

# Love of nature shows in brush strokes

By HELEN ZUCKER

The new Larry Zox show at the Rubin Gallery is breathtaking. The 15 acrylics, all vintage 1978-79, were nearly sold out on opening night, May 1. It is not surprising. Zox's canvases are filled with a rare tenderness; a feeling for the sweep of sea, sky, and earth that is surprising for an artist who has spent the last 20 years of his life painting in New York City.

But the impressions made in childhood are strongest, and Larry Zox spent his boyhood living near fields and streams in Des Moines, Iowa. His love of the earth has been translated into a sweet purity of color. He fills his canvases with large, subtle stainings, and has the wit to leave points of contact for the eye to follow. We know where we are, in very specific, untouched country, poetically rendered.

ZOX REMINDS ME of one of my favorite painters, Nicholas de Stael. Like de Stael, who moved from pure abstraction to figuration, to landscapes and still lifes, Zox moves with great precision through the Rothko region of color, the final negation of everything else, and emerges on the other side, into daylight, into the possibility of painting the world as it is.

Zox once stretched canvases for Mark Rothko, and he admires Jules Olitski and Larry Poons — the critics of abstract expressionism.

But I think Zox has moved further than he realizes. Footholds are necessary. In the great washes of color Zox is capable of, one senses the presence of an artist who cares enough to lend a guiding hand, who is eager to help you explore the wild edges of the world.

In "Cox Ledge," the red sun opens over the sea. The orange sky melds into

the gray, and tangerine air hovers over the land.

Looking at the painting is like being there, feeling the sun on your face. In "Baronet Bridge," Zox's tremendous feel for open spaces is immediately apparent. Orange turns to blue, the sea becomes earth browns and grays. The composition is terrific. Small shapes move into long, flowing stretches. Zox understands color as few artists do.

THE VERY SUBTLE "Middle Orange" builds from a rich tangerine center fading toward grays. Light works toward the dark edges in a particularly vivid way. It's refreshing. There's nothing morbid in any of these paintings.

I loved "Stone Crest," the painting the show was built around. The "Niagara" series, filled with dark orange moving into light, then into Venetian red and layers of light green, is a visual treat — a hail of falling light, leaping water.

Allen Rubin did a brilliant job hanging this show. All the paintings look like the separate entities they are. "Red Hook," with its expanse of sky, gray rock, mustard and pink sands slashed by a red and green edge, is a place I know — seen anew through Zox's vision. The sweet slashes of paint work in every one of these lucid paintings.

LIKE HIS WORK, LARRY ZOX is refreshing. He looks like he could take on Joe Lewis with no problem, but has

chosen to hurl his energy onto canvas instead. A serious fisherman, he has worked in the merchant marine, on construction crews, driven trucks, and grown vegetables in his garden in Southampton every summer.

His wife, a city girl, "never goes near my vegetable patch," Zox said fondly. "She thinks vegetables grow in markets." He is deeply attached to his two children, and proudly credits his eight-year-old son with several of the titles on his paintings.

I believe Zox when he talks about his son's rapport with his works. Children exposed to art from infancy often display the ability to understand color, field and abstract art. A sensitive kid lucky enough to grow up in a studio soaks up a knowledge of painting as easily as he learns to read. Painting, after all, is simply another language.

Zox himself comes from a farm background. He was knocked out by the sight of guards at a Hans Hofmann show at the Des Moines Art Center in the late 1950s. Farmers, not believing their eyes, walked up to the paintings and tried to take the rich gobs of paint off in an effort to understand what Hofmann was doing. Guards were called in to keep the farmers away from the exciting works. The scene sent Hofmann and a friend to try their luck in New York.

Zox's parents didn't approve of his "mad enterprise." Zox said he starved for eight months in "a basement apartment two floors below ground level. It was so bad the landlord wouldn't even come to collect the rent." This artist

seems to have total recall.

His sense of yesterday is as keen as his sense of today. He returned to Des Moines for a very brief interval and then went to live permanently in "the seaport town of New York."

HE ENJOYS WALKING around New York harbor and said, "Most of the people in Manhattan don't even know they're surrounded by water." (That's accurate. City dwellers dream of mountains and green fields when they want to get away; they don't walk along the waterfront, dreaming about the ocean.)

Despite the years he has been away from Des Moines, Zox vividly remembers his art teacher in grade school, Miss Hanrahan, and his art teacher in high school, a shrewd lady named Julia Keeler, who has since become a trustee of the Des Moines Art Center.

"I was the only boy in the class," Zox recalled. "All the girls had no trouble solving the color problems she gave us. I worked like a dog — really struggled. I thought Miss Keeler was encouraging me."

"When I had a show at the Des Moines Art Center in 1971," he said, "I told Miss Keeler how much I appreciated her help. She told me, 'Oh, you were a big guy. I just kept you around to move the furniture.' I was crushed."

Fortunately, Zox has a good sense of humor. He laughs about his tough-guy appearance and the number of chairs he broke accidentally. He is certainly no bull in a china shop in a studio. His paintings are filled with the delicate

sensibilities of a first rate poet. Behind the joshing about "that seaport town," Zox is clearly a man with a first-rate mind who knows exactly what he is about.

He has had many one man shows: The Andre Emmerich Gallery; the Kornblum Gallery; the Whitney Museum in New York; Galerie Riccio in Cologne, West Germany; Daniel Templeton

Gallery in Paris, and many university shows. Zox won a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1967 and a National Council of the Arts Award in 1969. His paintings can be found in the Tate Gallery in London, the Joseph Hirshhorn Collection, the J. L. Hudson Collection in Detroit, the Museum of Modern Art, and many others. His work has been included in many group exhibitions.

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