

John Miller *Hommage an Karl May*

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Hommage an Karl May

Central to popular myth of American identity is the landscape of the Southwestern United States. It dominates the supposedly immutable bond between land and people. Many, with no intended irony, call this region "God's Country". Its seeming boundlessness once promised every new settler unprecedented freedom. Its utter wildness also promised an escape from the decadence of European civilization and the chance to build a new society from scratch. Ironically, the new Americans were mostly European immigrants and they rendered the territory they pioneered "virgin" partly by eliminating its indigenous population. The Southwestern frontier's very scale, desolation and ruggedness also redefined earlier European ideas about pictorial landscape, taking it from picturesque majesty to sublime menace.

Not surprisingly, an avant-garde art colony later formed near Taos, New Mexico, centered around the figures of Georgia O'Keefe and Alfred Stieglitz. Equally not surprising, is that much of the artwork subsequently produced in this area devolved into kitsch, i.e. paintings for the area's tourists. The touristic character of these more recent works, however, bears the less sublime truth of ongoing social, historical and economic relationships between the land and the people of the United States. Perhaps, then, one can chart the transition from legitimacy to disrepute only with some difficulty.

John Miller painted the series of landscapes paintings shown here from reproductions in picture books about the Southwest. If he displayed these paintings in a more delegitimized context, perhaps they could pass for the paintings they mimic. The artist's choice of titles registers this gap; each is a phrase drawn from reviews or texts about other, apparently much different, work he has made. This displacement serves to index these paintings to the so-called official art world, a place from which they have never departed. The subject these works depict is landscape; the subject they imply is the social differential which can effectively legitimize a particular esthetic or not. One fantasy always has the potential to displace another.

An additional painting stands in contrast to the landscapes. It represents an American television "game show". The source for this image is a photographic production still, made for an newspaper and magazine publicity. Such game shows seem to register the corruption of American values. They may, however, ultimately help to create and to disseminate those values.