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The Valley Series: Recent Paintings by Keith Jacobshagen

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Looking into Salt Valley from South 37th Street 1988, oil on paper, 8 1/2" × 9 1/2", Collection of Mr. & Mrs. Greg Fitzgerald, New York

THE VALLEY SERIES
Recent Paintings by
KEITH JACOBSHAGEN

September 20 – December 4, 1988
Keith Jacobshagen has been a member of the Art Department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln since 1968. During the past ten years, he has established a national reputation as a painter of the midwestern landscape. His studies of the plains are thoughtful assessments of familiar views. But, while Jacobshagen’s paintings document the particular conditions of weather, light, topography, and their effect on the land, they also transcend the specific to function as metaphors for the human condition: a solitary viewer surveying an expanse of farm land; a transitory, cloudy sky meeting the cultivated fields; the sky as mystery touching the known earth. The myriad emotions, seasons, and times of day present in a Jacobshagen landscape pivot on the ever-present, but inexplicable horizon.

INTERVIEW WITH THE ARTIST

Daphne Anderson Deeds: Landscape has been interpreted as history, mythology, personal anecdote, and religious symbolism. What does landscape painting mean to you?

Keith Jacobshagen: All of the above. I have no doubt that it has everything to do with a kind of personal history on my part. I think that is how it started out for me. It was a way of going back over the things that were important to me as a child—the experiences that I had as a child, about flying with my father in the country airports, living close to the edge of Wichita, and being able to go out to the fields. That personal history is not apparent to people who look at the paintings, but it is apparent to me, and it feels like it is a natural, inherent part of the work.

DD: Is that a requirement? Do you need that feeling to proceed?

KJ: You know I have never really been able to decide whether it is actually a sort of unwritten requirement or not. I have often wondered if my emotion about the formal structure of something I see out there is always directly linked to that past experience. I sort of doubt it because I think I have too much history of looking at contemporary and historical landscape painting now, and that has all gotten mixed in with the early memories. But I think that it is still part of it, maybe, in a lesser way.

DD: There are those artists that would reject an anecdotal tendency.

KJ: I have never tried to discard it. I have always had a strong feeling about a sense of historical signature in painting. A sense of a building of time as the painting is created and structured, and not just the time the painting is being painted, but the time that goes back even before the painting has even become a possibility.

DD: Do your paintings also refer to an art historical time?

KJ: I think so, yes.

DD: So that there are several issues relating to duration—personal and actual and art historical. Throughout art history in both occidental and nonwestern cultures, landscape has been a constant and evolving genre of painting. How do you see your work within the history of landscape painting and relative to the issue of permanence and the idea that a landscape painting can capture a sense of reality? I am thinking of the difference between a 19th century concept of landscape wherein the viewer is encountering nature with a capital N, and having dialogue with God, and transcendental issues. And then the kind of landscape that Cezanne was making which was much more of a direct dialogue from the source. And also, the painterly quality that these small studies had. I found those to be very persuasive. And I was looking at those also at about the same time that I was beginning to look at de Kooning and the abstract expressionists.

DD: Have you sustained that interest in Constable now or was that an early phase of your development?

KJ: I still go back and look at him. I am probably looking at the 17th century Dutch landscape painters a little bit more right now more than I am looking at Constable, but I have never given up on looking at him. I mean, it’s 22 or 23 years later, and I still go back and pull out my Constable books and look at them.

DD: When you refer to the Dutch, I imagine that you are referring to a sense of control and the stillness that they imbue their work with. Is that something that you are striving for now or is it, on the other hand, possibly setting up a tension for you to look at their work and yet to be still relating to Constable?

KJ: That’s an interesting way to put it. I think that, yes, maybe in a way that is true. I have set some issues for myself in looking at both of them now that causes a kind of tension and energy that makes it even more interesting to me.

DD: It seems to me that the space we are referring to, between polarities of realism and expressionism, between Constable and the 17th century Dutch, that we seem to be between staying in that place. The space between realism and expressionism arrives at a very precise place in your work. How do you talk about the space? Is it a challenge to adhere to that self-imposed limitation or do you sometimes worry about being too comfortable within the confines of landscape generally? I think it could be seen as a limitation or a kind of refuge.

The following interview was conducted during July, 1988. It is printed here to accompany The Valley Series, an exhibition of work completed during Jacobshagen’s summer from teaching at the University, 1987 to 1988. Throughout that year, the artist returned to the river valleys of Nebraska, Southern Iowa, and Northern Kansas. All the work in The Valley Series refers to the artist’s experiences on the Big Blue, Missouri, Platte and Sal River Valleys.

Daphne Anderson Deeds Curator
IQ: I believe that all painters have to set limits to begin with in order to get it done. I think I set limitations for myself years ago because I wasn’t trained as a painter. I had to set very specific limitations throughout the process of learning because I was really learning on my own. Those have carried on into my work 20 years later. They now tend to be a challenge that within a particular kind of vision and limitation I can still continue to somehow expand. Yes, I think that there is a great deal of truth in that — the issue of realism, the issue of expressionism, and also the issue of abstraction I suppose. There’s no doubt about the fact that I think that one also at times becomes comfortable within a particular language, and you stay within that to a certain extent because it is comfortable, and it can become a refuge.

DD: In modernist art history Cezanne interpreted landscape as a system of planes which was relinquishing the one point perspective and implied a telescopic foreshortening of space which led to 20th century painting as a surface devoid of illusion. Again, I think that that points out in your work a tension between within a particular language, and you stay within that to a certain extent because it is comfortable, and it can become a refuge.

IQ: The physical landscape, yes, sure. There are times in which I go through two or three stages when I’m actually out there working. The first stage is just sort of pure unadulterated, emotional, romantic attitude towards this extraordinary thing that I’m looking at. Like last night I was working over on the hill west of Ashland, looking towards Ashland and out to where you can just barely see a strip of the Platte River Valley. It’s a place that I have been attracted to for the last year, and I have gone over and made some drawings. But last night I went over and made a little watercolor. When I first arrive, I am very much aware of a kind of factual documentary attraction my work has. But within a very short period of time, that all begins to change for me. I begin breaking things up, I suppose, into a more formal attitude. I think that I really believe that the painting would not work in the way that they do for me if I was to hold onto a constant factual rendering of what I see in front of me. I did that for eight years when I worked only outside and directly from the source for that period from about 1969 to about 1977 or 1978. I worked with it right in front of me, directly in front of me, let it impose itself on me as fact so that the process of learning was going on there.

DD: Do you think that some reference to Renaissance space is required of a landscape?

IQ: No, I don't. I think of, for instance, Dove, who is a painter that I greatly admire, a painter who I am looking at. In the last five years, I have been looking at a lot of the Americans — Hartley, Dove, Avery, and then I have been looking a lot at Hopper lately.

DD: And yet I would say that everyone you have just referred to does have some relationship to illusionism, some reference to one point perspective. They never really give themselves over to complete abstraction.

IQ: Yes, I think you are right about that.

DD: You have stated that though you often work on site, you also liberally rearrange reality to suit your composition. And yet your work always refers to a basically recognizable locale. How do you balance the realism and the recreated composition which might be referred to as the “ideal”?

IQ: I think I tried to stay away from the word “ideal” in my own mind, partly because it may refer too directly to a kind of 19th century romanticism.

DD: It is a very intimidating word.

IQ: It's a terrifying word. I think one of the things that I am doing now is, especially with the work that is inside the studio, I have become fascinated by the idea of invention. A title may very specifically refer to a place, and that title means that I was influenced by that place, that I was on the spot in that place, looking at a drawing from it, or whatever might have happened.

Evening on the Valley Floor 1987-88, oil on paper, 12” × 26”, Courtesy of Dorry Gates Gallery, Kansas City, Missouri
And that is somehow made a very deep emotional connection for me that then went into the process of a painting. The paintings may not have taken place there. And in a way, if you were to take the painting out to that spot it might not look anything like it. I might have so completely eliminated specific things and added new things during the process, that the painting took place in the studio, that it changed completely. But, first and foremost is fact. And I'm interested in that. I don't want to obscure fact to the point where fact is no longer important. Now the fact may only be in the title, but yet it continues to be important to me. It gives it a kind of literary foundation for this painting to set on. And I think even if I eventually completely break away from what feels like factual paintings, which is what these paintings feel like, I think that I would still continue to title them very specifically.

DD: Your titles are almost like diary entries as opposed to documentation. Would you say that the titles are more literal references when you are outdoors painting? Do they become more a kind of metaphor when you are indoors painting?

KJ: I think that might be right.

DD: Does that then mean your paintings that are done plein aire are in fact more literal than those that are in the studio?

KJ: Oh, they are. Yes, they are. Even though I change things around, when I'm out there I am so attracted to what I see that it is difficult for me to change it. That is a struggle. Actually, in a way, it is a struggle that I am confronting right now in still working direct. I am trying to be less literal, but I find it very difficult.

DD: So we have another dichotomy between painting outdoors and painting in the studio. Your work falls somewhere in the middle of those two locations.

KJ: And that is one of the reasons why I came back into the studio almost 10 years ago. Up until that time everything had been painted directly from the source. It was started outside and finished outside, and if it didn’t get finished then it wasn’t worked on at a later date. I didn’t bring it back and finish it. I think that in 1978 when I began to start painting in the studio, I was exhausted by the enormous limitations of working direct, those limitations that I imposed on myself and that nature imposed, the factual material imposed on me. I needed to free myself up. Now some people wouldn’t see studio painting as being freed up.

DD: To what extent has contemporary art influenced you? Are there living artists that are affecting this evolution that you have been referring to? Are you consciously seeking contemporary models?

KJ: Well, I am looking at contemporary art constantly. I am always looking at people who are alive and well and painting. I suppose that there must be people who are in very subtle kinds of ways affecting what I do. I look at Wolf Kahn. I think that in terms of contemporary landscape painters, there are certainly three or four that I would have to list up there. Wolf would be one. I have been looking at Backstraw Downs lately because I am interested in that sort of curious distorted panoramic thing that he’s doing which he says is nonphotographic, but which looks as though it has been based on photographs. But he says he works directly from the source, makes drawings. I am interested in the way that he is bending the stuff, and I am also interested in his palette. I love looking at those kinds of extreme realist images that he’s making right now.

DD: When you talk about bending the space, it makes me wonder if that’s not an intuitive reference to your own experience with the airplane.

KJ: When I set a painting up, I don’t set it up with a kind of intellectual experience of perspective in mind. I set it up from an emotional point of view first of all. When I sit down in front of that piece of paper or that canvas, and I put a horizon line across it, which is the very first thing that I do, I immediately set a perspective, but that perspective is very abstract. It is just a line that floats or sits on the surface. And it also refers to the farthest point in the painting. But then I start setting these other things up in a way that either refers to the horizon line as being directly in front of me or below me. Mostly it seems to be slightly below me, and that has to do with that experience, I think, of flying.

DD: What is your understanding of the phenomenology of horizon lines? In many ways I think the horizon is somehow incomprehensible. Does it really exist? Do you make an attempt to locate it, to have it in some way, to capture it? Or are you conscious of it being very ephemeral and elusive?

KJ: I think that I try to locate it, because I learned at an early age that it was immensely important when I was flying with my father. I think it certainly made me aware of our human frailty and the smallness of our existence within this sphere that we live. I think that the other thing that it did for me is it gave me a sense of the fact that the horizon line is really invented by the human. It isn’t really based on fact at all. It is a structure, a limitation that we set for ourselves, so that we can better understand the earth that we roam around on. But when you become involved in dislocating yourself from the earth and flying over and actually becoming a part of the space because you are moving through it at an accelerated speed, and you have also let go of the earth, then I think the horizon line even
becomes more important because it is a guide. The horizon line is a curious and unusual attitude towards life which is finding some kind of balance, some sort of correlation, between how you live and your life, and how you exist in this paint that we push around on the surface.

**DD:** Is that in fact the metaphorical import of the horizon line?

**KJ:** I think it is. I think that I am not ready to let go of the horizon line now, and it may be that one of the things that fascinates me about Bill Jensen is the fact that he has let go of the horizon line. That has certainly happened to a certain extent in Dove, and it certainly happened in de Kooning.

**DD:** But you're not referring to those who completely let go of it — all the minimalists and all the color field painters.

**KJ:** I think that to a certain extent the reason I don't want to let go is that my history has nothing to do with letting go of the horizon line yet. My history is based on experience of moving through this world that I live in, and a lot of it still has to do with the world outside and not the world one hundred percent inside.

**DD:** When we talk about the horizon line as being a metaphor for the transitory nature of man, the next idea that comes to mind is how much is it also a reference to God or to the transcendental, which again refers to the 19th century approach. I wonder when you were in the the field, when you are in your studio, when you are dealing with that horizon line, how much are you having a dialogue with God, or are you not?

**KJ:** Well, it's certainly a question that has come to mind at various times when I'm out there. I'm not so sure that I can use the word God. I have experiences out there that are extraordinary. One of the extraordinary things that happens when you're painting, if you're lucky, is that you make a kind of breakthrough into a state of grace at times. That doesn't happen very often, but it happens sometimes. And at the end of it you sit back in a state of sublime exhaustion, and you say to yourself, "I don't know exactly what happened, but something very extraordinary happened." Now it happens also at times when I'm not painting. It happens when I'm just out there.

**DD:** Isn't that what Schopenhauer, among other people, would refer to as relinquishing the self and entering a completely subjective understanding?

**KJ:** I think that that is exactly true. You ultimately give up the ego and the intellect and give yourself to the process of just letting go of everything. It is something that I have certainly never been able to explain to myself. I am not a traditionally religious person in the sense that I go to church. There was a period of time back in the 60s when I read a certain amount of theological writing. There are times in which I refer to very specific religious dates in my paintings. If I'm out painting, say on a day of the Epiphany, then I will mention it in my paintings because I believe that there is something inherently special in the human spirit which has created these things for itself so that they can give names to these feelings that we have.

**DD:** But isn't the horizon more or less a name for reality that is somehow equivalent to naming a religious holiday or naming a feeling? I think there is some connection between the incomprehensibility of landscape and flying that horizon line.

**KJ:** To me it is the support. To me, the horizon is ultimately what gives us the human support between what is sublime and unexplainable and what is factual and somehow explainable.

**DD:** I imagine that is what Rothko was dealing with. In a way he was painting the horizon line.

**KJ:** Yes, I think so. I think that is what all the Abstract Expressionists were, at least in my own estimation, what all those guys were up to. I think that in a way, abstract expressionism was not just a major breakthrough in terms of a kind of stylistic phrasing of painting and an invention of what, everybody wants to see, but new language. Although, I really don't believe it was a new language.

**DD:** It is essentially a continuation of Romanticism.

**KJ:** Yes, it was very much a part of this desire to find this sublime quality or self.

**DD:** Sometimes I see in your work a dichotomy between the sky, which can be perceived of as highly abstract, and the more particular, more literal foreground. Is that intentional?

**KJ:** There is a great physical choreography that goes on with my art and the movement of the brush above the horizon. It is less choreographic and less physical below.

**DD:** Do you think that you are arriving at a more introspective understanding of landscape?

**KJ:** I would like to think that that is part of it. Part of it was metaphorically coming inside, this going into the studio to get further inside of myself. I certainly would have very emotionally charged and introspective times outside, but there were times when I felt like I couldn't get into the work because I was constantly on this treadmill of time. As I became more thoughtful about the formal aspects of the work, it became harder and harder for me to complete a work outside. During that period of time when I was outside, it was like a good jazz man who could play riffs. The technical expertise is there. He doesn't even think about it any more. The stuff just swims out of him, and it is all predicated by the people who are playing the music around him. I think that that is the way I was beginning to work from the landscape. I was just reacting to the things that happened in front of me. I think I really wanted to get away from that for a little while and insulate myself from that kind of reaction and see what would happen if the paintings then became more of a puzzle, more of a problem that could go on. One painting could go on for a long period of time.

**DD:** So what you may be saying is that when you are in the studio you are in control of time as opposed to being out of doors where time is in control of you.

**KJ:** And the studio is a place in which you can be thoughtful. I'm not saying you can't be thoughtful in front of nature. You certainly can, but I think that I allow myself to be a great deal more introspective in the studio than I do outside.

**DD:** Does that come out of a kind of humility when you are faced with the grandeur of nature?

**KJ:** Romantically I would like to think of it that way. I do not feel at all important when I am out there. And in fact, I have every sensibility that I am not. I will say this, that there is something that I like about painting outdoors. You can't posture out there because nobody gives a damn.

**DD:** Nature certainly doesn't.

**KJ:** Nature doesn't care, and the farmers are working out there. They're trying to keep their heads above water. And you can't prance around and act like an artist because nobody cares. It is just very practical and pragmatic when you are painting outside. You've got to get out there and get the job done just like the farmer does. And I am very attracted to that.

**DD:** Perhaps there is a balance that you are effecting in your work by being outdoors, by coming inside and going back and forth. A balance which you wouldn't be able to achieve if you stayed outside or if you stay inside. That balance poses interesting dichotomies — the transcendental and the tangible, the foreground and background, the ideal and the real — all balance on the persistent horizon line.
Exhibition Checklist

1. Looking into Salt Valley from South 37th Street 1988, oil on paper, 8 1/2" x 9 1/2", Collection of Mr. & Mrs. Greg Fitzgerald, New York
2. Salt Valley, Early Evening, 24 April 1988, oil on paper, 8 1/2" x 16", Collection of Tony Oppenheimer, Kansas City, Missouri
3. New Year's Eve South 27th towards Salt Valley 1987, oil on paper, 8 1/2" x 9 1/2"
4. Evening on the Valley Floor near Bigelow 1988, oil on paper, 12" x 26"
5. North of Hamburg, 14 November 1987, oil on paper, 14" x 16"
6. Late Evening - Big Blue River Valley 18 December 1987, oil on paper, 8 1/2" x 18"
7. In the Big Blue River Valley 9 March 1988, oil on paper, 14" x 28"
8. Tractor Road East of Greenwood 29 December 1987, oil on canvas, 40" x 70"
9. Evening of the Solstice, Cold Front 1987-88, oil on canvas, Numbers 3 through 9, Courtesy of Dorry Gates Gallery, Kansas City, Missouri
10. Tractor Road - Edge of Salt Valley 4 July 1988, oil on paper, 8 1/2" x 18", Collection of Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma
11. Evening West of Walton 19 January 1988, oil on paper, 10" x 28"
12. Late Afternoon, South 27th St. 1988, oil on paper, 10" x 28"
13. Farm Lights and Power Poles 1988, oil on paper, 10" x 28"
14. Evening in the Missouri River Valley North of Craig 28 May 1988, oil on paper, 10" x 28"
15. Solitary Silo - Fresh Paint Near Nebraska City 19 May 1988, oil on paper, 10" x 28"
16. East of Denton 11 August 1988, oil on paper, 10" x 28"
17. Hillside Tractor Road West of Platte River 9 February 1988, oil on paper, 8 1/2" x 18"
18. Spreading Evening Sky with Crows Winter 1988, oil on paper, 12" x 36"
19. Evening Big Blue Valley 18 December 1987, oil on paper, 8 1/2" x 9 1/2"
20. East of Ashland 28 December 1987, oil on paper, 8 1/2" x 9 1/2"
21. Evening in the Missouri River Valley Near Hamburg 19 November 1987, oil on paper, 8 1/2" x 16"
22. Evening, Platte River Valley towards National Guard Camp 29 December 1987, oil on paper, 8 1/2" x 16"
23. Windshift (Mid-afternoon) 1988, oil on canvas, 36" x 80" Courtesy of Mr. & Mrs. Perry Wilson of Lincoln, Nebraska
24. - 29. Six music manuscripts hand painted, all untitled, oil on paper, Courtesy of Randall Snyder and the Artist.

Acknowledgements

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