

ARTnews

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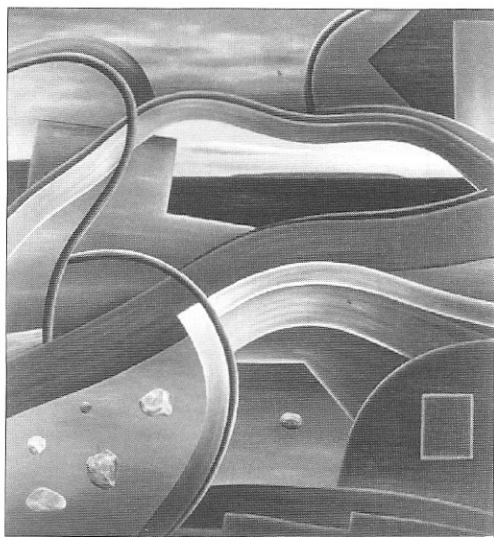
William Conger

ROY BOYD

For some time William Conger's superb abstract paintings have suggested fantastic landscapes and city views. This latest group of canvases, with titles such as *Fox Prairie*, *Escanaba*, and *South Harbor*, are among the artist's more naturalistic and most specific. Still, they are by no means ordinary. They have an otherworldly quality to them. Some feature planetlike orbs that hang eerily in colorfully streaked skies. Others depict chunks of rock that float in empty space, like asteroids. Geometric elements are always inexplicably present in his images, and everything is rendered with clarity and strangeness. In *Escanaba*, swirling lines make the hill, forms seem like they are moving.

Conger's landscapes are never experienced directly or as a whole. Instead, desert, prairie, mountain, sea, and sky are glimpsed in puzzlelike fragments—sometimes through cutout openings in geometric shapes, sometimes through the sparse, bare branches of drastically cropped foreground plants. He has taken his landscapes and broken them into complex multiple perspectives. A single view may include a typical water-and-sky horizon, a telescopic slice of the heavens, and a magnified piece of rock. In *Second Mesa*, the artist even peels away a scenic southwestern vista to reveal a gigantic thornlike object suspended in space.

Conger's forms are smooth and highly stylized. Their contours are sharp. His colors are brilliant and, at times, almost metallic without being harsh. Yet in "Lakeview Suite," a group of small square canvases, the artist presents a surprisingly different side of himself. Begun a few years ago, these works borrow some familiar forms from those that are better-known—a circle, a cone, a sweeping arc—but they are not so loosely brushed and are more economical. Their surfaces are scumbled, scored, and sensuously textured. Working in contrasting styles, Conger is producing some of the best work of his estimable career. **G. H.**



William Conger,
Escanaba, 1993,
oil on canvas, 52" x 48".
Roy Boyd.

Slightly blurred and indistinct, they look something like an impressionistic sketch or soft-focus photograph. The art suggests anonymous and uneventful vistas—perhaps the kinds of places where one might happily picnic and daydream.

It is only later, after glancing at the works' titles—*Dachau*, *Mauthausen*, *Birkenau*, *Auschwitz*, and *Treblinka*—that Girson's point of view becomes evident. The paintings are now identified as the locations of Nazi concentration camps, whose very names are capable of stirring profound emotions.

Treblinka is one of the most desolate and foreboding of these views. Its lonely expanse of slowly receding fields is broken only by the shadowy silhouette of a tree in the foreground that seems almost like a grieving figure. On the horizon, a small smudge of gray in the sky could be a wispy cloud or a spectral whiff of rising smoke. These works, whose voices are barely raised above a whisper, make powerful art from unredeemable history.

GARRETT HOLG