, then, that utopia takes the form of the geometric figure that symbolizes harmony, unity, coherence—the circle. And here we return to the procedure of painting itself—the miniature. In these manipulations of scale, place, and proportion, the normal equations between picture and observer are altered. The beholder’s experience is simultaneously intimate and distant, the body bereft of spatial coordinates. In drawing closer—which in the conventional viewing of painting allows us to engage in detail, dissolving distance through the privacy of individual focus—the viewer is presented with the panoramic view of a perfectly miniaturized world, paradoxically dwarfing the observer through its own kind of immensity.

This dislocating experience is what aesthetic theory has defined as the Sublime, wherein our ordinary perceptual faculties, rendered incapable of taking in the sheer immensity of the world’s manifold, are overwhelmed, awed, resulting in a kind of stupefying power which forces us into an awareness of our own puny position in the universe, a kind of “existential vertigo.”⁵ Our glimpse into Utopia—just beyond

reach—seems an utterly unreal and unfathomable ideal; as such, the imagination is launched into a vain attempt to comprehend its magnitude in a way that ultimately leads to the consolation that something ‘beyond’ transcends the limitations and imperfections of our ordinary phenomenal being—infinity, perfection, the ideal. That is, in fact, the literal translation of Sir Thomas More’s punning word to describe his visionary state, Utopia—*no place*—while maintaining the hopeful belief in the possibility, the necessity, of discovering Utopia.

Beyond subject itself—beyond the wistful desire for Eden and Oz—what invokes the sublime here is the overwhelmingly infinitesimal. De Jong assigns the sublime to the immeasurably tiny, to the near dismissible, through the procedure of painting itself, where the indescribable—perfection, the ideal, Utopia—is lodged in the imperceptible.

NOTES

1. Trans. Paul Turner, 1965: 128–131.

2. See exhibition and catalogue, *Borrowed Paradise*, Krannert Art Museum, College of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1998.

3. Both of which the artist claims as home. The peacefulness of his northeastern Pennsylvania retreat is easily traveled from New York City by a 70-mile stretch of roadway.

4. Spoken by the central character, Dorothy, as she dreams of her as yet unrealized utopia from the drabness of the American heartland in the 1939 technicolor fantasia of L. Frank Baum’s 1900 story *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

5. Paul Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art*, 1989: 170.















EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

(2) *Untitled*, 1992–1998

watercolor on paper

22½" x 30" (paper size)

(12) *Untitled*, 2001

oil on panel

gold leaf frame

2¼" diameter (landscape image size)

(14) *Untitled*, 2002

oil on panel

ebonized frame

3¼" diameter (cityscape image size)

MICHAEL DE JONG

Born Chicago Heights, Illinois, 1962

EDUCATION

University of Illinois (M.F.A. 1988)

L'Ecole d'Architecture, Versailles, France, 1987

Northern Illinois University (B.F.A. 1984)

AWARDS AND HONORS

Pollock-Krasner Foundation Fellowship, 1999–2000

Kate Neil Kinley Memorial Foundation Fellowship, 1996

Pollock-Krasner Foundation Fellowship, 1992–1993

University of Illinois Fellowship, 1986–1988

James P. Bates Memorial Scholarship, 1984

Xi Iota Xi Annual Scholarship, 1980

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2002 *From Eden to Oz*, Sordoni Art Gallery, Wilkes University,
Wilkes-Barre, PA (catalogue)

Forest for the Trees, Pacific Northwest College of Art, Portland,
OR (catalogue)

2001 *Forest for the Trees*, Sioux City Art Center, Sioux City, IA (catalogue)
Forest for the Trees, Waterloo Art Museum, Waterloo, IA (catalogue)

2000 *Borrowed Paradise*, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL
(catalogue)

1999 *Borrowed Paradise*, I-Space, Chicago, IL (catalogue)

1998 *Borrowed Paradise*, Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois,
Champaign, IL (catalogue)

1997 P.P.O.W., New York, NY

1996 Feigen Contemporary, Chicago, IL

1995 P.P.O.W. New York, NY

1988 Rastovski Gallery, New York, NY

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2001 *Summer Exhibition*, Littlejohn Contemporary Fine Art, New York,
NY

2000 *Shifting Grounds: Transformed Views of the American Landscape*, Henry
Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, WA (catalogue)

1999 *As Far as the Eye Can See*, The Atlanta College of Art Gallery, City
Gallery at Chastain, Atlanta, GA (catalogue)

1998 *Summer Exhibition/Gallery Artists*, P.P.O.W., New York, NY
Divining Nature, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art,
Winston-Salem, NC (catalogue)

*Remembering Beauty: The Seductive and Nostalgic Nature of the American
Landscape*, South Bend Regional Museum of Art, South Bend,
IN (catalogue)

1997 *Summer Exhibition/Gallery Artists*, P.P.O.W., New York, NY

- 1996 *Small Works*, Bernie Toale Gallery, Boston, MA
Summer Exhibition/Gallery Artists, P.P.O.W., New York, NY
Watercolors, P.P.O.W., New York, NY
Field & Stream, Monique Knowlton Gallery, New York, NY
Selections From Private Collections, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA
- 1995 *Nature Studies I*, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, MA
Summer Exhibition/Gallery Artists, P.P.O.W., New York, NY
New Works, Feigen Contemporary, Chicago, IL
Portrait, Figure, Landscape, Brave-Post-Lee Gallery, New York, NY
- 1994 *Secret Garden*, Cummings Art Center, Connecticut College, New London, CT
- 1993 *Quo Quo on Queens Road Central*, Queens Road Central Gallery, Hong Kong
Cadavre Exquis, The Drawing Center, New York, NY; The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Foundation for Contemporary Art, Mexico City; The Santa Monica Museum, Los Angeles; The Forum, St. Louis, MO; The American Center, Paris, France
Immanent Domain, Selections/Fall 1993, The Drawing Center, New York, NY (catalogue)
- 1992 *Contemporary Icons: From the Sublime to the Fetishistic*, Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery at Hunter College, New York, NY (catalogue)
 Group Summer Exhibition, Galerie George-Philippe Valois, Paris, France
Little Women/Little Men, White Columns, New York, NY
Immediate Reality, Postmasters Gallery, New York, NY
- 1991 *New York, New York*, Museum Gallery, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA

- 100 New York Artists*, Weatherholt Gallery, Washington, DC
- 1989 *Twelfth Anniversary Benefit Auction*, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, NY
- 1988 *Made in New York City*, Rastovski Gallery, New York, NY

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 2001 Ronald R. Bernier, Ph.D. "Forest for the Trees, Works by Michael De Jong," exhibition catalogue, February-June 2001. Sioux City, IA: Sioux City Art Center.
- 2000 "Shifting Ground: Transformed Views of the American Landscape," exhibition catalogue, curated by Rhonda Lane Howard, February-August 2000. Seattle: The Henry Art Gallery, Faye G. Allen Center for the Visual Arts, University of Washington.
- 1999 James Yood. "Michael De Jong." *The New Art Examiner*, February 1999.
 Joyce Henri Robinson, Ph.D. "As Far as the Eye Can See," exhibition catalogue, January-March 1999. Atlanta: Atlanta College of Art Gallery, City Gallery at Chastain.
- 1998 Ron Bernier and Tim Porges. "Borrowed Paradise," exhibition catalogue, Contemporary Art Series No. 17, September-November 1998. Urbana: Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois atampaign-Urbana.
 Susan Labowsky Talbot. "Divining Nature," exhibition catalogue, April-July 1998. Winston-Salem, NC: South Eastern Center for Contemporary Art.
 Linda Johnson Dougherty. "Divining Nature." *Art Papers*, September-October 1998.

- Susan Visser and Leisa Rundquist. "Remembering Beauty: The Seductive and Nostalgic Nature of the American Landscape," exhibition catalogue, August–October 1998. South Bend, IN: South Bend Regional Museum of Art.
- 1996 Alan G. Artner. "Catherine Opie, Terri Zupanic, Michael De Jong." *Chicago Tribune*, February 16, 1996.
- 1995 Kim Levin. "Voice Picks: Tom Woodruff & Michael De Jong." *The Village Voice*, March 1995.
- Claire McConaughy. "Still-Life, Portrait, Landscape." *Flash Art*, Vol. 18, no. 182, May–June 1995.
- Kim Levin. "Voice Picks: Michael De Jong." *The Village Voice*, February 22, 1995.
- 1993 Richard Hsu "Exposure" exhibition catalogue, December 1993.
- Ingrid Schaffner, Mary Ann Caws, and Charles Simic, with Foreword by Ann Philbin. "Return of the Cadavre Exquis," exhibition catalogue, December 1993. New York: The Drawing Center.
- Kim Levin. "Voice Choices: The Return of the Cadavre Exquis." *The Village Voice*, November 23, 1993.
- Michael Kimmelman. "The Exquisite Corpse Rises from the Dead." *The New York Times*, Sunday, November 7, 1993, p 4I.
- "Word of Mouth: Big Art (Cadavre Exquis)." *Harpers Bazaar*, November 1993, p. 120.
- Arlene Raven. "Immanent Domain." *The Village Voice*, September 29, 1993.
- "Goings on About Town: Immanent Domain." *The New Yorker*, October 4, 1993, p. 34.
- Robert Mahoney. "Immanent Domain," exhibition catalogue, September–October 1993. New York: The Drawing Center.
- 1992 Roberta Smith. "Art in Review: 10 Steps Toward the Best." *The New York Times*, Weekend Section, December 4, 1992.
- Susan Edwards. "Contemporary Icons: From the Sublime to the Fetishistic," exhibition catalogue, November 1992. New York: The Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery at Hunter College.
- Joshua Dector. *Arts*, April 1992.
- Kim Levin. "Voice Choices: Immediate Reality." *The Village Voice*, January 15, 1992.
- 1991 Kim Levin. "Village Listings: Value." *The Village Voice*, November 26, 1991, p. 79.
- Roberta Smith. "New Galleries in Soho, From Glittering to Not So." *New York Times*, Weekend Section, November 15, 1991.
- Robert Mahoney. "Official Guidebook: House of Value, 252 Lafayette Street, NYC: ATTRACTIONS," exhibition handbook, November 1991.
- 1989 Robert Mahoney. *Arts*, March 1989.
- Joshua Dector. *Flash Art International*, March/April 1989.
- Lois Nesbitt. *Artforum*, March 1989.

EXHIBITION UNDERWRITERS

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M&T Bank
Maslow Lumia Bartorillo Advertising
The John Sloan Memorial Foundation, Inc.
Andrew J. Sordoni, III
Wilkes University

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Karen Evans Kaufer, Associate Director
Earl Lehman, Preparator

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Brianna Herron
Sara Scalzo
Sarah Leskosky

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This project was supported in part by the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, a state agency funded by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.



