

ARTFORUM

Darren Waterston

DC MOORE GALLERY

Grand, visionary landscapes unfold across the seventeen oil paintings from 2012 in Darren Waterston's exhibition at DC Moore, all of which appear on gessoed wood panels (with the exception of *Edifice*, which is on canvas) and vary in size from large to small. The exquisitely strange scenes are based on nature. Meticulously drawn pine trees proliferate throughout, forming a dark ring around the luminous center of *City of Sun*, growing from a spindly, desiccated trunk in *City on the Edge*, or looming above an outcrop of rock in *Island*.

In the last of the works, a small, abstracted city sits beneath three trees. If the city is a synecdoche for the earth, the pustulelike red stars glowing in the sky may signal the planet's fate—feverish red being the color of a dying star. Likewise, the bubblelike "knots" that seem to grow on the trunk of the central tree may be cancerous tumors, suggesting that the tree will eventually expire, becoming a blurry ruin, as has the hazy treelike form to its right, or die, as the tree to its left has done. For the moment, however, that central tree remains triumphantly dignified, holding its own in the cosmic emptiness.

"Waterston has often engaged with mythological, theological, and natural histories," the gallery tells us. With this in mind, we might speculate that the three trees in *Island* allude to the crucifixion, as do the three trees in Rembrandt's famous print *The Three Trees*, 1643. The painting *Agony in the Garden* also appears to rework that famous theme, with twisted dead branches—one bloodred, the other gray—converging to form a sort of tormented figure, an invisible but felt presence that

conveys Christ's suffering in ambiguously abstract and natural terms. Similar allusions appear elsewhere. *The Isle of Pines*, for example, references Henry Neville's 1668 novel of the same title, but it could also be read as a reworking of Arnold Böcklin's *The Isle of the Dead*, 1880.

Waterston is elaborately equivocal. It is not clear whether he is mocking traditional religious motifs or using them to make the modern eschatological point that nature is dead or

dying. And the artist's paintings have an undercurrent of angry futility, perhaps most explosively evident in the blackly humorous *Cathedral*, which looks like a ruin on a Martian landscape.

Waterston's aesthetic vibrancy compensates for the morbidity of his vision. His backgrounds are composed of luxurious, overlapping fields of color; painterly flourishes abound, among them artful drips that defy gravity; and abrupt shifts in perspective add drama to the scenes. He finds beauty and sublimity in trauma. I suggest that Waterston is a latter-day Romantic naturalist, as much on the sublime edge as Caspar David Friedrich and as obsessed with infinite space and radiant light as J. M. W. Turner—though the nature Waterston's images depict has seen better days.

—Donald Kuspit

Darren Waterston,
Island, 2012, oil on
wood panel, 16 x 20".

