

Dozier Bell: Descending, Lifting, Rising, Swells

by Carl Little, November 9, 2014



Dozier Bell, "Moon, 16:00" (2013), acrylic on panel, 16 x 20 inches (via danesecorey.com)

In a statement about her life and work written a few years back, Dozier Bell started off by highlighting her roots in Maine, which stretch back seven generations, and the role they play in the way she perceives the world. "Physical isolation, the cultural tendency to reticence, and the prominence of the natural world in day-to-day experience," Bell noted, "fostered habits of thought in which the visual and the unspoken carried a great deal of weight."

Despite her native credentials and lifelong association with Maine (she was born in Marsden

Hartley's hometown of Lewiston in 1957 and currently lives in Waldoboro), Bell has never been inspired to represent its famed landscape — no Monhegan headlands, no Prout's Neck rocky coast, no Mount Katahdin eminence, no working waterfronts. Yes, much of her work has been in a landscape mode, and maybe recent paintings of the surface of the sea owe something to the nearby Atlantic, but the subjects have arisen primarily from those "habits of thought" more than from her surroundings.

Bell's is a kind of darkly romantic vision, often northern in nature. Employing acrylic, photomontage and other means and mediums, over the years she has created a body of work that embraces enigma even as it represents the truth of her perceptions, whether she is considering her origins or the elegiac vagaries of World War II (she went on a Fulbright to Bauhaus University in Weimar, Germany, in 1995-1996).

Bell is tuned into a kind of parallel universe, one that has ties to Eastern Europe, but one that also reflects thoughts of a future where birds wheel across the sky and the clouds briefly break to reveal dark countryside. Her oceans are what we imagine will eventually envelop us: swelling with depths of darkness.



Dozier Bell, "Riverbank" (2014), acrylic on linen, 20 x 28 inches (via danesecorey.com)

The [exhibition](#) of new work at Danese/Corey (through November 15) extends Bell's explorations of a stark world, sometimes populated by birds. It is not exactly post-apocalyptic as some of her early

work seemed to be, although she notes in a statement for the show that the impact of climate change may be influencing her vision (a painting like “Floodwaters,” 2012, certainly points to this).

Bell’s penchant for old world landscapes comes through in “Descending” (2012) and “Citadel” (2014). In the former we see the silhouette of a city immersed in a smoggy glowing half-darkness — a place where perhaps at certain times of the year it might seem like evening all day. The latter, with its tower-like structure cutting into the sky, had me humming a line from Dylan’s “All Along the Watchtower”: “Two riders were approaching/And the wind begin to howl.”

Bell’s paintings are all about light and they are romantic in that regard, at times almost Luminist: see “Ridge” (2012), with its streak of gold between earth and heavens. The true ancestors in the room are Blakelock and Ryder. She shares those painters’ ability to bring light out of darkness, be it dim moonlight in a pool in a forest or a patch of snow in pine woods, and to record gradations of dark.

As with some of the charcoal drawings of Emily Nelligan, one must adjust one’s eyes to make out the contours of a land mass or fir trees or riverbank — peer and squint and carefully roam to find one’s bearings. Art historian Meyer Schapiro called Nelligan’s charcoal studies of Great Cranberry Island “beautiful poems in blacks of a rare delicacy of tone and surface.” That appraisal came to mind when viewing the twelve charcoal-on-Mylar landscapes in Bell’s show. Mostly made in the last three years, all of them are very small, from 2½ by 4½ inches to 3 by 6 inches (in the [catalogue](#) they are reproduced in their actual size). They are warm and dark and often echo the compositions of larger acrylic pieces in the show.

Bell’s paintings bring to mind a host of associations. Her castles make one think of Rilke’s “Duino Elegies.” Her desolate but beautiful landscapes bring to mind Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. The haunted quality of certain pieces recalls the poetry of Louise Gluck.

Mostly though, these paintings transport us to richly realized worlds. In “Flock, Haze” (2014), for example, we are placed at the edge of a cliff where sharp-winged birds scissor across a mist-laden sky. The landscape below offers dim outlines of distant hills and fragments of water. Two handsome seascapes, “Swells” (2012) and “Low Clouds, Flock” (2013) set us upon voluminous waters. And sometimes she does away with orientation altogether, offering a study of dissipating clouds, a rectangle of atmospheric sky where a migration of birds is taking place.

Bell is essentially an elegist, but as with any composer of elegies, she leans to poetry and the splendor of the afterworld. These are lost places she has found.

[Dozier Bell: New Paintings and Drawings](#) continues at Danese/Corey (511 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through November 15.