

CURATOR'S STATEMENT FOR "JOHN DANIEL ABEL: NOCTURNES"

August 20 to October 29, 2011

Mark-Elliott Lugo

Curator, San Diego Public Library

*THE GENESIS OF AN EXHIBITION*

For the past few years I have dreamed about curating an invitational group exhibition of paintings and drawings depicting night-related themes. This was an outgrowth of my long-time fascination with dark subjects and palettes, both as an artist and as a curator. Originally, I envisioned an exhibition emphasizing landscapes and seascapes, and hoped that by selecting artists whose mindset was fresh and contemporary, I would be left with a body of works grounded in classicism while exploring new territory. I was especially interested in seeing how other artists who might be new to the nighttime genre would be compelled to use understatement, nuance, mystery, and introspection to convey the essence of the theme.

The idea for a night-themed show first occurred to me during the lengthy evening walks I occasionally take through my beach-area neighborhood and along the seashore. In my part of town, the ideal time to experience the night begins approximately a half-hour before the bars close at 2:00 a.m., and ends around 4 a.m. The swift changes in mood during this brief period are fascinating. Initially, one can witness the noisy drama of inebriates leaving the bars and clubs (couples quarreling, brawls, senseless vandalism, etc.) and other forms of life in the raw. Minutes later, with the exception of an occasional straggler or automobile, the streets are deserted. Senses are heightened. The slightest sounds are audible blocks away, even above the low thunder of the ocean surf washing over the deserted beach a couple of blocks away. It's not difficult to imagine that you are the last person on earth, though the illusion of solitude is never complete because of the vague threat of danger that never leaves city dwellers.

It was this desolate, murky atmosphere of night that, in the role of curator, I had hoped to explore and reveal through a night-themed exhibition. The night offers an array of sights, colors, behaviors, sounds, and smells that are substantially, refreshingly, and intriguingly different from the day, especially in temperate climates like San Diego's where the bright sunlight intensifies colors, street life, and anything related to nature or outdoor activities. After

the sun sets, on the other hand, a lot of things happen that only an artist would notice or care about. At ground level, the beauty and mystery of the city, with its trees, buildings, people, and even wandering pets and nocturnal wild animals – illuminated or silhouetted by the moon, streetlights, and occasional automobile headlights – offer an alternative world of images for exploration. Looking skyward, especially after a storm, iridescent-hued cloud formations drifting across a full or partial moon are not only beautiful in and of themselves, but impact the lighting conditions on the ocean or terrain below. Certainly, as trained observers, artists could shed light on nighttime phenomena like no one else, especially since most people except insomniacs, graveyard shift workers, and criminals are asleep in the early morning hours. Ordinary folks miss the magic when it happens.

I was especially eager to launch this show as a much-needed variation on the tiresome, cliché-ridden landscape exhibitions that pervade commercial galleries. Figuration and street life, which rank among my primary interests as an artist and curator, would have to take a back seat to the proposed exhibition's landscape orientation, or so I believed at the time. After all, nothing could more quickly ruin the illusion of stillness and solitude than the presence of people. This was despite the fact that if ethics had allowed me to participate in this exhibition as an artist, my painting or drawing most likely would have included shadowy figures lurking among the vegetation or prowling the alleys – just to enliven the scene a bit.

To clarify a point before this text progresses any further, “nocturnes” is the correct term for night-themed works of art and, according to the McGraw-Hill Dictionary of Art, is a “somewhat obscure term applied to paintings, usually landscapes, that attempt to give poetic interpretations of evening or midnight.” In the early 1870s, James Abbott McNeill Whistler was the first visual artist to apply the term to painting, whereas previously it had been used in music to describe a short, melancholy piano piece, and also in French literature. Exactly what constitutes a nocturne in art has changed substantially since Whistler's time, especially with the advent of flash photography, the installation of electric lighting in urban areas, and, of course, the evolution of art itself. As I thought about the territory that could be explored through a nocturne-themed exhibition, vaguely discomfiting questions about its parameters and other issues arose and persisted.

For example, by tradition, the nocturne genre includes dusk, dawn, and twilight imagery; that is, the period between sunset and night when daylight remains visible, but is fading rapidly. Indeed, due to the use of artistic license, many nocturnes are unnaturally bright and virtually indistinguishable from daytime paintings. In order to remain true to my original concept and dark vision, I wondered if I should insist that all exhibited works portray the deepest night only, or could I be flexible and permit works whose subjects were illuminated by

at least some daylight? If I opted to show only dark works, would that orientation result in an intolerably oppressive and dreary exhibition?

Another issue perplexed me. Excluding the medium of photography, I wondered why night-time imagery appeared to be relatively uncommon in contemporary fine art, considering that half of our lives are lived after dark. In general, the only major night-themed works that I could remember were paintings by Rembrandt and other Old Masters, plus classics such as van Gogh's *The Starry Night*, *The Potato Eaters*, and his lesser known *Starry Night over the Rhône*; Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*; depictions of night life in Paris and Berlin by Toulouse-Lautrec and the German Expressionists, respectively; Henri Rousseau's *The Sleeping Gypsy*; and a smattering of paintings by Georgia O'Keeffe, J.M.W. Turner, and American Social Realists George Bellows, John Sloan, and Reginald Marsh. Thinking along more contemporary lines, only Sue Coe and the late David Baze came to mind. Baze was a San Diego-area artist whose memorable figurative imagery included feuding couples sulking in dimly lit bedrooms, presumably in the middle of the night. A chance encounter with Richard Allen Morris, one of the most informed and inventive artists in the city, resulted in the addition of Ross Bleckner to the list. The slick, densely patterned imagery swirling above black backgrounds and filling Bleckner's Constellation series paintings (1987-1993) edge-to-edge suggests photographs of night skies and outer space taken through a telescope. As in most contemporary art, however, its origins and intent are complex and ambiguous, so I'll let the art theorists debate whether or not his paintings qualify as nocturnes.

With conceptual distractions like this, it took John Abel to bring me back to earth and remind me of western artist Frederic Remington's substantial body of paintings in which he explored the technical and aesthetic difficulties of painting night-related western scenes, and of the exhibition "Frederic Remington: The Color of Night" at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. in 2003. The exhibition catalogue (it can be found in the open stacks at two San Diego Public Library locations) includes a major essay by William Chapman Sharpe, "What's Out There? Frederic Remington's Art of Darkness." Sharpe's exceptionally detailed and informative thirty-four pages of text proved to be an eye-opener and one of the best resources available on nocturnes in that it offered a comprehensive and well-illustrated history of the genre and of Remington's achievements in that area. Not to be overlooked is Alexander Nemerov's essay "Burning Daylight: Remington, Electricity, and Flash Photography" in the same catalogue. On line, ArtLex.com lists and illustrates nearly fifty nocturnes in various media, though detail is minimal. For those who are interested, <http://www.artlex.com/ArtLex/n/nocturne.html> might be worth a visit.

Returning to the reasons why night-themed works of art, to my knowledge, are not as prevalent today as they could be, I suspect that it's a function of the marketplace. Because of their dark palette and associations with mankind's primal fears of the unknown, death, despair, madness, horror, witchcraft, and haunting spirits, to name a few less-than-comforting attributes, nocturnes are likely perceived by artists as having a limited audience among a general population that prefers its art colorful and decorative. As such, the market demand for these works would be substantially less than for their sunny counterparts. The disheartening phrase uttered by wavering collectors, "I like it, but I wouldn't want to live with it," is heard all too often in these circumstances. I would not be surprised if the same mentality applied to curators under pressure by administrators to appeal to the tastes of their institutions' memberships and also faced with limited wall space.

Younger generations of painters, especially, who lack the observational and technical skills that used to be taught in traditional, studio-oriented classes, probably regard the task of working with the dark, nuanced values of a nocturne-oriented palette as being excessively difficult, tedious, or constraining. I'll be the first to admit that, as a curator, my highest respect is reserved for artists who can rise to a challenge and produce successful works while being limited by materials or themes imposed on them. For example, since I have never painted or drawn a night-themed work – but only fantasized about it – the pleasures of the night air and solitude I enjoy on my walks have been somewhat dampened by an unending stream of technical questions coursing through my mind as I stroll. The answers to questions like, "What color underpainting (blue, lavender, or green, for example) might best convey the luminescence of a particular evening?" could only come through actual work and experimentation. Other questions abounded. How I might go about mixing the colors I saw – dark ones, but not truly black? Would charcoal, oil, acrylic paint, oil paint, watercolor, pencil, pastels, or powdered graphite be more appropriate or effective to convey the essence of one nocturnal scene versus another? Would a nighttime photograph capture enough information to enable me to use it as the basis for a work in another medium?

Abel, the only artist I know who occasionally paints twilight and nighttime renditions of landscapes and neighborhoods, was the first artist I thought of including in this exhibition. Abel lives a rural lifestyle in Campo, and is the quintessential survivor, much like the isolated scrub oaks and battered, abandoned trucks and automobiles he is so fond of painting. Ironically, looking at Abel's career in its entirety, landscapes – his most popular works with the general public – came as 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 than the tight linear draftsmanship he was used to in his figurative

works, were the subjects that were easiest for him to paint. Now that Abel is almost fully recovered, his landscapes are a legacy that continues years later.

Abel's art, whether landscape or figurative, springs from a wide variety of sources ranging from the Old Masters to popular culture, but his nocturnal landscape paintings, in particular, reveal the influence of American Tonalists like Whistler, George Innes, and Ralph Albert Blakelock, among others. Although it is not a nocturne, per se, one of my favorite landscapes of all time (not on display here) is Abel's *Dark Sun*, a poetically gloomy, monochromatic landscape painted primarily in blacks and grays. Compositionally *Dark Sun* is pared down to the fewest possible elements and verges on being a minimalist abstraction. *Dark Sun* manifests qualities that I have always admired about Abel and his art. On one hand, he is able to operate with the restraint and subtlety of a minimalist, and on the other – especially in his figurative work – he unabashedly pours his heart and soul into gut-wrenching narratives that reveal the fragility and misery of the human condition like no other. As a master of darkness, whether in landscape or figurative works, Abel relishes the challenge of painting nocturnes. “When you're dealing with low light, you're dealing with tonality as much as color,” he explains. “There are no definitions for tonality, and colors are harder to define. You're working with colors that have no name.”

Communications between the two of us progressed over a period of months and, ultimately, it became clear that Abel could easily produce enough night-themed works to fill the Pacific Beach/Taylor Library Gallery, and more. Eventually, it was decided to give Abel his third solo exhibition with the Visual Arts Program, with all works having nighttime themes. Abel also came up with the title of the exhibition, “Nocturnes,” and was helpful in further focusing my thoughts about the subject, including his ideas mentioned above.

Later on, much to my delight, Abel broadened the scope of the exhibition to include figurative imagery, his first love, and, at the other end of the spectrum, a number of works that, at first glance, appear to be nonobjective abstractions. (Among the latter group are a half-dozen drawings evocative of masses of abstract expressionist scribbles, but which, in actuality, are straight-forward depictions of graffiti-littered urban walls. That being noted, Abel has long venerated Jackson Pollock's convulsive expressionism from the 1940s, and even went so far as to dedicate one of these “wall drawings” to Pollock.) The denizens of the night portrayed in Abel's figurative nocturnal vignettes are all drawn from his standard iconography of the disenfranchised in our society, and include drug addicts, the homeless, the sick, the mentally ill, the dying, and criminals. Reflecting Abel's strong interest in classic and historic painting, these are augmented by a sprinkling of references to tragic heroic figures from mythology. Titles like *Vietnam Vet with Glass Eyeball* (originally titled *Addled Vietnam Vet Taking Out His Eyeball*) and

*Girl Accused of Killing Her Boyfriend with a Claw Hammer* are clues to what can be found in this exhibition.

Another aspect of Abel's exhibition that is a departure from my original concept is the substantial number of mixed media drawings on paper. Abel is unapologetic about his artistic roots as an illustrator, and, indeed, the rendering skills he acquired as an illustrator have served him well over the years in the realm of so-called fine art. In previous interviews, Abel has referred 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, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Lucien Freud, and Honoré Daumier. Not only is Abel adept at rendering the human figure, the most difficult challenge an artist faces, but he has developed a distinctive style using an arsenal of media such as charcoal, ink, pencil, gouache, and airbrush.

"John Abel: Nocturnes" is the result of nearly three years arduous years spent in the studio painting and drawing. I am sure that viewers of this exhibition will find it as varied, fascinating, and memorable as I do.