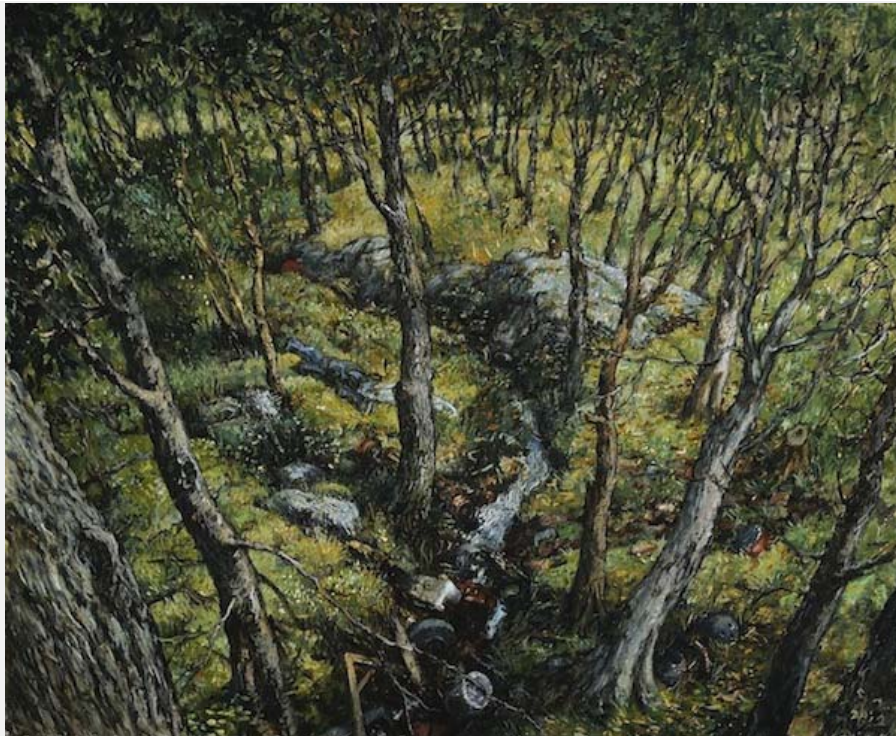


Chester Arnold

SFAQ

INTERNATIONAL ARTS AND CULTURE

“Chester Arnold: A Pilgrim’s Progress” at Catharine Clark Gallery



Chester Arnold, Upper Shit Creek Pastorale, 2012. Oil on linen. 18 x 22 inches. Courtesy of Catharine Clark Gallery.

Afraid of taking a chance on the unknown and its potentially negative consequences, (failure, embarrassment, death), people will always be drawn to art about a perilous journey for a prize. At Catharine Clark Gallery, Chester Arnold’s paintings of men living in the woods and mining in America were inspired by John Bunyan’s 1678 “Pilgrim’s Progress...,” an allegorical story of English Protestants apostasy from the Roman Catholic Church. Arnold’s “A Pilgrim’s Progress” is a journey for mineral wealth, Westward Expansionism, and spiritual freedom, most of which ends as a skeleton in parched earth. The closest his seekers get to a prize is living in an isolated shanty tent in the woods—which is, admittedly, appealing.

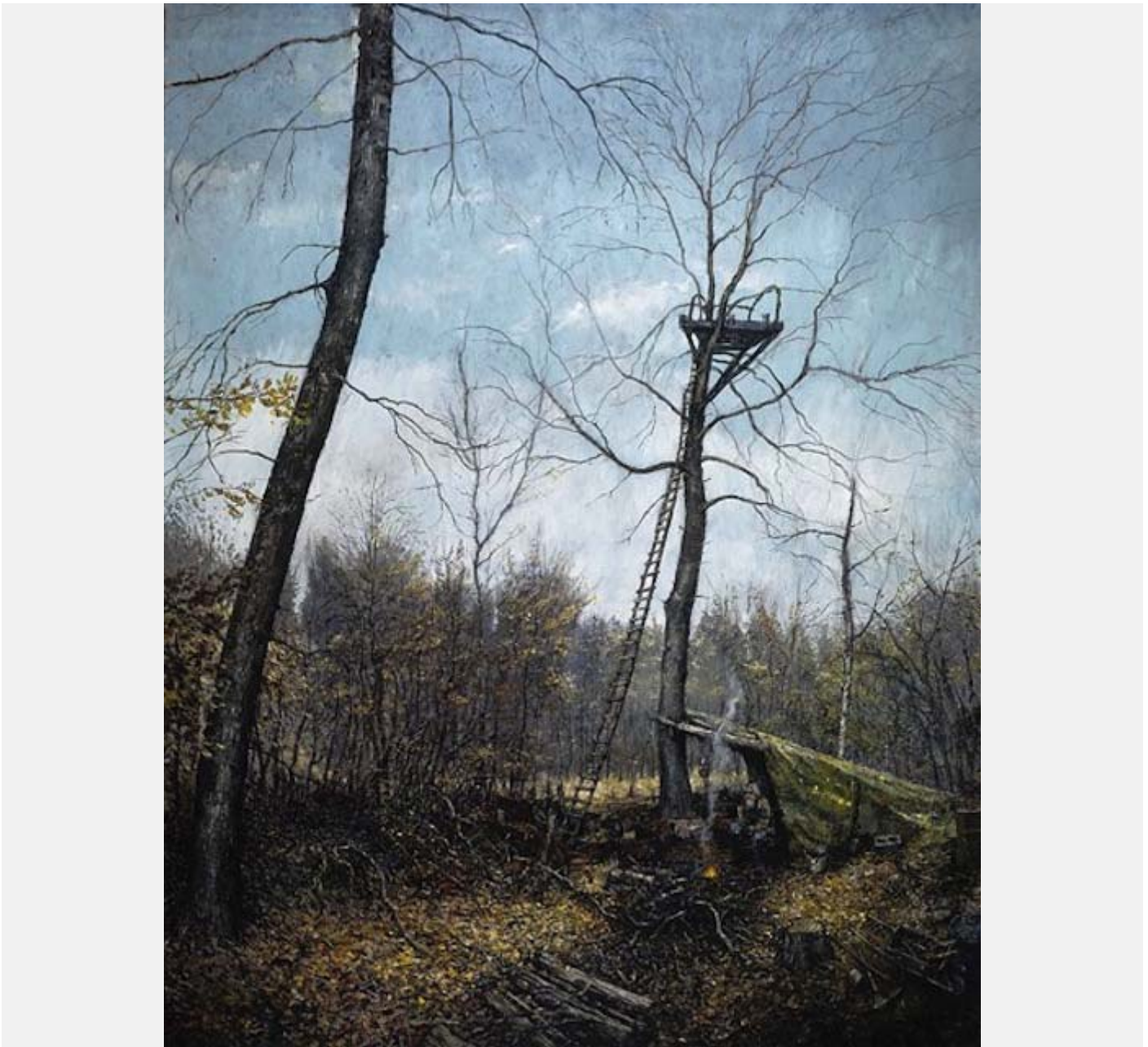


Chester Arnold, *Trouble at the Heavenly Host Mine*, 2011. Oil on panel. 8 x 10 inches. Courtesy of Catharine Clark Gallery.



Chester Arnold, *The Legacy of Henry King*, 2012. Oil on linen. 56 x 46 inches. Courtesy of Catharine Clark Gallery.

Arnold's paintings resemble the "Robinson Crusoe" and "Treasure Island" illustrator N.C. Wyeth's in their graphic quality and distance from the subject. This makes sense for the original "Pilgrims Progress," which has one fantasy quest hurdle after the next (sinking in a bog, the imposing Mount Sinai), though makes slightly less sense for the dysentery adventures of people moving west in America, with its myths of Paul Bunyan and a rosy version of the Lewis and Clark story overshadowed by the reality of yoked Chinese workers moving rocks. That piece of American history was made pretty real for kids in the past twenty years. He stipples the paint a bit like the grandfather of the Wyeth dynasty too, but loosely, and lacking N.C.'s competency with impasto; a lot of the high points of paint don't have anything to do with dimensionality or effect. This is not to say that Arnold isn't technically skilled. The aforementioned best-case scenario, "60 Years in the Forest," has a classical landscapes' balance of composition, repoussoir, mix of precise to spontaneous stroke, and sharpness to blur. "60 Years in the Forest" makes the small, messy paintings on unforgiving panels look like a miner painted them.



Chester Arnold, 60 Years in the Forest, 2012. Oil on linen. 72 x 60 inches. Courtesy of Catharine Clark Gallery.

Chester Arnold's "A Pilgrim's Progress" is fantastic, and it has very little to do with the abundance of narratives he's working with. The series' scenes are wild, far beyond most of our daily lives, and make things that are conceptually ugly look idealized or heroic (dumps, tunnels into the ground look like a testament to man's will rather than a scar on the earth). When did you last see a contemporary painting of bootstrapping men and a landscape that could so easily overpower you? It's life affirming, a reminder of how much there is outside the gallery and outside the city. Skeletons, a dead man's effects, broken bridges and natural calamities do nothing to dissuade the call to the viewer to wide open spaces and adventure.



Chester Arnold, Grubstake, 2008. Oil on linen. 78 x 94 inches. Courtesy of Catharine Clark Gallery.

"Chester Arnold: A Pilgrim's Progress" is on view at Catharine Clark Gallery through January 12, 2013.

-Kendall George