

ART

East meets West in compelling landscapes

By TERRINGTON CALAS
Contributing writer

There is an old aesthetic dictum that aims to both elevate and circumscribe what serious art should be. It calls for the artist to master "a religion of his own, to express an original view of the infinite." The "infinite" translates as nature. And the dictum, written nearly 200 years ago by a German philosopher, amounts to one fundamental ideal: that God's wilderness, in all its unfathomable wonder, is art's only suitable theme. This is classic Northern Romantic thinking, geared to a distant, more spiritual time when an artist's mission was as much priestly as aesthetic.

But now, with the neo-expressionist 1980s barely waning behind us, it seems far less distant. It seems, in fact, increasingly appropriate again. Artists like landscape abstractionist Su Gross make this clear. In her mystical paintings, currently on display at the International House Club, I sense that this German concept has special meaning. But not for the obvious reasons.

It is true that the last decade of revivals and reappraisals made us newly aware of the northern Romantic tradition, including the notion of the spiritualized landscape. And more than a few young neo-expressionists managed to evoke this ethos in their work. But Gross's connection is unique. There is no trace of real expressionism in what she does. In this series of medium-sized canvases — mostly flat, and in pasty tints — she recalls the same Romantic ardor for the natural environment, and she does so with what appears to be a contradictory attitude.

Gross is not German. She is, in fact, Korean-born, came to this country in 1973 at the age of 24, and studied art in several fine American schools. By evidence of her work, she has retained crucial ties to her Eastern past. That past, coupled with her education, may explain the odd but compelling aura she brings to landscape. Her work embodies both traditions.

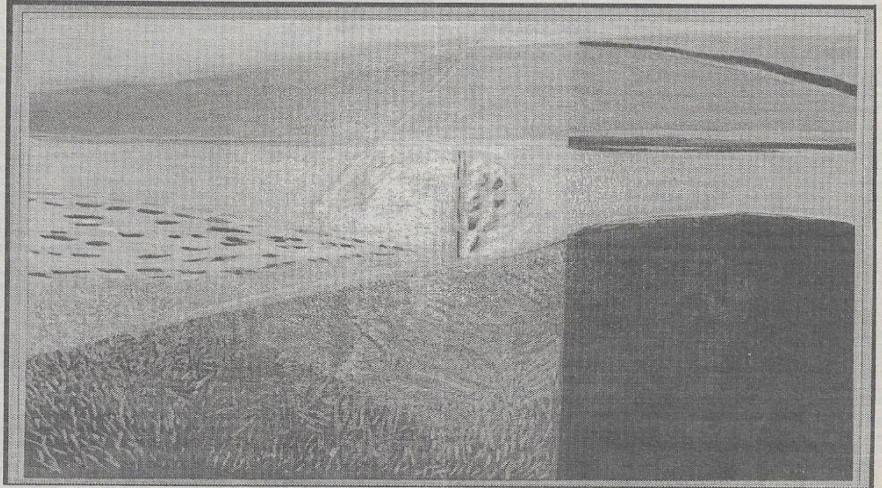
In western landscape painting, the most intense posture derives from the 19th-century English and German, specifically J.M.W. Turner and Caspar David Friedrich. It is a posture that saw nature as divine. But it also saw it as terrifying,

unknowable. Friedrich's dark, melodramatic pictures say it all. They betray a situation in which the artist-priest worships before nature's altar, all the while trembling at the thought of so much grandeur, mystery and might. Those images verge on the masochistic. There are moments when the human figure, depicted as pitiable and diminished, seems almost at the point of leaping into some deep, murky abyss.

Nor did this view change much in our own century. The vocabulary may have become abstract, but the sentiment remained the same. When certain American abstractionists in the 1950s emerged with a profoundly emotional style, it, too, was based in the Northern Romantic tradition. Those artists, in search of transcendental

her, the spiritualized landscape is pervaded with the luminous, open quality of classical Eastern art. It harks all the way back to the uncluttered timelessness of Zen painting and the Japanese printmaking that so influenced early modernism in the West. The tone is poetic, pensive, without drama. And yet, a vague Western edge, a particular tenseness, remains.

This is especially true of her more complex and, arguably, best works. In "Inner Light No. 27," for example, nature is seen as a conceptualized seascape, as mysterious and ominous as the Germans would have it, but radiant and airy and inviting. The painting is actually two distinct compositional zones on a single canvas — the larger left side painted in high-keyed warm



In works such as 'Inner Light No. 27,' with its two distinct compositional zones, Su Gross combines elements of both Western and Eastern landscape traditions.



'Inner Light No. 25' is the most elaborately structured painting in the show.

imagery, invariably alluded to the arcane majesty of nature. In the most effective instances, they did this by depicting a gargantuan somber void — a chilling representation of man's absolute failure to see and reach the deity.

Gross's view is markedly different. To be sure, she is likewise essentially abstract. She also appears to seek the transcendental in nature. But her work is free of the pessimism that Northern Romanticism and its heirs never ceased to portray. For

there are broad passages of Impressionist-like daubs and abrupt high-contrast diagonals. No other canvases in this show reveal so many formal and technical risks; nor do they reveal such virtuosity in overcoming them.

This is also the only work exhibited here in which cool greens and blues predominate. They vacillate between mere description of observed landscape and an intimation of undefined melancholy. The melancholy stays with us. But, in the end, it is the kind of sweet melancholy that diffuses much Eastern-inspired art. What keeps us from drowning in it is the uncommon balance that Gross wields — an East-West balance that, in certain paintings, is gratifyingly rich.

INNER LIGHT SERIES

What: Paintings by Su Gross.

Where: International House Club, 607 Gravier St.

When: Through April 16.

colors, and the right side cooler and dark. Initially, there is the simple suggestion of day versus night, both nebulous and impenetrable. But, on either side, thin bands of yellow-orange zip across the plane, animating the whole and, ultimately, reading as an emblem of hope.

The most elaborately structured painting in the show, "Inner Light No. 25," moves closest to discernible reality and, at the same time, is most related to the Western tradition. Despite a somewhat rough impasto in Gross's handling of the paint, trees and water and land are clearly articulated. The trees are blocked in as gestural silhouettes, almost insinuating the black leafless forest in several of Friedrich's signature works. Something akin to the German's overriding sense of doom is also apparent. But, as before, Gross's approach counters the effect. In this case,