

## This Exceeding Brightness

by Maureen Bloomfield

Stewart Goldman, *Landscape With Bell Tower* oil on latex canvas (34 1/2' x 8')  
The Cincinnati Bell Training Center  
Erlanger, KY 1990

"The exceeding brightness of this early sun  
Makes me conceive how dark I have become...."  
Wallace Stevens, "The Sun This March,"  
*The Collected Poems*

"Color in itself is light. In nature, light  
creates the color; in the picture, color creates  
light." Hans Hofmann, *Search For The Real*

The only landscape painters that Edward Lucie-Smith considers in his problematic *Art In The Eighties* are Neo-Expressionists for whom landscape is a way of talking about history and for whom the large painting is an opportunity for making a public (i.e., political) statement.<sup>1</sup>

If one accepts Lucie-Smith's assessments as axiomatic of current critical discourse, Stewart Goldman's stunning commission for The Cincinnati Bell Training Center, at first glance, has no place. Amid alternating 12" x 12" squares of pungent color, linear gestures suggest terraced hills, undulating clouds, and Tuscan trees; this *Landscape* has nothing in common with the theatrical bombast and the turbid encrustations that have characterized recent international art. Goldman's brilliant composition is, instead, as complex as its light is limpid; this 34 1/2' x 8' panorama has at once the bravado of American Abstract Expressionist motifs and the rigour of a modular design. *Landscape With Bell Tower* eschews both elegy and apocalypse; it manifests humor rather than irony; it is informed with cerebral light rather than emotional darkness. It seems, in essence, to celebrate not only a

Cincinnati Bell Training Center, situated on a desolate, man-made lake. The Training Center's upper stories are tiers of blue, rectangular windows that multiply the American flag and mirror the changing sky. Once inside, the rectangles—of those windows, of the bricked entryway, of the building stones, and of the interior windows—are blissfully repeated by the squares of Goldman's splendid *Landscape* that fills the atrium's wall.

By using the square as a matrix, Goldman has divided the huge painting (actually completed in nine sections which were then seamlessly wallpapered to the wall) into a grid; each 12" x 12" square is thinly painted one, radiantly unnatural, non-primary color. Though the module as a basis of design conjures up the idea of the field-generated system, Goldman's arrangement seems rhapsodic rather than analytical. In contrast to Jennifer Bartlett whose recent work uses the white-bordered square as a way of breaking up the continuity of the single image, Goldman paints each square as a discrete picture and places it flush with its surrounding squares. The effect is insistent and intense, especially since the color is truncated, so that a rose square, for example, abuts a blue, which abuts an orange square. The vivid color, at once pasty and unearthly, seems Mannerist, right out of Pontorno or Veronese. The fields and hills are not green, but salmon and yellow—the same colors that inform the sky. Against this grid of effulgent color; fluent contours, reminiscent of Clyfford Still's fire shapes or of Milton Avery's ghostly hollows, suggest bushes, clouds, trees, but since each square is its own picture, with its own scale and perspective, the squares offset and refract each other, until the viewer perceives the visual sensations of light and line through shifting vantages, alternating points of view. With no visual center, but instead a



Stewart Goldman *Landscape with Bell Tower*, detail, oil on latex 34.5' x 8'

And *Bad Government* (1339, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena). The final, sly joke is that place of the cathedral that would bless a town, Goldman has, in the far right, implied, by a few ribbon lines, a bell tower: a play on the corporation's logo and an argument that the landscape's fruitful order implies the efficacy of man's and, by extension, the corporation's intervention.

While *Landscape* harks back to Goldman's earlier, lyrical series of Italian landscapes, it is possible that one of the privileges a commission confers is the opportunity to make a public statement that is not primarily personal or political, and hence more likely to be exultant or serene. In spite of the fact that *Landscape* evokes the vanished hills that Cincinnati Bell and other corporations have remade, it is not nostalgic or mushy-headed; it seems, instead, to be an essay on a difficult, dishar-

mony to the world.<sup>2</sup>

It is this harmonic "relatedness to the world" that contemporary art-watchers rarely find; it is the quality that another Cincinnati commission, Karen Heyl's wonderful wall-relief of *The Creation* (Good Shepherd Parish, Symmes Township) so joyfully expresses, and it is the quality that Goldman's multi-faceted paean to an orderly world invokes, as well. In fact, the pride with which the laity regard Heyl's wall relief has something in common with the gratitude which corporate trainees may feel as they escape the wasteland of I-275 into the radiance of *Landscape*. The square that is the picture's matrix is what one finds everywhere in the building—the mod-

ular couch snaking around the atrium, the TV screen announcing conference titles, the floor and ceiling tiles, the windows, the phones. The square is, of course, an image of a cell, and the reality of blocky telephone operators and "square" corporate trainees behind computer terminals is an image of a prison, an image that has its corollary in the idea of the self within the body's box. Goldman's *Landscape* finally may posit a way of seeing contemporary landscape as a paradise that can never again be "natural," but can still be redeemed, if one breaks out of the cubicle of the self, making a connection with other cells, with other, infinite sources of light. It is the humorous charm of this dazzling, challenging picture that the idea of harmony can be translated into the image of the bell, and the idea of transcendence into the module of the phone.



Stewart Goldman *Landscape with Bell Tower* oil on latex 34.5' x 8'

different time, but a different conception of time. For all these reasons, *Landscape With Bell Tower* is difficult to categorize.

It is also difficult to find. First, one has to take I-75 South to 275 as if on the way to the airport, and then suffer the dislocation of realizing that the lush expanse of hills has been graded flat in order to accommodate yet another series of tubular malls, flanked by signs reading "Now Leasing." Just off the Mineola exit, brick streets lead to an undistinguished, vaguely Art Deco building of terra cotta stone which a Peter Huttinger sculpture announces as The

series of visual centers, the picture is in motion; it unfolds like a screen, and the effect is of an aerial vantage, a way of seeing in fragments, and then, as one steps back, all at once. Thus, *Landscape* is an old-fashioned panorama, whose antecedents reach back to the Early Renaissance, rather than to nineteenth century painters of the sublime. There is nothing of Claude, of Caspar David Friedrich, or of the American Luminists; in place of awe, Goldman postulates grace; his landscape is a continuum of terraced hills that testify to a fecund domination of nature and that evoke Ambrogio Lorenzetti's great cycle, *The Effects Of Good*

monious idea—that of progress: a state in which men and women subdue nature and yet still find solace in the garden. While *Landscape* then superficially extols the corporation, it really insinuates the ideal of communication—with the self, with Nature, with others—as harmony, emblemized by the bell. The idea of harmony implies a question of transcendence, which the poet-critic W. S. DiPiero argues, "has a social meaning, if we accept Erich Fromm's view that transcendence means overcoming the limitations of selfhood, the prison of the self, of solipsism and alienation, and opening ourselves to others, to relatedness

<sup>1</sup>Of the 101 artists discussed, only 8 are women. Edward Lucie-Smith, *Art In the Eighties*, New York: Phaidon Universe, 1990.

<sup>2</sup>W. S. DiPiero, *Out of Eden: Essays On Modern Art*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, p. 168.

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