



THOMAS LARSON

Home Heart Book Memoir Book Publications Adagio Book Writing Workshops Lectures Multimedia Bio Contact

Consume, Discard, Repeat: The Industrial Landscapes of Kim Reazor



San Diego Reader



(*San Diego Reader* June 1, 2016)

Virtually no one ogles the industrial vistas of Southern California. Those unsightly realms where giant cranes stipple the skyline. Where ship containers are stacked unemptied of their new Curvy Barbie dolls for Wal-Mart. Where thickets of brightly painted gas pipes crowd the dead spaces beneath Interstate overpasses. Where electrical towers look like praying mantises and factories like Tinker Towns. Reazor, who is a young-looking 50 and who grew up in Denver under its "dramatic skies and high-altitude light," has strikingly intense eyes; she has a numinous, intense gaze, seeming to record and compose whatever she beholds.

In early work she adopted the style of Western highway paintings, Hopperesque friezes of single gas stations. College painting classes were nearly useless, she says, because "they taught you how to think about painting, not about making a painting." She's taken several turns around no-painting, job, bored-with-job, back-to-painting. She just can't get accustomed to the oil-and-water world of art and money. What artist can?

A one-car duo, Reazor and her San Diego State-prof husband, (locals since 2003), often cruise by industrial lots and bayfront piers to photograph the storage world. In her studio—a 10-x-15-foot converted garage, next to her home in Normal Heights—she walks me through her process. She enlarges a photo, penciling grid lines over it. Next, she draws the grid and each section's content onto canvas. The grids are then painted over with a primer; the shapes underneath remain and eventually receive color to suggest or stamp form and contour. The method invites two ends: one, the grid lets her see the big compositional elements in the scene, and two, those shapes can, once sketched, be altered a little or a lot to emphasize Reazor's telltale vision.

She reminds me that realist artists work the thick-fenced DMZ between representation, "what the painting is *of*," and composition, "its abstract underpinnings: an emotion, a mood, a balance of elements. Do I want this part of the work to feel more mystical or less cluttered? Push-pull, back-and-forth." After weeks "noodling" and "highlighting," a *painting*, not a photographic rendering, emerges. Most people, she says, see the "of," what it represents. "Which is fine. I'm fine with *of*." But she's also structuring the chassis beneath, whose building blocks viewers are aware of only emotionally.

A student of Tai Chi, Reazor loves the many Yin/Yangs of painting, "the tension between opposites—dark/light, warm/cold, areas of loose abstraction and areas of warm color, thin paint versus thick paint." The analog of the photograph for the painter is the composer's score for the musician. She avoids an overt faithfulness to the photo. Reazor says she "ignores the technical reality of the photograph when I need to." She oscillates, but not long. "Who's the boss? Me or the photo? The photo is not the boss of me."

Reazor is represented locally by Noel-Baza Fine Art gallery, a favorite of local collectors, and was nominated in 2014 for the San Diego Art Prize by former Oceanside curator Daniel Foster. She tells me that she wishes she had more "inventory" because her work is selling. I think she's rendering a wholly unacknowledged Southern California our eyes, rushing by in cars, seldom seen—and that's why the work is moving.

Realism's Abstraction

A recent Reazor piece, "Recycle Yard," has just been donated to the permanent collection of the San Diego Museum of Art. On first look, I note much crammed in: sky, a horizon line, the bay or a body of water, and a whole lot of boxy bins, mostly dumpsters. On second view—magically zooming in on an iPad—portions of her depiction are soundly abstract, blotches of color, splays of shapes, miniature Richard Diebenkorns. Pulling back, I see the painting resists a realist distinction. It's half-distinct, what Reazor calls "intriguing chaos."

Another piece shines with expansive skies and pell-mell puddle patterns on a surface road, an overpass in Tucumcari, New Mexico. To get the color right, Reazor recalls watching "Breaking Bad," "because the light's so beautiful. That was long past the point where I could deal with the horrible violence in the series." The drug drama was shot in that glowering harsh sun of Albuquerque.

Reazor confesses that she's a bit of an odd duck, a non-abstract painter. "I can't make up stuff out of my head," she says. The nonrepresentational is what we think wild, free art has become—forms that invite an individual's existential freedom to guide the brush. We've been taught to think this action painting is in the artist, not in the world. Such is the legacy of Vasily Kandinsky in the early 1900s and the Abstract Expressionists in the 1950s. But maybe all Reazor is doing is reminding us that "nature" assembles every shape imaginable, even and especially ones we've never seen.

In this regard, she shows me "Winner Takes All," a work whose composition is built on an ordered pandemonium—a mounded hillock of trashed boxes—and a commanding stabilizer—the huge, angled, yellow-lighted wall of a grim functionary building. Disarray and calm. The abstractionist's willy-nilly has a "grounding in reality," which, Reazor says, "I need to make sense of the world."

Best of show is the immaculate "Big Electricity," perhaps the junkiest scene anyone might paint, a disagreeably inchoate field of electric stations and storage vats. Train tracks. A blacktop road. Desiccated ground. A lone shrub. Chain-link fences, sectioning who knows what: Keep out but see through. Bleached white gas and oil tanks beside a warehouse, its bold black opening a gaping maw. Miles of telephone poles, miniature crosses stippling and vanishing on the horizon. And in the near middle of this desultory mess, unsquarely set with a massively weary tilt, slumps the bottom third of an electrical transmission tower.

We look through the tower's steel latticework (forming cross-hatched pentangles, triangles, and trapezoids) into an indifferent sky. We are dizzied by the pylon's lean—it's buckling and should fall!—though it's bolted, it seems, to concrete pilings. We feel the image's uneasy finish—the abstract thrown-togetherness, the precariousness of our wired-up existence, anyone's guess as to how long it will last.

"Big Electricity" is owned by Bram and Sandra Dijkstra. Bram, an author of eloquent critical appraisals of 20th-century American artists, writes in an email that he finds a "remarkable compositional coherence" in the painting. "Reazor was able to impose on what one would otherwise logically assume to be the inherent *incoherence* of the industrial environment it depicts." He particularly likes "the formal beauty of various human-made

forms when seen in isolation (rusty colors against a startlingly blue sky, the crisscross patterning of metal bars, sudden white cylinders against a triangle of roofing, and so on)." She "recombines these in unexpected patterns of celebratory juxtaposition in an industrial environment that would otherwise beg us to disdain its chaos. She brings what is essentially an abstract sense of composition to these otherwise seemingly incoherent byproducts of modern commerce." The email concludes, "What is not to like?"

In the Tradition

Of San Diego rendered in landscape painting we cherish the three pillars: Maurice Braun, Alfred Mitchell, and Charles Reiffel. In our time, we have the buttery scenes of William Glen Crooks, and his glare-popping views of the backcountry or Imperial Beach where he lives. We have Wade Cline's foggy urban street paintings as well as canny renderings by other realists like John Abel, Brad Maxey, and Carol Lindemulder. In contemporary representation, artists compose elegiac goodbyes to the old Ramona theater or a stand of Engelmann oak. They see these things one last time before they are blacktopped or poofed by a new stadium. They memorialize that which fights to remain—bungalows and Craftsmen, the anorexic palms, the inky shadows, the sense that nothing happens in San Diego except each generation is baked by the sun, but oh, what a good feeling it is.

What's memorable about Reazor's work is how her industrial landscapes remind us how far we are from the traditional West of sage and scrub or the ungentrified main streets of Missions Hills and Chula Vista. It's a resource-swilling production, the American Dream. Indeed, the tracts that Reazor revels in are tracts where people can't live. In that *can't*, Reazor captures the apocalyptic. In our ports and docks and construction sites and pocked asphalt and fenced-in yards, sentried by dumpsters, is our end.

In a new book, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth*, Northwestern University economics historian, Robert J. Gordon, argues that it is not the technological revolution of the last two decades which has changed America; rather, it was the creation of nationwide transportation and electric grids, from 1870 to 1940, that transformed us. Those years ignited a Cambrian explosion and expansion, built from five infrastructures: electricity and sanitation as well as the industries of mass communication, chemicals, and automobiles. When you think of what people did not *have* before 1870 and what they *had* in 1940, you understand the difference between the Middle Ages and the Modern. (What else is the chemical poisoning of Flint, Michigan, but the failure to upgrade their worn-out waterworks?)

Without putting too fine a point on it, Reazor has a visionary ardor (perhaps, it's her mission) to paint the meat-grinding stress of American growth, albeit its aesthetic bent intact. Her subjects are the "artifacts" of our unsustainability, piles of disposable stuff, she says, like the "detritus on the floor after you open your Christmas presents."

The Emotions Arrive

How does Reazor bring emotion into her paintings? We look at another dumpster ode of hers, a night scene, called "Urban Solstice." Dumpsters are, for her, often the "main characters" of her human-absent dramas. An old lazy-boy leather chair sits beside two dumpsters, solitary, exposed. (What's happened? A lot and nothing.) She laughs, telling me that on a recent drive-by of the scene she saw someone had fenced off the dumpsters and padlocked them. Even refuse sites must play hard-to-get.

The painting is bathed in an emerald green light, feeling more than forlorn, from a nearby streetlamp. She says the green is "the emotional story." The green washes over everything. The green is contrasted by a faint line of Christmas lights in the middle ground. There's no narrative tale but there is a color clang between the heavy saturation of green on the waste receptacles and the decorative lights of the season.

Painters often depict the light sources that provide the painting its light—with "Urban Solstice," it's the artificial and anemic gloss of a stilled city. This light at night is, of course, unnatural. Thus, the eerie afterglow is what caused one friend who told Reazor that he felt this piece was just "too intense" and he had to turn away.

Letting It Be What It Wants

For the past five years, Reazor has suffered from hypothyroidism, marked by adrenal fatigue and Vitamin B deficiency, which has limited the time she spends at the easel. Every moment she can work she does. But, she notes, "I get really tired." For a time, the illness robbed her of all energy; she shook badly; she spent 23 hours a day flat on her back, unable even to paint in her head. Any exertion wiped her out. She thought she was dying. She says, "It's was like wearing a helmet of static. I lost years."

The only upside is that now, in recovery (Vitamin B injections), Reazor says she "doesn't second guess everything I do. I used to do that a lot. I need not worry about whether [the painting] is detailed enough, is it realistic enough—I'm just a lot more comfortable with letting it be what it wants to be." Her choices as an artist are "more energy-efficient," she says. "I'm taking a Prius-approach to painting."

I wonder whether the disease she suffers is echoed in her paintings, places she depicts and calls "inhuman." A medical issue is certainly not delineated in the work. But a sinister blame creeps into these fenced-in refineries and warehouse yards where no one but operators and the infrequent pollution surveyor goes. Could it be our unhealthy urban air that is responsible for her condition? Is that too paranoid an assertion? These built environments may be toxic, burning off and leaving afloat and unseen the ashes of our rapacity. Who knows how many chemicals befool our air and water?

I study one more of her paintings, "Bobtail Entrance." It's a superbly confident work in which Reazor shows a society bent on supplying itself more gas, boxes, and vapors. There's lots of music in this work—with its giant curving freeway off-ramp pillared above a pipe-strewn yard in which a bobtail or truck unit is parked, new-haul-ready. She organizes a messy middle-ground by punching up the lemon yellow color of the containment berms, angles of syncopation that guide the truck into its temporary rest. A stop-sign-like blot of red punctuates the moment. Enough to say stop what you're doing and *look*. This is the how our economy devours us, the willed mantra of consume and discard—unloading one haul and awaiting the next.

[< Prev](#) [Next >](#)