

In New York, Chris Ballantyne's Human Geography

BY CODY DELISTRATY | JANUARY 21, 2019



One of Chris Ballantyne's landscapes from his exhibition at George Adams Gallery in New York. (© Chris Ballantyne/courtesy George Adams Gallery)

Chris Ballantyne's exhibition "Temporal: Recent Paintings and Watercolors" at the George Adams Gallery in New York, on view through March 3, explores a world in which suburban housing sprawls infinitely outward, apartment complexes seem to rise up into the sky forever, and humans, curiously, are nowhere to be seen. Ballantyne's unpopulated landscape paintings maintain the vestiges of humanity in their architecture and buildings, but they ultimately question where this development is taking us, and how we've come to relate to nature. Is nature, perhaps now, best understood as an empty highway? Have humans painstakingly crafted their own demise?

Ballantyne, who was born in Mobile, Alabama, and now lives and works in New

York is an exceptionally soft-spoken artist. He's reticent to provide interpretations or easy answers to his paintings and drawings, even as there's much to be taken from them. With colors that evoke Alex Katz and an eye toward a near-apocalyptic future, Ballantyne has come up with one of the most intriguing exhibitions currently on in the United States.

Just before the exhibition opened to the public, Modern Painters spoke to Ballantyne.

You grew up in Alabama?

My dad was in the Coast Guard and we just happened to be stationed down there when I was born. We were there for the first four years of my life, and then every few years, basically, he was transferred to another station, all just within the coastal US. We went from there to Texas, California, Maryland, and back again. That was sort of my continental upbringing.

How did all of that jumping around effect your art? One of your central themes is empty suburbia...

I guess it was always suburban neighborhoods. Every place we lived, they were always sort of around these cities; but, you know, it was just kind of a cold suburban upbringing. I guess it always sort of trapped [me]... even though they were in different places. I sort of got into working on these paintings that kind of use a little bit more of a generic style of architecture.

What is it you're trying to evoke then with this current work — because it's at once devoid of humans but also has the fingerprints of humanity like architecture and engineering?

I think I like to leave people out of it just because that leaves it maybe a little bit more open-ended. There are obviously these kind of open spaces or maybe even voids. But I think without people it leaves the narrative maybe more open-ended, less specific. Sometimes, even though there's kind of a peace to it, there's also maybe just a little bit of humor. Kind of a playfulness or something to it as well.

How do you see it as playful? With the bright colors?

Well, maybe, yeah, like you say with color. Also, with some of the buildings — they are lifting off, round, kind of floating. Or maybe it's even a little bit vague as to whether they're falling.

The title of the exhibition is "Temporal." It seems like a real tip-off to what you're trying to get across—almost apocalyptic, the temporary nature of humans.

Well, I think a couple of things: when you're in the city, like in San Francisco, maybe New York, that's where people are always in apartments, living in new situations. Also, the landscape itself is different and changing — sort of like with

climate change and any kind of environmental change too.

There's a pretty impressive mural that greets visitors of your exhibition...

The mural is actually like several floating townhouses or brownstones that you might see in New York, but they all kind of look like they're drifting up at different angles. Again, I think whenever you move to the city and you move into a new apartment, there's always people talking about issues with beautification and there's always this sort of upheaval. Maybe they're tearing down buildings next to yours or something and building new condos or something like that. That sort of thing.

Perspective seems key in your art. In most, the perspective is from above, looking down; but there are a few paintings where the perspective is bottom-up and those tend to be in your more urban paintings, like those of apartments. What explains these choices?

I think the ones where you're looking up at the sky are, for me, a counterpoint to how a lot of my days have been, where I was looking down for a long time. That's been pretty typical for me. So it's just a way to shift that a little bit and also have this openness, where the buildings are maybe on the periphery, maybe just popping from the edges.

What have you tried to achieve with this exhibition?

Part of it is just my own process, competing, having this kind of physical nature. But then I also think there is maybe a sort of contemporary cultural—monetary even—critique that is based on our own environment and that influences where we live. It's also about space and family, like how spaces in suburban neighborhoods are so much different than the more dense kind of urban cities. It's just one part of what you might take away from it. I don't want to be too literal.