

ERIC WOLF  
MAINE PAINTINGS



*Rosenblum's Scholar's Rock*, 2010. Ink on paper, 30 x 22 inches.

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DAVID MASELLO

Eric Wolf occupies the very place he depicts. When he arrives every year at the Phillips Memorial Wilderness Preserve, near Oquossoc, Maine, and sets up camp and unfolds his painting table, he is surrounded by color. It is easy to imagine the blue-gray cast of the sky, the silver of Lake Mooselookmeguntic, the gradations of browns and greens along the surrounding hills, the yellow sunlight, even the occasional jewel-hued flashes of eagles, ducks, and loons. And there are the wildflowers, too, growing among lakeside rocks.

Yet, Wolf banishes those distractions of hues, emblematic as they may be of that part of Maine's Western Mountains to which he has been journeying since 1989. Wolf seeks and captures the purest distillation of the landscape. For this solo show at Gregory Lind Gallery of his most recent paintings, Wolf has once again stuck hard to his preferred palette of black and white, intermixed now with tonal grays. The white is that of the paper, functioning as a kind of negative as he brushes on the ink in swift, broad movements.

His resulting images of the elements he covets in Maine—the silhouette of the mountains, the undulating waves of the lake, towering pines and birches, abstractions of cloud formations, rocky outcroppings, approaching storms—may be chromatically limited, but every finished work is vibrant with form. Wolf's embrace of black demonstrates that the color is, indeed, the most versatile of all. Sometimes, it feels upon walking away from an exhibition of Wolf's works that what you had been seeing was in color. So potent are his images, so narrative in quality that what you see feels wholly complete.

Wolf admits to entering a kind of Zen-like calm when making his brush and ink paintings. "These are made in single, working sessions, start to finish," he emphasizes. As he always has, Wolf prefers to work in solitude, on site, sleeping, eating, working, daydreaming where the subject matter resides. He typically spends a week or two in situ, experiencing what he characterizes as "a creative burst of energy that I work through until it ebbs."

Since having spent a formative summer at Skowhegan in 1989, Wolf has rarely departed from his decided embrace of black and white. By keeping to that limited palette, he has been able to court, simultaneously, both abstraction and representation. Viewers of these new works, as well as prior ones, know what is before them, but those elements of the landscape assume a presence they might not were they solely expressed abstractly or in great detail. With every one of the works in this show, the viewer stands right with Wolf as he looks over the miles-wide lake to distant islands and mountains that appear and disappear, depending on the shifting light and weather conditions.

The embrace of black and white harkens to Far Eastern artistic traditions, notably those in China and Japan. In traditional brush and ink paintings from those cultures, the mark, that unsigned signature, that defining hand of the artist and its calligraphic presence, is paramount on the surface. Of that mark of the artist, Wolf has written, “This is a value that I hold in high esteem.” Indeed, no one would mistake a Wolf creation for anyone else’s.

Wolf responds in a profound, even spiritual, way to place. In 1999, he was a resident of Giverny, the home and gardens of Claude Monet, and while there he experienced a kind of aesthetic epiphany. “The Impressionists blazed the way for artists like me, working from observation, while bringing a fresh and evolving modernism forth in that process,” Wolf says. “Artists like Van Gogh, Cezanne, and Gauguin absorbed aesthetics and imagery from Japan, China, and the Far East, which resulted from a pervasive opening up of the East to the West. It was an exciting time. These artists, in turn, inspired me, as well as many others.”

Viewers of this show, featuring Wolf’s newest and boldest work, are able to witness his passion for Maine. He renders on paper the textures, the shapes, the sheer volumes of the nature there, and with a confident fluidity. He knows what he is doing. He works fast and moves on to the next work. He captures those elements that have been there, often inert, for countless millennia but he is also aware of their capricious ability to change moment to moment. When he begins a work, he does so at precisely the moment that the particular element in his focus occupies in time and space. To wait, to delay, is to lose what is there, right before him—what might be called the perfect. In that sense, too, Wolf’s work is both spontaneous and still.

Wolf speaks of these wilderness sojourns of his as “experiences of immersion.” He is immersed, of course, in an actual landscape, but also a mindscape. “The pleasure of this process of making art in nature is a key element, that has provided a seemingly limitless motivation, to always do more, to always go back, to keep pressing on, and to do it again,” he has said recently. Wolf returns again and again to the same region of Maine, but he never sees the same things. He never depicts seemingly unchanging natural elements in the same ways. And so the viewer gets to experience his works with a freshness that feels akin to the bracing air of Maine, tinged with the scents of so many trees, the lake, the earth.

With every one of his expeditions northward to Maine from his home and studio in upstate New York, Wolf leaves with an output. Along with that folded up tent, a growth of beard, and ink-stained fingers, Wolf packs away a permanent vision of what he is leaving behind, this time. He’ll be back.

David Masello is a cultural essayist, critic, and feature writer, based in New York. ([davidmasello.com](http://davidmasello.com))



*Japanese Bridge and Nypheas at Giverny, 1999. Ink on paper, 34 x 24 inches.*