

JOHN ABEL CURATOR'S STATEMENT
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Two of my all-time favorite works from John Abel's extensive oeuvre of paintings, drawings, and prints are *Dark Sun* (2002) and *Working Class* (2002). *Dark Sun*, a poetically gloomy, monochromatic landscape painted primarily in blacks and grays and compositionally pared down to the fewest possible elements, verges on being a minimalist abstraction. *Working Class*, a meticulously composed and crafted (like all of his works) oil painting, depicts an aging and battered pickup truck (one of Abel's hallmark subjects) parked on a deserted city street. The entire scene, bathed in the deeply shadowed, golden light of dusk, has an eerie, Hopperesque feeling. Not only are both of these intimately scaled paintings thought-provoking and poetic, but they are also beautifully painted. Never has the term "little gems" been so appropriate.

Abel is an interesting, articulate, and solitary figure. He lives by himself in the relative isolation of San Diego's back country whose rugged terrain inspires him. He doesn't seem to be quite of our time, and, had he lived long ago, one could envision him as a poet, artist, and philosopher, probably in the Byronic tradition. Not surprisingly, Abel professes disdain for the theory-driven art that academics adore, but is pretty much incomprehensible to the man on the street. In lengthy emails, Abel is fond of railing (fortunately with a liberal dose of humor) against what he perceives as the pretentiousness of art historians and other representatives of the art establishment. Being the iconoclast that he is, even the most revered art world historical figures are not immune from his criticism. Michelangelo and Raphael have taken their share of brickbats. However, Abel saves his harshest criticism for himself, making no apologies for the fact that he considers himself to be an illustrator at heart. (Abel refers to the comic rack as "the poor man's art gallery" and cites cartoonists like Mort Drucker, Mike Mignola, and Robert Crumb as major influences on his art, along with Rembrandt, Piero della Francesca, Toulouse Lautrec, Lucien Freud, and Honoré Daumier.) In an informal autobiography describing his early years, Abel confessed, "I have little in the way of inborn talent, but I was persistent and capable of evolution."

Among the themes that engage Abel, being a man of the people, are the grotesque, society's misfits, fringe elements, the disenfranchised, casualties of war, and the sick and the dying. People struggling against seemingly insurmountable odds can be seen in dramatic narrative vignettes that evoke heroic biblical or mythological themes. In a similar vein, Abel is particularly adept at rendering rusty Volkswagens and old abandoned trucks, gnarled oaks hugging windswept hillsides, and desolate landscapes with vestiges of human habitation. You get the picture.

Abel's drawings, most of which incorporate the human figure in some way, are quirky and interesting, not only in their subjects, but also technically. In his most complex drawings, he often uses two or more media on gray Canson paper, achieving marvelous results by augmenting pen-and-ink crosshatching with white gouache, stump charcoal, airbrush, etc. One of the best demonstrations of Abel's drawing ability and use of light and shadow can be found in a series of etchings depicting abandoned vehicles and other subjects that he produced in the late 1980s through the late 1990s.

Not surprisingly, being the least disturbing of Abel's art, it is his landscape paintings that resonate most strongly with the general public. However, these works have

no relationship to the warm, sun-dappled clichés mass marketed by commercial galleries. Even the brightest ones have a haunting air. More often than not, cloud formations hang forebodingly in the sky and one can almost sense a chill in the air. Daylight fades, obscuring detail. Trees, darkening silhouettes, take on the attributes of twisted figures. The viewer is transported to another time and place.

Ironically, looking at Abel's career in its entirety, landscapes are somewhat of an afterthought. When a spinal ailment and radical surgery left him partially paralyzed, he was forced to learn to draw and paint with his left hand. Landscapes, which required less dexterity and the tight linear draftsmanship he was used to, were the subjects that were easiest for him to paint. Now that Abel is almost fully recovered, his landscapes are a memorable legacy that still continues.

Another aspect of Abel's technique that is especially effective in his paintings – one that has become a distinguishing characteristic of his art – is the red-toned ground (primer) he uses. Abel began toning his canvases and boards with transparent earth red, burnt sienna, and transparent earth brown early in his career; a practice among studio painters that is thought to date back to medieval times. However, it was only in the mid-1990s that Abel began letting tiny patches of red ground remain visible between his brushstrokes. He also began leaving exposed a narrow band of ground around the perimeters of his paintings. Only part of this band would eventually be covered by the lip of the frame when the work was completed. This mat-like buffer between the image and the frame, combined with the vibrancy added by the hints of tinted ground percolating through the image itself, greatly enrich the color dynamic of his paintings and rank among the most distinctive aspects of his art.

Abel's paintings are beautifully executed, the color is sublime, and they can be interpreted on a number of different levels. They speak to the poet in all of us and provide a welcome respite from the coldness of much of today's art.