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Dunne, Aidan. "Finding Our Way: Robert Bordo's Paintings."
Blind Spot ex. cat. Dublin: Rubicon Gallery (2007)

ROBERT
BORDO
BLIND
SPOT

FINDING OUR WAY: If you are
ROBERT BORDO'S a means of
PAINTINGS approaching
Robert Bordo's paintings, you could
do a lot worse than take his own
statement of intent as a guide. "I am working," he wrote back in
1998, "to integrate an essentially abstract painting language with
themes and metaphors that reflect my interest in landscape,
modernist painting and memory." There could hardly be a better
illustration of these aims than his recent painting *Ambush* (2007).
Horizontal swathes of sandy ochre lead us via gaps and hollows
towards a distant ridge. But a slim, scarcely visible band of
alternating red and white marks intervenes, ambiguous and too
indistinct to be deciphered as anything specific, but effectively
ambushing our vision nonetheless. **It's reasonable to presume**
we are looking at a desert, particularly given that the blue
expanse at the top of the composition — the sky — appears
positively sagging with heat. From there it's but a short step to
link the image to the conflict in Iraq, and connect the painting's
ocular ambush with other, lethal ambushes, and perhaps the
ambush of democracy that lay behind the war. The picture's spare
schema opens up all these interpretative possibilities but it isn't

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exhausted or defined by them. It allows us to arrive at them in the intricate network of spaces and surprises generated by Bordo's relaxed-seeming deployment of blue and shaded ochre, injected with those fleeting red and white accents. He's fond of indicating what almost isn't visible, whether it's hiding in plain sight, or fading from sight, lost in mist or falling snow or flowing water, or something distant and faint as in *Ambush*. And, as in *Ambush*, what's not quite seen, or not immediately seen, can be ominous. The nocturne of *Blue Wind* (2006-2007), which features a silhouetted tree-line against a sumptuous evening sky, is disturbed by a mass of black shapes apparently borne on the wind. Any initial, benign impression that they might be birds is dispelled with a second look. They are irregular, gritty forms, and vaguely threatening. At the same time, the even patterning of these dark marks evokes the grid of geometric abstraction, allowing the work to function in two quite different registers, something characteristic of virtually every painting by Bordo. While he doesn't shy away from the more toxic areas of thematic concern, the paintings invariably wear their subject matter lightly. The gentle whites and greys, the muted pinks and blues and greens of his palette recall Morandi, and the work's occasional tenderness and consistently neat, well-turned lyricism brings to mind the formal skills of a composer or a poet, which is not to say

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homogeneous sense. You could say that he did not want to become enslaved by a style, that he needed to maintain a greater level of flexibility than such definitions allow. So our apprehension of his work is not facilitated by the kind of stylistic clues that are usually sufficient to locate and fix an artist in our minds. Yet there is a crucial distinction between what he does and a typically post-modernist view of style as a social construct, quotable and inhabitable but essentially empty, hollowed out and no longer capable of conveying meaning. Bordo doesn't want to fall into the trap of stylistic convention, but he hasn't given up on meaning. For example, as his own statement indicates, it's obvious that landscape is at the core of his interests, and is central to a great deal of his work. So that while on one level it seems justifiable to describe him as a landscape painter, it is an inadequate and partial description, and to that extent less than accurate. Landscapes are integral to his painting, as arenas of colour and light, and as sites of experience and memory, entailing such concepts as limits, borders, distance and mystery, and allowing the convergence of "an infinite number of things." He draws on landscape painting not as an historical genre but because it offers current possibilities for the exploration of a wide range of concerns: For a period of several years from the late 1990s he made a series of paintings which marshal several overlapping landscapes, like

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musings on a multiplicity of things, including his own identity, his past, our ideas of place and belonging, near and far, exploration and the unknown, geopolitics and — the crux of the matter — pretty much whatever was on his mind. The paintings map internal spaces as much as external. All of these things are embodied in paintings of texture and nuance, positively reticent in their use of colour and form. Acutely attentive to atmosphere, they are intimate in mood and suffused with feeling — often a quality of muted sadness, an awareness of loss — though at the same time they are thoroughly unsentimental and not particularly emotional in any overt way. Perhaps Bordo's sheer formal expertise, his ease with abstraction, militates against any such tendency. In the paintings, the grammar of minimalist abstraction coexists easily with representation or, more accurately, various kinds of representation. For Bordo's use of representation takes it as given that we live in a world substantially composed of representations, and that representation per se is simply not a fundamental task for painting in the way that it was until the end of the 19th century. He feels free to use various modes of representation interchangeably. Hence, as his work has developed since, what might be described as a certain stylistic promiscuity has become apparent. That is, he hasn't set out to devise and does not adhere to a personal style in the traditional,

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position of opposing Neo-Expressionism while at the same time implicitly arguing the case for the viability of painting. With sublime indifference to fashion, he turned away from large-scale figuration just as it became the favoured international currency. The problem for him was to find an appropriate pictorial language, one that would substantiate his convictions. The solution involved formulating a language of his own, though one that certainly has features and strategies in common with the work of other painters faced with the same dilemma. As even a cursory glance at his work will confirm, he didn't set out to engage in an arm-wrestling contest with the Neo-Expressionists. Rather his instinct was that we needed an alternative to hyperbole, something altogether quieter, more considered and oblique, a form of painting that allowed the artist to think and reflect rather than merely shout. His breakthrough body of work emerged from about 1985. The *Geographies* are relatively modest in scale and introspective in feeling. They take maps as a motif, not necessarily as a subject in themselves in the conventional sense of the term, but as offering a way into a whole range of subjects in much the same way as Elizabeth Bishop once noted that, while the settings of her poems are the plain facts, or as near as she can get to them, the poems themselves entail "an infinite number of things coming together." For Bordo the idea of maps became a way of

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category of expression and, in terms of contemporary practice, to borrow Denis Donoghue's phrase, "relocated between the irony of inverted commas." Painters like Bordo, who adhered to a belief in painting's capacity to reflect the gamut of thought and feeling, in painting as a medium equal to the full weight of the contemporary, found that they were facing a daunting recuperative project.

Bordo was born in Montreal in 1949, went on to attend McGill University, where he studied history and, partly because the kind of art education he wanted was not available in Montreal at that juncture, and partly out of a determined desire not to be co-opted into taking sides on the issue of Québécois nationalism — very difficult to avoid at the time, he recalls — went to study at the New York Studio School. One of his teachers there was Philip Guston, then going through a trying time as he transformed himself from a painter of atmospheric abstracts to one of existentially and politically charged comic-book figuration. Guston, Bordo recalls, liked to talk about himself, and was a big artistic personality. His experience suggested, exceptionally, that doubt was permissible, that there was an alternative to the Romantic-heroic archetype of the artist. In any case, it took Bordo some time to figure out his own path. At the beginning of the 1980s he was in what might have seemed the almost contradictory

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that it doesn't challenge us. On the contrary, Bordo's rationale dictates an avoidance of pictorial cliché, so that, while there is for the most part an engaging mellowness to what we see, we have to negotiate our way into each piece without recourse to preconceptions. The paintings' sheer approachability may mask the acuity that goes into their making, disguising Bordo's grasp of art's history and predicament, but their approachability is also part of the point. To understand why, it is necessary to go back to the end of the 1970s and the advent of Neo-Expressionism, which signaled a revival of painting's fortunes. But, as the term itself suggests, it also meant that particular stylistic traits were fore-grounded at the expense of others. Painting tended to be something big and brashly assertive, to be defiantly non-reflexive. Grand gestures won out over considered observation. Neo-Expressionism was also fairly chauvinistic in its conspicuous alpha-masculinity. In effect, painting's success came at the expense of any claims to underlying complexity and diversity, and was largely dependent on a drastic narrowing of its emotional and intellectual range, its adoption of a bombastic rhetorical stance. Nor did the situation look like improving over time. In the evolving cultural landscape of post-modernity, painting has been continually at risk of being corralled into an artistic ghetto, of being regarded as nothing more than an exhausted, historical

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postcards pinned on a wall. These remarkable works, in which multiple views spring from a common ground and are chromatically and tonally consistent, suggest a multiplicity of memories linked to places, and narrative form without a simple, linear progression. They are a vivid demonstration of the idea that, as he says, memories are themselves landscapes. In terms of establishing a site, the idea of space, mental and physical, is central to what he does. But, his work implies, if we can simply assimilate that space with a glance, if the painting simply fits into a generic mould, it hasn't done its job. We should instead have to go through the transformative process of making our own way there, coming to terms with novelty and circumventing our own preconceptions, experiencing what V.S. Naipaul, borrowing a title from a painting by de Chirico, termed *The Enigma of Arrival*. Having led us into what he has termed "a thoughtful space," a contemplative space richly informed by clues encountered along the way, each of Bordo's paintings aims to confront us with just such an enigma. **Aidan Dunne**