

## SUMMER NOTES

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Another exhibition of singular interest was the late summer display of paintings by Thomas Sully at Heriard-Cimino. These are “wonderland” scenes that, initially, have the general aspect of children’s book illustration, and they exude more than a little of the charm of that idiom. More compelling, however, is one of Sully’s probable themes and the intriguing way he articulates it. Certain pictures seem to deal with the workings of the human mind and, more pointedly, with our enduring inquiry into the mystery of existence itself – a daunting project, to say the least. It is a project that might warrant pictorial approaches ranging from surrealist irrationality to pure abstraction. With Sully, surprisingly, the idea is made literal – and in a forthright, if somewhat picturesque, style. He places a figure, usually isolated and dressed for the city, in idyllic segments of wilderness – in a meadow, at a river’s edge, in the thick of a forest. Invariably, the figure seems rapt. You sense her/his deliberation. At times, it reads as awe, at times as skepticism, at times sheer child-like curiosity. And invariably, too, the paintings feature a kind of cartoon glow surrounding the figure – a direct means of pinpointing both the locus and intensity of thought. All of this is presented within a genre somewhat reminiscent of the natural drama of a Caspar David Friedrich landscape, but hardly as grand. Instead, Sully’s pictures exude a disarming innocence. And a bit of calculated quaintness tossed in to raise the eyebrows.

The odd and gratifying thing is the fact that an approach like this – it is almost cheekily clever – also draws you into the paintings. Once there, the aura of emotional drama is persuasive. These figures seem authentically locked in some spiritual engagement with “the sublime,” just as it occurs in countless great northern Romantic pictures. When Sully modifies the drama of that engagement, he renders it more palatable to contemporary sensibility. After all, as splendid as Friedrich’s work is to some of us, it is also patently exalted – something fitting, of course, for the Gothicism of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany. Sully seems to be saying that, today, we acknowledge the contrivance of such weighty art – indeed, the contrivance of all art. But he is saying, also, that personal commerce with larger philosophical notions should continue to be viable artistic content.

And, moreover, it might be conveyed with a degree of wit. In *Philosophy*, the figure strikes a thinker’s pose – twice, in a new take on the medieval “simultaneous narrative,” though there is no conspicuous narrative here. In *Memory*, he crouches within a halo, ruminating before a blindingly white sky while the entire painting is surrounded by an abrupt halo version of Friedrich’s familiar tonal modulations. You could call it *romanticisme trop court* but, in fact, these compositions somehow leap from playful to profound and back again. Sully manages to revive and relocate Friedrich’s famous “wanderer,” that transfixed loner, and directs him to “close the bodily eye” (in Friedrich’s phrase) and to use the “spiritual” one. He declares the validity of spiritual experience, and he makes you believe in it.